

# “It is Better that One Man Should Die”

## The Power of Power

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Gun control is a hot issue right now, especially in places most directly affected by recent mass shootings. Christians can disagree on the issue without, necessarily, compromising their faith. Don't judge a fellow believer based on political affiliation. What unites us in Christ is much more significant than what may divide us in American politics. What I find interesting is that, in some states, like Florida, opinion polls show that the public is in favor of stricter control, but legislators will not vote for it. One reason cited for what appears to be a disconnect is that the minority opposing gun control is more likely to give money, get active, and cast votes over this single issue. Legislators can downplay polls because they know who keeps them in power. I mention this because it illustrates how little things change over time.

We are considering a section of the Bible this morning in which the powerful are nervous to hang on to their power. Justice and truth take a back seat to their ambition. Turn with me to John 11. In a moment, we will begin reading at v. 45. In our pew Bible, that verse is on p. 898. The editors of this Bible insert a heading just above v. 45, “The Plot to Kill Jesus.” Listen as I read to the end of chapter 11. Try to detect some examples of people seeking approval from others rather than searching for truth in Jesus Christ.

<sup>45</sup> Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him, <sup>46</sup> but some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. <sup>47</sup> So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the council and said, “What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. <sup>48</sup> If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.” <sup>49</sup> But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, “You know nothing at all. <sup>50</sup> Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish.” <sup>51</sup> He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, <sup>52</sup> and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad. <sup>53</sup> So from that day on they made plans to put him to death. <sup>54</sup> Jesus therefore no longer walked openly among the Jews, but went from there to the region near the wilderness, to a town called Ephraim, and there he stayed with the disciples. <sup>55</sup> Now the Passover of the Jews was at hand, and many went up from the country to Jerusalem before the Passover to purify themselves. <sup>56</sup> They were looking for Jesus and saying to one another as they stood in the temple, “What do you think? That he will not come to the feast at all?” <sup>57</sup> Now the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that if anyone knew where he was, he should let them know, so that they might arrest him. (John 11:45–57)

This passage divides cleanly between verses 53 and 54. The first section, vv. 45-53 describes how Jesus stirs controversy among the powerful. The second section, vv. 54-57, describes how Jesus stirs controversy among the public. Controversy reaches a boiling point because Jesus has proven that he is the legitimate Messiah. He raised Lazarus to life after he had been dead four days. We studied this last week in 11:1-44. No one can deny that Lazarus is alive, and that Jesus restored his life. Yet, Jesus as Messiah brings hope to some and horror to others. He claims to lead a new kingdom. The anticipation of this kingdom is either a thrill or a threat. As we

have often noted, you cannot be neutral about Jesus. He is either of God or of the devil. He is either Lord or liar. He is either worthy of your worship or your warfare. Trying to marginalize Jesus is impossible. He will not let you get away with that. When he returns to judge the world, you will either fall on him and enjoy his mercy, or he will fall on you and you will experience his judgment. This is true no matter what status you hold. The members of the powerful council as well as the common people must respond to Jesus. All human beings regardless of rank, or race, or riches will have to respond when Jesus summons them to appear before him at the end of time. What will you do on that day?

## Controversy Among the Powerful (45-53)

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### ***Division (45-46)***

John turns our attention to the people had been with Mary and had seen Lazarus come back to life. These were average, caring people wanting to comfort a friend mourning the loss of her brother. They could not deny what they saw. But they had wildly differing reactions. V. 45 says that some of them believed in Jesus. We have seen earlier in our study of John that professing to believe in Jesus and truly following him are not the same. These people may believe in him as leader of a revolution. They may intend to make him king. They may see in Jesus one who will overthrow Roman power and rid the nation of corrupt leaders who are helping Rome. These are probably some of the same people who welcome Jesus as king on Sunday and then call for his crucifixion later in the week. For now, they have a positive response to him.

But v. 46 says that some who were with Mary and witnessed Jesus bringing Lazarus back to life went to report him to the authorities in Jerusalem. These are people who had been mourning with Mary. They have been good neighbors in the face of tragedy. Nice people. But they must do something about Jesus. He has proven that he is God and holds the power of life and death. Yet the authorities want him arrested. Jesus is a threat to their power. He might upset the status quo. So, they turn Jesus in. They give in to the pressure to win the approval of those in power rather than follow God's true Messiah.

Such temptation may be closer than we think. The days are fast approaching and are already here when obedience to the government will mean compromising allegiance to Jesus Christ. Standing up against unjust or immoral laws may cost Christians their jobs or money or social status. It will seem better to report fellow believers than stand by them. We prepare for such a time by remembering that Jesus Christ not only raised the dead like Lazarus. He himself came back to life on his own authority three days after his crucifixion. All authority in heaven and on earth belongs to him (Matthew 28:18). All governments exist and survive because he ordains them. He declares to the Roman representative at his trial, "You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above." (John 19:11). Psalm 2 makes it clear that those in power oppose God and his anointed Messiah. But, "Blessed are all who take refuge in him." (Psalm 2:12). Don't wait for persecution to decide how you will respond.

### ***Debate (vv. 47-48)***

Our text makes clear that those in power do not know what to do with Jesus. The reports of Jesus raising the dead push them to call a meeting of their council (v. 47). But the gathering only provokes debate (vv. 47-48). They see Jesus' popularity and wonder how to respond. It appears that they have only two options. The first is do nothing. Let Jesus keep performing signs. This will keep most of the people happy. But, if they employ this strategy, the whole nation may believe in Jesus. This will not sit well with the Romans (v. 48). Jesus' new kingdom ultimately represents a threat to Roman power. If there is unrest in Palestine, the Romans will blame the Jewish leaders to whom they give authority so long as they keep the peace. If Rome must step in and put

down an insurrection, these Jewish leaders fear they will be removed from office and banished to a remote part of the empire.

Their second option is to arrest Jesus. But if they do this, rumors about him will continue to spread. The people will demand his release like they would do in a week with Barabbas who was already in jail for attempting to challenge Roman authority (John 18:40). Besides, they have attempted to arrest Jesus in the past and he has evaded them (John 7:30; 7:44; 8:20; 10:39). Perhaps they worry that their failed attempts are making them look bad in the eyes of the people. They are supposed to be leading and yet they are simply trying to keep people happy. They reject Jesus' authority and so have nothing to support them except the people's approval.

I appreciate the suicide prevention speaker who was the guest of the 409-school district this week. He said that parents should not try to be their children's best friend. Friendship may be the product of good parenting down the road. But the process of parenting does not involve trying to be a child's friend. Leadership is not pleasing people. Paul charges Timothy to preach the word because he knew all too well the temptation for teachers to tickle itching ears (2 Timothy 4:3). If Christ gives you a position of leadership (and every Christian is a leader in some context), lead others by his truth and not their sense of what they want in the moment. In our nation, great leaders have done the right thing even at the risk of losing an election. A good parent will insist on the right thing at the risk of being unpopular. Truth is often unpopular. Leadership based on truth is rarely convenient.

### ***Decision (vv. 49-50, 53)***

One man on the council rejects both options: Caiaphas, who is high priest. He has no patience for the indecisiveness of his fellow council members. It may be that the Pharisees are closer to the people and so more in tune with public opinion. Caiaphas as priest may be removed from the people and more in tune with what Rome will like. In any event, he tells them that they know nothing about handling Jesus. He has been high priest for a decade already and will continue for another six years. His appointment came not by following God's instructions through Moses but by a decision of the pagan occupying power, Rome. He is not in the least sympathetic to Jesus. He announces to the council a third option, that, if they care about holding on to power, they need to kill Jesus. In effect, he tells them that if Jesus is not killed, the whole nation will perish when the Romans put down the rebellion. Better that Jesus die and keep the peace. Caiaphas' short speech galvanizes the debating leaders. V. 53 notes, from that day on they made plans to put Jesus to death. They set aside public opinion to hang on to power.

### ***Declaration (vv. 51-52)***

But it is what John tells us about Caiaphas' speech that is most interesting. Under the leading of the Holy Spirit to write down God's word, John tells us that Caiaphas' words are true in a way that he never intended. Caiaphas is a conniving political player who is willing to kill to keep his position. In just over a week he will play a central role in sending Jesus to the cross. To an observer in Jerusalem it will seem that Caiaphas is right. They kill Jesus and they keep their power. In fact, God uses their sinful actions to establish Christ's kingdom out of every people group in the world. John tells us,

<sup>51</sup> [Caiaphas] did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, <sup>52</sup> and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad. (John 11:51-52)

God is sovereign over even the wicked actions of political leaders. In Acts 4, after Jesus’ death, resurrection, and return to glory, the early church prays to God about the persecution they face. These new Christians find themselves at odds with those in political power. They join to seek the Lord and say,

24 ... “Sovereign Lord, ... 25 who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit, ‘Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain? 26 The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed’— 27 for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, 28 to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.” (Acts 4:24–28)

Christian, even when you face difficult opposition or tribulation God is furthering his sovereign purposes. Jesus Christ will gather his people who are scattered across the globe. No government will stand in his way. Fifty years ago, the communists took over Ethiopia and kicked out all the western missionaries. The church they left was young and had little leadership. When they returned twenty years later, they expected to have to pick up the pieces and start again. Instead, they found a vibrant church with courageous leaders developed through persecution. The communists meant it for evil, but God meant it for good.

In Acts 4, the church prays to this Sovereign God for boldness. As one of you reminded me a couple of weeks ago in the words of Dick Eastman, “Something happens when we pray that doesn’t happen when we don’t pray.” This is the glory of a sovereign God. He responds to our prayers and advance his purposes in a world that remains opposed to those purposes. He commands us in 1 Timothy 2 to pray for those in authority so that the gospel will advance. He will even use powerful opposition to accomplish his will.

1 The king’s heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will.  
(Proverbs 21:1)

What is more amazing about Caiaphas’ declaration is that Jesus does die to spare people from death. But it is not physical death at the hands of the Romans. Jesus spares sinners like you and me from God’s wrath because Jesus dies as a Substitute. This is what we affirmed earlier in our confession of faith.<sup>i</sup> Jesus is the sacrificial substitute not only for faithful Jews who trusted in him during John’s lifetime. He is the Savior for all who will trust in him, scattered throughout time and place. If you will turn to Christ today, he will place you as God’s child in to his unified family. Only in Christ are we gathered home from our wandering in sin. Why will you wander, wondering what power will control your destiny. Give yourself to Christ. He is Lord of all. In him you have life forever.

## Controversy Among the People (54-57)



When the authorities decide on their plan to kill Jesus, Jesus leaves the city. It is interesting that this is the only thing that Jesus does or says in this whole passage. He has finished debating. He has performed his last spectacular sign. He now goes into seclusion in a small town north of Jerusalem called Ephraim. The map shows the location (NE of Bethel). But we know that Jesus is not hiding. He does not fear those who want to kill him. They will do that on Jesus’ schedule. He is with his disciples preparing them for what is about to happen. They will soon face persecution without him physically present. Time spent learning from Jesus with other Christians or on your own is not wasted. It is preparation

for the challenges ahead. The speaker for the school system this week encouraged students, parents, and staff to give time to self-care. He gets up an hour and a half early each morning to renew himself for the day. He draws only on resources within himself (at least from what he told us). We have the word of God and the presence of Christ's Spirit. Take time each day to be with the Lord. Prioritize the time we set aside each Lord's day to learn and worship together with him. You need time in Ephraim if you are going to handle the challenges of Jerusalem.

Jesus' absence in Jerusalem causes a stir among the people in the city. The Passover festival is close. Devout Jews are preparing for this most sacred time. They are looking for Jesus (v. 52). They expect him as Messiah to come to the temple. But they also fear the authorities. They wonder if Jesus will really come because they plan to kill him. But Jesus must come for the feast. He cannot claim to fulfill God's law if he neglects such a basic and obvious requirement to observe Passover (Deuteronomy 16:1). This special year, Jesus is coming to complete the Passover, to be the Jewish firstborn Son who does die so that God's judgment might Passover all who trust him as the lamb of God.

We do not have to wonder if Jesus will do the right thing. Jesus does all things well (Mark 7:37). People will deceive and disappoint you. Popular opinion is undependable. Those in power may lead you astray.

<sup>3</sup> Put not your trust in princes, in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation. <sup>4</sup> When his breath departs, he returns to the earth; on that very day his plans perish. <sup>5</sup> Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD his God, <sup>6</sup> who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, who keeps faith forever; (Psalm 146:3–6)

You will never regret doing what is right when you follow Christ. Do not fear what your friends will think. Do not fear what the law may do to you. Do not fear what you may lose. To paraphrase C.S. Lewis, seek anything but Christ and you will have nothing. Seek Christ and, when he finishes his work in you, he will give you everything.

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<sup>i</sup> "Jesus Christ was the best person to be a substitute. There was needed a substitute of the same nature with us. Such is Jesus Christ. For this purpose he became man, of the substance of his mother, very man, as any of us. Handle him and see if he be not flesh and bones. Look at him, and mark if he be not man in soul as well as in body. He hungers; he thirsts; he fears; he weeps; he rejoices; he loves; he dies. Made in all points and like unto us, being a man, and standing exactly in a man's place, becoming a real Adam, as true an Adam as was the first Adam, standing quite in the first Adam's place, he is a fit person to become a substitute for us. A mere man could at most only be a substitute for one other man. But the dignity of the Son of God, the dignity of his nature, changes the whole matter. A God bowing his head, and suffering, and dying in the person of manhood adds a special force to the substitution, and thus one bleeding Savior can make atonement for millions and the Captain of our salvation can bring multitudes to glory." (Spurgeon, C. H. (1864). Expiation. In *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons* (Vol. 10, pp. 175–176). London: Passmore & Alabaster.)