

# Lent 2017

“That one man should die for the people”

## John 11:45-53

The events John describes in the passage for this morning follow upon the heels of Jesus' raising his friend Lazarus from the dead. Remarkably not even a dead man being raised was enough to convince those whose hearts remained committed to unbelief. Indeed, so committed were the unbelievers in and around Jerusalem that they saw Jesus' miracles not as proof of His divinity but as cause to plot His murder. Their concern was not righteousness but political power. They were afraid that if Jesus continued to gather followers the Romans, fearing a violent uprising, would destroy the temple and depose all of Israel's religious leaders.



The Chief Priest Caiaphas justified the murder plot along predictable lines of expediency: “It is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish” (vs. 50). There is great irony in the statement by Caiaphas. First, in spite of their actions, the nation of Israel will perish in a matter of decades. In AD 70 the Roman general Titus Vespasian sacked Jerusalem and destroyed the temple.

But there is a deeper level of irony in the words of the Chief Priest. He was unaware of the fact that God was using him to prophesy concerning the sacrificial death of Jesus. This one Man would die for the people. By their own sinful actions the religious leaders of Israel unwittingly contributed to God's sovereign plan to offer His only begotten Son as a sacrifice for the sins of men and women from every nation, people, and tribe upon the earth. As Paul writes in Galatians 3: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us” (vs. 13).

**Main Idea:** The death of Jesus was for the purpose of satisfying Divine justice so that God's people may receive mercy.

**Vv. 45-46** – The varied responses of the Jews who saw the miracle of Lazarus' resurrection.

**Vs. 47** – Under the Roman rule, the Sanhedrin was permitted to exercise authority over Jewish internal affairs. At this time the Sadducees, the party of the priests, made up a majority in the Sanhedrin, the Pharisees an influential minority. Most of the Pharisees were scribes, teachers of the law. The remainder of the Sanhedrin were elders, men of standing of probably a mixture of theological viewpoints.

Caiaphas offers his question rhetorically. They haven't accomplished anything. They had been completely ineffective in stemming the tide of Jesus' popularity. Everyone knew that Jesus was performing real miracles which are self-authenticating works of supernatural power. No one ever disputed that they had occurred. The healing of the man born blind and the raising of Lazarus were facts that no one could dispute.

**Vs. 48** – They were afraid that if messianic expectations were raised too high the Roman empire would fall upon them and would take away *their place* – mostly likely a reference to the temple in Jerusalem – and *their nation* – that is the semi-independent status of the Jewish nation at that time.

**Vs. 49** – “You don't know what you're talking about!” The Sadducees were known for rudeness, for the contemptuousness of their speech. Josephus said of them, “The Sadducees...are, even among themselves, rather boorish in their behavior, and in their [communication] with their peers are as rude as to aliens.” [*Bell.*, ii, 166]

**Vv. 50-51** – This is *realpolitik* or political pragmatism coming from Caiaphas: “Better one man die than that the nation suffer retribution from Rome.” However, the murder of Jesus would be the cause of the

divine judgment falling upon the nation and its utter devastation in A.D. 70, but, at the same time, would be the cause of the salvation of God's people. But Caiaphas knew nothing of that.

**Vs. 52** – We are not intended to conclude that Caiaphas was aware that he was uttering a prophecy or that he had any idea of what it would mean for Jesus to die. He was speaking callously, happy to give up a single life to secure the interests of the ruling class. But what he said was true in a way he had no inkling of. This is powerfully ironic. Christ's enemy speaking the truth about the Lord's death without even realizing it. Here is God, once again, **using sin sinlessly**.

Both Caiaphas and John understand Jesus' death as substitutionary. But while Caiaphas is thinking in terms of political expediency, John is thinking of the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. And it is the world, not the Jews only. John has in view the "sheep that are not of this fold," the Gentiles who would be called by the Shepherd.

**Vs. 53** – That marked the beginning of the formal conspiracy to kill Jesus.

### **1. The only possible responses to Jesus.**

Vv. 45-46

- Throughout his ministry he called men and women to believe and to follow. Jesus cannot be merely pondered as a good teacher. One must either believe upon Jesus or reject him. We notice from verses 45 and 46 that many of those who witnessed the extraordinary signs Jesus performed responded in faith. But many others who witnessed the very same miracles, including the raising of Lazarus from the dead, remained steadfast in their unbelief. Just as the apostle Paul informs us in Romans 1, unbelief is not the result of the absence of evidence but a stubborn sin.

### **2. The sacrifice of justice to power.**

Vv. 47-50

- What the religious ruling class in Israel desired was power. They longed more than anything to keep their seat of influence. Their chief concern was that, fearing an uprising of Jesus's followers, Rome would sweep into Jerusalem and take away their seat of power. So great was their desire to hold onto the power they possessed that they began plotting to murder Jesus. In their eyes such an action was simply the price of keeping the status quo. The approach of Caiaphas is to make a crass appeal to the people's selfish interests. But even in this God is at work.

### **3. The unconquerable purpose of God.**

Vv. 50-53

- When Caiaphas said that Jesus must die *for the people* he was employing the language of sacrifice; the language of substitution. Obviously Caiaphas had no idea what he was actually saying. Nevertheless because of his office as High Priest God spoke through him this prophecy of Jesus' atoning death.
- Either Jesus will die or the nation will die. If Jesus dies then the nation lives. Of course Israel fell in AD 70. So it is was neither ethnic or national Israel in view here. Rather Jesus' death atoned for the sins of all God's people; those gathered from among all the peoples under the Lordship of Jesus. Nothing could stop this purpose. The sinful acts which put Jesus on the cross were God's means to bring about the salvation of his people. God used sin sinlessly.