

John's Gospel - the One for the Many

by John Vissers

The sermon explores the significance of Caiaphas's words in John 11:50, which reveal the meaning of the cross of Christ and the sacrifice that Jesus makes for the many.

Duration: 32:41

Topics: "Gospel Of John"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the paradox of the gospel and discipleship. He highlights the fact that no matter how hard we try, we cannot save ourselves. The speaker emphasizes the importance of understanding that Jesus' sacrifice on the cross was not a general or vague act, but a personal one for each individual. He also points out the paradoxical nature of Caiaphas' words, as they unintentionally bear witness to who Jesus is and what he came to do. The sermon concludes by reminding listeners that attempting to save oneself will ultimately lead to failure, but surrendering one's life for the sake of the gospel will result in finding true life in Christ.

Transcript

We're reading this evening from John's Gospel, chapter 11, and reading at verse 45 through to the end of the chapter at verse 57. Let us hear the Word of God to us tonight. Therefore, many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary and had seen what Jesus did put their faith in him.

But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin. What are we accomplishing, they asked.

Here is this man performing many miraculous signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation. Then one of them named Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up.

You know nothing at all. You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than the whole nation perish. He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, and not only for that nation, but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one.

So from that day on, they plotted to take his life. Therefore, Jesus no longer moved about publicly among the Jews. Instead, he withdrew to a region near the desert to a village called Ephraim, where he stayed

with his disciples.

When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, many went up from the country to Jerusalem for their ceremonial cleansing before the Passover. They kept looking for Jesus, and as they stood in the temple area, they asked one another, what do you think? Isn't he coming to the feast at all? But the chief priests and Pharisees had given orders that if anyone found out where Jesus was, he should report it so that they might arrest him. So far, the reading of God's word to the end of the chapter, may he by his spirit grant us understanding this evening.

Let's pray together. Lord, we thank you tonight for the gospel of John. We thank you for your word which instructs us and exhorts us and encourages us, and most of all, through which you reveal yourself to us.

We pray this evening that as we reflect on this passage together, we might catch a fresh vision of our Savior, that we might understand anew what it means to believe in him, to follow him as disciples in the world in which we find ourselves. For we ask it in the name of Christ our Savior. Amen.

As we come to this passage tonight, what strikes us at first is that the raising of Lazarus from the dead has created quite a stir. On the one hand, it encourages the faith of the disciples, and it greatly broadens the circle of believers. Many people believed in Jesus as a result of this miraculous sign, as a result of the fact that Lazarus had been raised from the dead.

And as word about Jesus spread, as word filtered out that he had performed this miracle in addition to all the other miracles he had performed, we now begin to understand the reason for the great crowds on Palm Sunday. Had Angus Reid been in Jerusalem at this point, the polls would have shown a dramatic rise in the popularity of Jesus. But as we come to this passage this evening, we also begin to realize that the miracle had another effect.

The miracle didn't just encourage faith among the disciples, it just didn't bring in new people into the circle of fellowship and faith, but it also hardened the opposition against Jesus. And the religious leaders now realize that they have a major problem on their hands. So what do they do? Well, they call a meeting.

That's what we always do when faced with a serious political or religious problem, we call a meeting. And so a meeting of the Sanhedrin was summoned. Now you need to understand that the Sanhedrin was the central Jewish court, the central court of the Jewish people during the first century.

And it was chaired by the high priest, and we're told that the high priest at this time was Caiaphas. And the Sanhedrin consisted of about 70 members. It was comprised mostly by the Sadducees, but there was also a group of Pharisees who sat on the Sanhedrin as well.

They were an important minority group. And you'll remember, of course, that the Sadducees and the Pharisees were often at odds with one another, often opposed to one another. Now the Sanhedrin operated under Roman jurisdiction.

And the court, the Sanhedrin, was responsible for the day-to-day operation, for the day-to-day political and religious life of Israel. And normally, you see, normally what would happen is the Romans, the Roman army, the Roman government would not interfere with religious controversy or tamper with religious practices in the provinces. They kind of hoped that things would be quiet, that things would just go along as normal, and that in this case, the Sanhedrin would be able to look after things.

They only intervened, they would only intervene when there was a threat of anarchy or a threat of insurrection, when problems would emerge that threatened the unity and that threatened the peace of the empire. One of the things they would not tolerate, the Romans, was unrest and rebellion. They would tolerate all kinds of other things as long as there was peace, as long as things were under control.

And so as we come to this passage, what we begin to realize, of course, is that that's precisely what the religious leaders are afraid of. And so they meet together in an atmosphere of alarm, it's even an atmosphere of crisis, because they realize that they have a problem on their hands. And they realize that if they don't solve this problem, the problem is going to escalate to the point where the Romans might move in.

Now, of course, Jesus was not a new problem for them. As we've seen throughout the Gospel of John, this relationship, this confrontation, this controversy emerges again and again as the religious leaders have been trying to deal with Jesus. They had confronted Jesus, they had challenged his teaching, they had tried to discredit Jesus with the people, and they now knew, they now began to realize that this strategy, that their strategy was getting them nowhere.

If anything, the Jesus problem was growing. If anything, the Jesus problem was getting worse. The miracles were continuing unabated, the crowds continued to be impressed, and now even to the point of raising the dead, Jesus was bringing people back to new life, giving life to the dead.

And he clearly had a lot of support among the masses, and that support was likely to grow rather than diminish. And so you see, what the religious leaders were afraid of is that as Jesus' popularity continued to grow, as he continued to do miracles, as the masses gathered around him, that there was a possibility that there would be insurrection, that there would be rebellion, that there would be an uprising, a popular uprising, which the Romans would have to come in and crush. And if the Romans moved in, as of course they finally did in AD 66 to 70, and finally in AD 70, destroying the Temple, the results would have been devastating.

Jerusalem would have been destroyed as it was in AD 70. The Temple would have been desecrated. The Romans would have imposed direct rule, and the religious leaders would have lost their political and religious power.

Now, it's in this climate, in this context, that we need to understand the words of Caiaphas, the high priest. Because he utters words that are recorded by John the Gospel writer, which become the pivotal words, in fact, not only in this passage, but indeed in the Gospel of John. For Caiaphas says, it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.

And what Caiaphas is saying is really very clear. Jesus is going to have to be sacrificed in order to save Israel from the Romans. They have to make a decision here.

They have to cut their losses. There has to be a sacrificial lamb, and Jesus has to be sacrificed. They have to do away with him now if they intend to protect the peace, if they intend to protect the nation of Israel, or so they think.

And John points out that Caiaphas was saying more than he knew. Because John the Gospel writer points out that these are also words of prophecy, that Jesus was going to die not only for the nation of Israel, but for all the scattered children of God. This is not just a word of prophecy in the sense of being a prediction,

which it was, but it points to the very theological heart of what is going to happen to Jesus.

It's a profound theological interpretation of the death of Jesus. Because these words begin to point, begin to uncover the meaning of the cross of Christ. The one Jesus will die for the many.

And these words set everything in motion. And of course what we know and what we realize is that Jesus will die during the Passover. That indeed he literally will be the sacrificial lamb.

He will be the one who dies for the many. Now I want to focus on these words of Caiaphas tonight because they really form the center of this passage in John's Gospel. And they link really everything that's happened to this point in the Gospel of John with everything that's now going to follow, with everything that's about to come in terms of the events that are going to unfold, the triumphal entry, the arrest of Jesus, the trial, and ultimately his crucifixion.

Now the first thing that I want us to notice about these words of Caiaphas is that they are exceedingly political. These are political words. Caiaphas, you see, makes the proposal that unites the Sadducees and the Pharisees in a common front against Jesus.

And that was not an easy thing to do. The Pharisees, you'll remember, had many disagreements with the Sadducees. One of them was around the resurrection, but they also wrestled with one another concerning political power.

And Caiaphas sized up the situation, and this is what it comes down to. He says to them, either you get together and you eliminate Jesus, or the whole nation of Israel could be threatened by the Romans. The words, when you read them in this way and when you understand them in this way, are cynical.

They are opportunistic. They are driven by fear. The language indicates that the overriding concern was in fact not just national, but also personal.

They knew what was at stake. They lived under a delicate political truce, and anything which upset the status quo threatened them all. And they wanted to avoid trouble at all costs.

And more than that, they wanted to protect their own privilege and their own power. They could see, Caiaphas could see it all tumbling down unless they got rid of Jesus. And so as you look at these words, the first thing you understand is that these are not words of principle.

These are words of expedience. They're not interested, you see, really in doing what was right. They're more interested in doing anything that would preserve their hold on power and maintain the status quo.

They want to protect the nation of Israel, yes, from Roman invasion. They want to protect the status quo, their own privilege, their own power, their own prestige. Bruce Milne, in his book on John's gospel, describes the situation in this way.

He says this, Thus the cause of the living God, the glory of the age-old revelation from the patriarchs through the Red Sea and Mount Sinai, is all mortgaged in one sorry and passionate hour to save their political skins. The possibility that Jesus may in fact be authentic is not raised, even though the veracity of his miracles is universally conceded. That the common people for once might have a sound religious instinct is also left unconsidered.

Jesus is a threat, a cancer on the body of the nation that must be cut away if health is to be recovered. That's how Caiaphas saw the situation. We've got to cut Jesus out of the picture.

We've got to cut him out of the nation if we're going to have any chance whatsoever of saving our own skins. Jesus has become a threat to their well-being, and he must go. The first thing I want to suggest to you by way of application is that these words carry in fact a warning for us all.

Because if we're honest with ourselves, it seems to me that we have to admit that often we treat Jesus in precisely the same manner. We deal with Jesus in a way that is expedient rather than principled. When Jesus gets a little too close for comfort, when Jesus becomes a threat to us, when Jesus challenges our status quo, the way that we look at life, the way that we like to have life organized, the way that we have life under control, when Jesus calls us into question, we want to get out from under the threat.

We want to avoid a difficult situation that may require change on our part, that may require repentance on our part, that may require faith and obedience on our part, that may require that we look at things differently than the way we have been looking at them, particularly when it comes to Jesus. But so often what we do, of course, is precisely what Caiaphas does. We rationalize.

We take the expedient way out, and we convince ourselves and everyone around us that this is really the better way. And even worse, we often use pious language to hide darker motives. We use lofty words to screen out the truth.

If you think about it, the words that Caiaphas speaks here would have sounded reasonable. They would have sounded pious to both the Sadducees and to the Pharisees, to the religious leaders, to all who heard them. But they were words that were intended to get rid of Jesus without facing the truth.

God save us from spiritually expedient words that are politically motivated. But secondly, I want you to notice that these are also prophetic words. John goes on to point out that there is more to these words than we might first realize.

Verse 51, John the Gospel writer interprets what's going on. He says, He did not say this on his own, but being high priest, that is, Caiaphas, that year he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God. These words may well have been political and expedient on the part of Caiaphas, but what John the Gospel writer says is that Caiaphas was saying far more than he knew.

Because these are words of prophecy. They predicted what was about to happen, and they also interpret what was about to happen, the meaning of the cross of Christ. Leslie Newbigin, who was for many years a missionary, statesman, a leader, a Christian leader in India, has written a number of books, and one of his books is on the Gospel of John, and he puts this text in this way.

He says, These small and frightened men, clothed in the robes of authority, which are in fact only a covering for pitiful weakness, are the unwitting instruments of a divine purpose. You see, Caiaphas's words may well have been motivated by expedience, they may well have been motivated by political purposes, but in fact there is a divine purpose here. The sovereignty of God is at work unfolding a reality in the life and ministry of Jesus.

By getting rid of Jesus in order to save the status quo, they were in fact pointing to the very heart of the meaning of the cross of Christ. Because what Caiaphas says here really points to the reality that Jesus is

going to die on the cross as a substitute for the people. His life will be given in exchange for the lives of his people.

Jesus will die so that his people may be spared. And John even points to the extent of the cross, not the nation of Israel only, but all the scattered children of God. The saving death of Jesus will extend not only to save the nation of Israel, but to save Gentiles as well as Jews.

The children of God will come from every corner of the world, and Jesus saves his people not, John says, from Roman domination, but from sin and evil itself. From the bondage and from slavery to sin and to evil. He is, if you go right back to John the Baptist pointing to Jesus, he is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

And so what we have here in these words of Caiaphas in this 11th chapter of John's gospel is the gospel of the cross, the meaning of the atonement, that Jesus dies in our place. This is the heart of the gospel with which we must all come to terms. You see, faith is born in your life not simply when you come to realize that Jesus died on a cross.

That's a matter of history. That's a matter of fact. But faith is born in your heart and in your life when you begin to realize that Jesus died on that cross for you.

That he died on that cross as your substitute. That he died on that cross as your representative. That he died in your place, in your stead.

As Paul puts it in Romans chapter 5, God commended his love to us in this that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. It's the for us aspect of the cross that is at the very center, the very heart of the gospel. That he did it for you and that he did it for me.

Paul in Romans 5 says one man's sin led to condemnation for all. The sin of our first parents, the sin of Adam, plunged us into the despair of sin. We're all implicated in that reality.

But Christ is the last Adam, Paul says, and one man's righteousness, one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. Adam was disobedient but Christ is obedient and he stands in our place as the one who can undo the sin of the other for us all. Or think of Paul's words in 2 Corinthians chapter 5 and verse 21, God made him who had no sin to be sin for us so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

That's Paul saying precisely what Caiaphas is saying here in the 11th chapter of John's gospel, the one for the many. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross so that free from sins we might live for righteousness by his wounds you have been healed, Peter says in 1 Peter 2 24. The substitutionary atonement runs like a straight arrow through the gospels through the entire New Testament.

It's the heart of Christian faith and as we come into this Easter season it's that reality that we need to keep ever before us that what Jesus did, he did not do in some general way. He did not do in some vague way. He did not do simply as an example as a great martyr laying down his life for a great cause but he did it for you and he did it for me.

When Caiaphas spoke these words he was speaking about what Christ did for you on the cross. And then thirdly I'd like you to notice that these are also paradoxical words. Paradoxical words.

This is the paradox. Caiaphas uttered these words as part of his attempt to persuade the Sanhedrin that it was time to get rid of Jesus. They were words of a political conspiracy.

They were words of expediency and little did Caiaphas realize that his words were actually bearing witness to who Jesus is and what Jesus had come to do. You see his words were spoken in an attempt to solve for him and all the religious leaders the Jesus problem but in reality these words pointed to the redeeming and to the sacrificial death of Jesus on the cross. This is the paradox.

Words that were intended to reject Jesus. Words that were intended to set Jesus aside. Words that were intended to get rid of Jesus are actually words which speak the truth about his identity and about his mission.

And I want to suggest to you tonight my friends that this is often true of our words. It's often true of the words of unbelief when people reject Jesus they often do so in ways and by saying things that reveal a great deal of the truth about themselves and in fact their very need for Jesus and even the truth of the claim that Jesus makes upon their lives. It's often in the words that are intended to reject Jesus, intended to set Jesus aside, intended to marginalize Jesus, intended to get rid of Jesus out of our lives that uncover in fact the truth of how much we need Jesus and the truth that Jesus is the one who alone can meet that need.

And it's not only true of words of unbelief but it's often true of words of believers as well. We sometimes try to rationalize away some claim of Jesus upon us but by doing so we actually reveal the truth of that very claim upon our lives. Have you ever found yourself in that circumstance? I have.

Where you've been thinking through some issue, thinking through some claim perhaps of the gospel upon your life, the claim of Jesus upon your life and you've thought through it, you've rationalized it, you've kind of argued through it and you're prepared to come to a conclusion and you realize at a certain point that everything you've said has uncovered in fact the reality and the truth of this claim upon your life. But I want you to notice that the paradox goes further here because the Sanhedrin's concern you'll notice was to save the holy place, the temple, Jerusalem from destruction. They wanted to save the temple in Jerusalem from being destroyed by the Romans.

And how do they do it? How do they do it? They try to save the temple by destroying Jesus. And do you remember how Jesus refers to himself? Do you remember how the Gospels refer to Jesus? Do you remember how the New Testament refers to Jesus? That he is the real temple. That he is the word made flesh.

That he is the word tabernacling in our midst. That he is the presence of God in our midst. The one in whom God has tabernacled and dwelled with his people.

Jesus is the real and holy place of the living God and he is destroyed. He is killed on a cross in order to save the temple in Jerusalem. Do you see the irony here? Do you see the paradox? Leslie Newbigin picks up this point in his book.

He says, the high priest fears for the destruction of the temple but does not know that Jesus is himself the true temple and that though they will indeed destroy the temple, it will be raised up to become the place to which all the nations of the earth will come to worship as the prophets had foretold. You see, they try to save the temple in Jerusalem. They try to save the holy place by destroying Jesus.

But Jesus, in fact, is the temple, is the holy place, is the one through whom and in whom and to whom the nations will come in worship and in adoration to glorify the living God. And of course, what happens? In the end, the Sanhedrin, the religious leaders, couldn't save the temple anyway. Within a few years, within 30 years or so, 35 years, the Romans invaded Jerusalem.

They destroyed the temple and they destroyed the temple so that it's not been rebuilt yet even to the present day. They lost the very thing that they were trying to save by turning away from Jesus. But I want to suggest to you tonight that that is the paradox of the gospel, that that is the paradox of discipleship.

Because what this text reminds us of, what this account reminds us of, what the rest of the Gospel of John reminds us of is that we cannot save ourselves no matter how hard we try. Every strategy that we will devise will fall apart. Every attempt that we will make will fail.

If you try to save your own life, you will lose it. But what does Jesus say? If you are willing to lose your life for the sake of the gospel, for my sake, you will find it. You see, the paradox of the Christian message is that you cannot save yourself, and if you try, you turn away from the very reality, the very gospel, the very salvation that is offered you.

Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He is the temple in whom we worship the living God. He is the one who died for the many.

May the words of Caiaphas be for all of us this night, not words of expedience, not words to get us out from under the claim of the gospel, but words of faith and words of repentance as we give ourselves to Jesus anew. Let us pray. Lord, we thank you tonight for the cross of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

We thank you for its power and for its meaning and for the way that it impacts our lives, sometimes in ways that we don't fully understand. But help us tonight in a new way to understand that Jesus died for us, that Jesus died for me, the one for the many, that indeed we might come to saving faith in our Savior, in whose precious name we pray. Amen.

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