Wednesday, January 25, 2023| *Deep Dive: The Gospel According to John* | John 11:45-54

Exegesis

Vs. 45-46 – Surprisingly, John does not convey how Martha, Mary, or the crowds reacted to Lazarus' resurrection. There is no emotional reunion. There is no interview of what it was like from Lazarus' perspective. Does he remember what occurred during the four days he was dead? Did he meet deceased loved ones? There is no way of knowing. As Carson explains, "Everything is sacrificed to the sign itself, to what it anticipates, and even to the way it precipitates it by arousing the animus of the authorities."[1] Instead, John focuses our attention on whether or not the crowds were persuaded of Jesus' messiahship. And, as before, Jesus' actions create a division (cf. 6:14-15, 24-33, 66-69; 7:10-13, 30-32, 40-44, 45-52).[2] The narrator explains, "Then many of the Jews which came to Mary, and had seen the things which Jesus did, believed on him." While not as good as a belief that occurs without miracles (cf. 20:29), a faith occasioned by signs is still better than no faith. And, sadly, though it appears that most believed in Jesus after Lazarus' resurrection, there were still "some of them" who "went their ways to the Pharisees, and told them what things Jesus had done." And though John does not explicitly reveal their motives, it can scarcely be anything other than enemy spies reporting back to their superiors.[3]

This fallout leads us to ask, "Was Lazarus' resurrection a success?" For the disciples, Mary, and Martha, absolutely. But what about the crowds? Did it fully convince them? An optimistic assessment would be that Lazarus' resurrection was met with mixed results. However, considering this is the straw that broke the camel's back and the thing that truly motivated the Pharisees to kill Jesus, it was by all accounts a failure in the immediate context.[4] Even though some did indeed believe in Jesus, Israel, by and large, would soon be united with the Sanhedrin against him (cf. 12:37).[5] All told, the sign did not accomplish its intended purpose. Even though they had gotten a reliable eye-witness account that a man who had been four days dead had been resurrected, the Jewish aristocracy *still* refused to believe. As Köstenberger puts it, "The

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[1] Carson (1991), p. 420.
[2] Beasley-Murray (1999), p. 196.
[3] Morris (1995), p. 501.
[4] Köstenberger, Andreas J., *A Theology of John's Gospel and Letters,* Biblical Theology of the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, MI; Zondervan, 2009), p. 228.
[5] Keener (2003), 2:854-855, points out that "In John, unlike the Synoptics, the crowds do not later pass judgment against Jesus; the responsibility for persecution against Jewish Christians lay primarily at the feet of the nation's recognized leaders…In a sense, John offers the hostility of such leaders as the reason that the world did not more quickly embrace Jesus."

following events show that no amount of evidence will convince those who have already determined to reject Jesus' claims."[6]

Vs. 47-48 – The Pharisees who heard that Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead took immediate action. In fact, John tells us they even "gathered the chief priests" and convened a special "council" to decide their next steps. This council, which could be appropriately called "the Sanhedrin," was primarily comprised of Sadducees, with Pharisees acting as a powerful minority who were themselves almost all scribes by trade.[7] Like our own Supreme Court, this council represented Israel's most powerful judicial body. And though it would've been subject to Roman authority, it would've been allowed to act autonomously, governing its own affairs according to its own laws, save for matters involving capital punishment (cf. 18:28-32). Combined, the Sanhedrin comprised some seventy highly trained and highly educated men who were experts in both judicial and theological matters, with a high priest acting as the seventy-first member and president.[8]

Ironically, the main item on their agenda was to answer the question, "What do we?" Or, "What are we to do?"[9] Those reading John's account might've been prone to answer, "Believe in Jesus!" But that, of course, would've been farthest from their mind. Their unbelief was firmly established. If they wouldn't believe in Jesus now, they never would. And in reality, the question might better be understood as "What are we accomplishing?"[10] And, in this sense, John's readers would've answered, "Nothing!"[11] No matter how one translates that question, it is an open admission that their efforts to stem the tide of Jesus' influence over the masses have *failed*. Especially when compared to Jesus, who has done "many miracles," they've accomplished very little. John often notes that Jesus performed "many" signs, miracles, and good works (cf. 10:32; 12:37; 20:30; 21:25), and here, even his opponents confirm this fact.[12]

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[6] Köstenberger (2004), p. 348.
[7] Beasley-Murray (1999), p. 196.
[8] Carson (1991), p. 420.
[9] ESV
[10] Keener (2003), 2:855; Morris (1995), p. 502; Carson (1991), p. 420, opt for this interpretation. But there is some disagreement among commentators. Both Köstenberger (2004, p. 349) and Beasley-Murray (1999, p. 184) explain that the phrase can be read either as deliberative (i.e., What are we going to do?) or rhetorical (i.e., What are we accomplishing?). I lean towards the rhetorical since they seem to be contrasting their actions with that of Jesus' "many miracles," and, by contrast, they've accomplished very little.
[11] Carson (1991), p. 420.
[12] Morris (1995), p. 502, "It has always been the case that those whose minds are made up to oppose what Christ stands for will not be convinced by any amount of evidence. In this spirit these men recognize that the miracles have taken place, but find in this a reason for more wholehearted opposition, not for faith. In their hardness of heart they continue on their own chosen way and refuse to consider the evidence before their eyes."

The miracles were starting to have their intended effect--i.e., people started believing in Jesus--and the Sanhedrin were quickly losing their credibility.

In this moment of stress, the religious leaders articulated why they stood in opposition to the Lord. They explain, “If we let him thus alone, all men will believe on him..." Left to his own devices, the chief priests feared that the whole nation would eventually end up believing in Jesus. And why was this a bad thing? Since they viewed Jesus as a revolutionary that threatened the established authority, they assumed that a wholesale acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah would eventually lead the nation in open rebellion against Roman occupation. Or, as they put it, "the Romans shall come and take away both our place and nation." One can hear the despair and cynicism in their words. In their minds, Israel did not stand a chance. Defeat was assured. In fact, they had good reason to believe this since the Jews had already experienced defeat at the hands of Romans centuries before.

But the Sanhedrin's fears weren't only driven by a sense of patriotism. They also had a strong sense of self-preservation. They said "*our* place and nation" would be taken away. Admittedly, "our" can be interpreted to refer to all Jews, with "place" referring to the Temple and "nation" referring to Israel.[13] But it could also mean their own personal positions within the nation.[14] And, considering their actions up to this point, it is doubtful they had much concern for anyone but themselves. Thus, they feared that what little autonomy they possessed would be stripped away. They would no longer be rulers. Should a rebellion begin under their watch, Rome would squash the rebellion and then install new leadership. So, the Sanhedrin's primary concern was not really for the nation but for their own station.[15]

John's readership, for whom the fall of Jerusalem was not some hypothetical scenario but a *historical* fact, would've picked up on the irony of this moment. It is akin to the self-fulfilling prophecy trope so common in mythology, literature, theatre, and film, where characters meet their destiny on the same road they took to avoid it (i.e., Cronos, Oedipus, Macbeth, Terminator, Harry Potter, etc.). If only they had realized that the path which avoided Roman defeat began by surrendering to Jesus, their Messiah and God.

Vs. 49-50 – John tells us that the high priest presiding over the Sanhedrin at this time was named Caiaphas. And historically, we know that Joseph Caiaphas held his position from A.D. 18-36 for eighteen years, which was an anomaly as most men were only high priests for a

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[13] Köstenberger (2004), p. 349; Morris (1995), p. 502; Thompson (2015), p. 253.
[14] Beasley-Murray (1999), p. 196.
[15] Wright (1950), p. 263, notices how Caiaphas will later, in vs. 50, explain that offering up Jesus as a scapegoat was "expedient for us," where "us" refers to the council.

year.[16] Considering that this post was also subject to the whims of Roman influence and high priests could be deposed without warning,[17] it is remarkable that Caiaphas was a high priest for so long. Thus, combining the length of his tenure with that of first-century sources, which bemoan the character of the high priests at this time, we can safely assume that Caiaphas was a masterful and ruthless politician.[18] For nearly two decades, he was able to walk the line as an advocate for the Israeli people while maintaining peaceful relations with their Roman overlords. That Caiaphas (or anyone for that matter) would need to be a man of dubious morals to hold that office is presupposed.

Caiaphas' political shrewdness is fully displayed in how he answered his colleagues when they asked, "What do we?" He says, "Ye know nothing at all, nor consider that it is expedient for us, that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not." Slinging insults (in this instance, claiming that they were ignorant) was apparently a common practice for those of Caiaphas' ilk. Josephus, a first-century historian and a Pharisee explains, "The Sadducees…are, even among themselves, rather boorish in their behavior, and in their intercourse with their peers are as rude as to aliens."[19] But, setting his demeanor aside, Caiaphas' point would've resonated with the rest of the Sanhedrin even if they would've been offended by his delivery. Why should they suffer Roman aggression when they can offer up Jesus as a scapegoat? They might've even been able to point to 2 Sam. 20, where Sheba is slain, but the city of Abel is spared.[20] The difference, of course, is that Sheba was guilty of sedition, whereas Jesus had been convicted of nothing. But, taking Jesus' innocence out of the equation, the Sanhedrin saw a way of getting rid of Jesus and quelling a potential altercation with Rome before it even began.

Again, just as in vs. 48, the irony of Caiaphas' solution would've been apparent to John's audience. In fact, his statement is the most extraordinary example of irony in all of this gospel account.[21] Jesus was, in fact, the scapegoat for not only the nation of Israel but for all humanity. As "God's lamb," the Messiah was the substitutionary sacrifice that paid for the transgression of the entire human race (cf. Rom. 5:12-21; 1 Cor. 15:21-22).[22]

Vs. 51-52 – So that his audience does not miss the ironic nature of Caiaphas' words, John tells us, "And this spake he not of himself: but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus

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[16] Köstenberger (2004), p. 351.
[17] Beasley-Murray (1999), p. 197; Carson (1991), p. 421, calls the high priest's position a "political football."
[18] Keener (2003), 2:853.
[19] Köstenberger (2004), p. 351.
[20] Beasley-Murray (1999), p. 197.
[21] Carson (1991), p. 421.
[22] Morris (1995), p. 504.

should die for that nation…." By saying that Caiaphas "spake…not of himself," John said that the high priest was the unwitting prophet of God and spoke better than he knew.[23] Caiaphas could not see the future and was not a willing mouthpiece of God. Instead, the Evangelist wants us to see that this high priest's calloused and brutal advice just so happened to coincide with God's plan, so much so that Caiaphas could rightly be said to have "prophesied" on God's behalf. "Both Caiaphas and John understand Jesus' death to be substitutionary: either Jesus dies, or the nation dies."[24] But whereas Caiaphas wanted to spare his own skin, God wanted to spare humanity. What a speaker may intend on a literal level, a hearer can understand on a metaphorical level, and so is the case here.[25] And so, what Caiaphas meant for evil, God meant it for good (cf. Gen. 50:20).

And because it was by God's design, and not Caiaphas' design, that Jesus had to die, John shows us that it wasn't just "that nation only [meaning Israel] but that also he should gather together in one the children of God that were scattered abroad." The reference to the "children of God that were scattered abroad" can refer to the Diaspora, Jews who had taken up residence in foreign lands. But that phrase also refers to O.T. prophetic depictions of Gentiles making their way to the "holy mountain" because the Temple is a "house of prayer for all nations" (Isa. 56:3-7).[26] And so, for John, Caiaphas was closer to the truth than he realized. Jesus would indeed die on Israel's behalf, but in doing so, the Messiah would save *all* people, not just the Jews.[27] The Diaspora, after Christ, no longer refers to Israelite sojourners but to the mix of Jewish and Gentiles "strangers" scattered throughout the world who identify with Jesus (cf. 1 Pet. 1:1).[28] All who name the name of Christ are called the "children of God" regardless of nationality (cf. 1:12; Rom. 8:14; Gal. 3:26; 4:7).

Wright makes a thought-provoking parallel between Caiaphas and the Nazis:

> "When the Nazi gang of evil conspirators of war and perpetrators of unutterable sufferings reached, at long last, the end of their earthly tether in Berlin during those unforgettable days of May, 1945, a Lancashire businessman said to a friend, "They were too clever, and that's where God *tricked* them." So could it have been said of Caiaphas

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[23] Wright (1950), p. 263; Beasley-Murray (1999), p. 198; Carson (1991), p. 421; Köstenberger (2004), p. 353; Morris (1995), p. 504, "What Caiaphas spoke as a piece of cynical political realism, God meant to be understood in a deeper, more significant way."
[24] Carson (1991), p. 422; Morris (1995), p. 504.
[25] Keener (2003), 2:856-857.
[26] Köstenberger (2004), p. 353.
[27] Thompson (2015), p. 255, "The Gospel's interpretation thus joins the political motives for Jesus' death with its saving effects: while the council intends that Jesus should die *instead of* [author's emphasis] the people, by their unwitting collusion, he dies *for* [author's emphasis] them."
[28] Beasley-Murray (1999), p. 198; Morris (1995), p. 505.

> and his sacerdotal followers. Their own tricks of mind were used, and overruled, so as to out-trick themselves. This is what the Psalmist meant when he spoke about the 'wrath of man' turning to 'God's praise.' This is what Shakespeare meant when he put into the mouth of Hamlet the familiar, but little regarded, words: *There's a divinity that shapes our ends / Rough-hew them how we will*."[29]

Vs. 53-54 – "Then from that day forth they took counsel together for to put him to death." Never before had the Sanhedrin been more united than on this day. In fact, so sure was their decision that one could say, "They passed a resolution on that day to put Jesus to death."[30] They would no longer seek to understand this Jesus but make every effort to execute him. The forthcoming trial is purely symbolic, a ruse to keep up appearances. At this point, it is nothing more than a means to an end. Jesus will have his day in court so that the Sanhedrin might have their crucifixion. And so, because the danger that Jesus was in had evolved from a kind of mob mentality (cf. 8:59; 10:31, 39) to premeditate and planned in nature, John tells us, "Jesus, therefore, walked no more openly among the Jews; but went thence unto a country near to the wilderness, into a city called Ephraim, and there continued with his disciples." While it is difficult to locate precisely where Ephraim is today, if it's to be identified with Ophrah (cf. Josh 18:23), as is commonly claimed, Jesus went about fifteen miles northeast of Jerusalem.[31] And unlike us, who would've fled for our lives, Jesus' move to the wilderness was not motivated by fear but was a calculated decision. He was not hiding. Ephraim was the perfect place to await the chiming of his fateful hour (cf. 2:4; 4:21, 23; 5:25, 28; 8:20; 12:23, 27; 13:1; 16:32; 17:1; 19:14).

For all intents and purposes, verse 54 officially marks the end of Jesus' public ministry. Even the rest of the content left in John's account has far more to do with events that occur within Jesus' inner circle than with anything else. Of the ten chapters left, only two could rightly be called "public knowledge" (ch. 18-19). The rest is filled with dialogue and conversations that Jesus had with his disciples. Thus, for eleven chapters, John showed his readers how the world saw Jesus. Now, he'll show us what his followers saw.

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[29] Wright (1950), p. 264.
[30] Beasley-Murray (1999), p. 199.
[31] Carson (1991), p. 424; Morris (1995), p. 505; Köstenberger (2004), p. 354.

VIDEO DESCRIPTION

Wednesday Night Live | John | Week 28

Text: John 11:45-54

Tonight, we come to the close of Jesus' public ministry. With Lazarus' resurrection, the people are on the cusp of wholesale devotion to the Messiah. But not everyone is inclined to believe. Amazingly, the religious leaders are even more convinced that Jesus is guilty despite a mound of evidence to the contrary. But what are they to do? Everyone could feel the shift in public opinion. If the Sanhedrin didn't act soon, the tide would completely turn against them. Not only that, this whole affair is liable to bring the wrath of Rome down upon Israel. Nothing would be left then. And so, under the direction of a gifted politician with dubious morals, the Jewish aristocracy hatches a plan: kill Jesus to spare the nation. However, in doing so, they become the unwitting agents of God's design, for Jesus' death would indeed be a substitutionary payment. But he would pay for more than just the sins of one nation. Jesus would die for all nations.

Pastor's manuscript can be found here: