

“Everyone Believed in Him”

The Thirty-Eighth in a Series of Sermons on the Gospel of John

Texts; John 11:45-57; Isaiah 2:1-5

Jesus has just raised his dear friend Lazarus from the dead. There were plenty of eyewitnesses to this amazing miracle—Lazarus’s family saw it, as did many Jews from the city of Jerusalem who were present at the tomb. This was our Lord’s seventh miraculous sign recorded in John’s gospel, and surely the most dramatic sign so far. The Jews of Jesus’ day should have understood full-well the significance of this event. YHWH was to raise the dead on the last day (the general resurrection), yet Jesus had just raised Lazarus. Since the Jews tied the resurrection of the dead to the culmination of the messianic age, the only conclusion to be drawn is that with the coming of Jesus, the messianic age is a present reality. There can be no doubt about Jesus’ identity. Jesus is Israel’s Messiah, the Son of Man, and the eternal word made flesh. Jesus has demonstrated for all to see that he is the coming one foretold by all of Israel’s prophets. You would think that upon learning that Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, the members of the Sanhedrin would rush to embrace Jesus as Israel’s Messiah. Instead, the Sanhedrin issues a warrant for Jesus’ arrest and hatches a plot to kill him. Our Lord’s hour is rapidly drawing near, and at the same time, Israel is also coming to a biblical crossroad. Just as Jesus’ hour is near, so too is Israel’s.

We are currently working our way through John’s Gospel, and are now in chapter 11. We are considering the closing verses of this remarkable chapter, in which the wheels are set in motion for Jesus’ arrest, trial, and crucifixion. We have spent several weeks considering Jesus’ raising of Lazarus from the dead, and it is important to once again consider the role that chapters 11 and 12 play in the overall structure of John’s Gospel. After the prologue to the Gospel (the first 14 verses), John (who was an eyewitness to these events) spends ten chapters covering Jesus’ messianic mission. When we left off last time, Jesus was in Bethany where Lazarus had been buried (just outside Jerusalem) and only days remained before Jesus’ death as the Passover Lamb and his resurrection from the dead.

Beginning in chapter 11—especially with John’s account of Jesus’ raising of Lazarus—John will spend two chapters preparing us for what is commonly known as the “Upper Room Discourse” which is recounted in chapters 13-17. During the Upper Room Discourse, Jesus prepares his disciples for his betrayal, arrest, death, and resurrection—all associated the so-called “Passion” found chapters 18-20. Although they do not yet realize it, the disciples’ time with Jesus is soon coming to an end. In just days, Jesus will be leaving his disciples and returning to the presence of the Father. As his hour draws near, little time remains for Jesus to prepare his disciples for a new manner of his presence with them—through the indwelling of the blessed comforter (the Holy Spirit).

In the first half of his Gospel (chapters 1-10) then, John covers the first three years of Jesus’ messianic mission. But the material found in chapters 13-17 (the Upper Room Discourse) takes place during one evening, while the Passion account (chapters 18-20) covers a mere three days. So even though we are about half way through our time in John, everything from chapter 11 until our Lord’s Passion, takes place shortly before Jesus’ final Passover celebration in Jerusalem. Chapters 11-12 serve as the literary bridge between the two halves of John’s Gospel, taking us from the end of Jesus’ three year messianic mission, to the days immediately before our Lord’s death upon the cross, and his resurrection from the dead.

Although critical scholars like to pit John’s Gospel against the synoptic gospels—trying to create the

impression that there are many contradictions between John's and the other gospels—the four gospels clearly agree as to the sequence of events at this critical turning point in Jesus' ministry. The time frame is spelled out in Mark 14:1-2, where we read, "*it was now two days before the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. And the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to arrest [Jesus] by stealth and kill him, for they said, 'Not during the feast, lest there be an uproar from the people.'*" Mark is speaking of the Wednesday of Easter week (or the Passion week).

The focus of John's account (at the end of chapter 11) is the origination of the plot to kill Jesus which Mark tells us was already in place two days (Wednesday) before the Passover (Good Friday). That Mark mentions the same plot which John recounts in chapter 11 as being formed a few days before Palm Sunday (the Sunday before the Passover), means that the plot to kill Jesus was hatched several days before Jesus enters Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. The synoptic gospels speak of this plot in retrospect—the scheme had been hatched a week or so earlier. In Mark's account, the Sanhedrin (the Jewish ruling body) is getting ready to carry out this plot immediately after Jesus institutes the sacrament of the Lord's Supper (Thursday of Easter Week), goes to Gethsemane to pray, and while there is arrested, before being taken before Caiaphas, the high priest, and turned over to Pilate on Friday morning. John and Mark are talking about the same plot. John describes its origin *before* Jesus enters Jerusalem. The synoptics describe this same plot being implemented *after* Jesus entered Jerusalem. There is no contradiction.

As we turn to our text (vv. 45-57), we also return to a familiar theme in John's Gospel. Jesus gives the Jews yet another miraculous sign which forces all those who witness it to make a decision about his person and work. When Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead, Jesus not only demonstrated that he is the Messiah, but it is clear that the messianic age has reached its culmination, Jesus is forcing those Jews who witnessed the event to decide whether or not he is the Christ. Jesus must be the Messiah, because who else could raise the dead? Yet because of sinful prejudice—sinful people love darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil—many reject him. Those who make the latter choice, will face the dire consequences of rejecting that one promised throughout the Old Testament.

You simply cannot remain "neutral" about Jesus. The usual mind-set of people then, as now, is to follow the line of least resistance. Most people are busy with life, and apathetic about things such as the ministry of Jesus which has seemingly little impact upon their day to day lives. They want to be left alone, and do not want to be forced to face ultimate questions. This is why Jesus makes people (then and now) so uncomfortable. You are either with him or against him. As we have seen throughout John's Gospel, whether it be through his words or deeds, Jesus forces the people of Israel to decide. He acts and speaks in public at Israel's major feasts. When he does, the question inevitably arises . . . "do you believe in me? Or, do you reject me?"

In recounting these events, John also forces his readers to face the same question those present at Lazarus' tomb faced. Who is this man? When Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead—an event far too significant to ignore—those present must either believe in Jesus, or look to the Pharisees to deal with him. Jesus' ministry cannot go on as it had been going on. Something has to give. The messianic mission of Jesus is coming to its climax. His hour is nearly here. What will the Sanhedrin do? What will the people of Israel do? What will the Romans do? What will Jesus do?

Immediately after Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, we read in verse 45, that "*many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him.*" The glory of God has been revealed when Lazarus came stumbling out of his tomb, struggling to get out of his graves clothes. As much as we would like it, not a word is said by John about Lazarus' reaction, nor about Mary and

Martha's joy at the sight of their dead brother now come back to life. The reason is that John's Gospel is not about Lazarus, Mary, or Martha. As John himself tells us in chapter 20:30-31, "*now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.*" This is the focus in John 11, as the Passover approaches, Israel is deeply divided when the great turning point in redemptive history finally comes. Will Israel believe that Jesus is the Christ?

Many of those who had come from Jerusalem to pay their respects actually saw Lazarus walk out of his tomb, and then placed their trust in Jesus—John says they "believed in him." Given Jesus' appearance in Jerusalem during the Feast of Booths just a few months earlier, and especially in light of the miracles he performed at the time (like restoring eyesight to a man who had been born blind), the mourners from Jerusalem present at Lazarus' grave were surely familiar with Jesus and his reputation as a miracle-worker. What they witnessed this day convinced them that Jesus was the Christ and the promised one. Only YHWH could raise the dead. And they had seen Jesus do this very thing! The only conclusion is that YHWH must be with Jesus, and that Jesus is who he claims to be.

Yet there were others who saw what happened, and who instead of trusting in Jesus, immediately went and tattled to the Pharisees that Jesus was back in the area, and that he had raised a dead man in nearby Bethany. As we read in verse 46, "*but some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done.*" We might entertain the hope (at least for a moment) that such people went to tell the Pharisees what Jesus had done so as to convince them also to believe in Jesus, but the context indicates that their motive was unbelief stemming from their loyalty to the religious status quo.¹ These people saw Jesus as a trouble maker, and a threat to the peace with Rome. They may have worried that the Pharisees might take action against them if they fail to report that Jesus was nearby. We saw this very thing when Jesus healed the blind man, and the Pharisees punished the blind man's family simply because they were recipients of Jesus' compassion, and because they wouldn't tell the Pharisees what they wanted to hear.

Jesus has confirmed his divine and messianic identity, as well as the fact that because he has come, the messianic age has dawned. Everything God had promised throughout the Old Testament about the messianic age was becoming a reality. It was all coming to pass before their very eyes. Yet, the Pharisees refused to accept what was virtually self-evident. The great irony which continues to unfold as well is that it is the unbelief, the scheming, and the plotting on the part of the Sanhedrin which soon leads to the death of Jesus, which secures the salvation of God's people. It is the unbelief of the Sanhedrin (the symbol of unbelieving Israel) which brings down the final covenant curses upon the nation of Israel, as seen in the destruction of the temple and the city of Jerusalem in AD 70, followed by the diaspora of Jews into the four corners of the earth. We glibly use the phrase, "none are so blind as those who will not see." But it is never truer than when used of the Pharisees. Even though one rise from the dead, Jesus told them . . . they won't believe.

But if John does not tell us about their reaction, he does tell us what the Pharisees did. They call an emergency council meeting. According to verses 46-48, "*so the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the council and said, 'What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. 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.'*" The fact that Jesus has performed miracles is now beyond dispute. No one (that we read of) even bothers to try to refute this. That large numbers of Jews are now following Jesus is also a matter

¹ Carson, The Gospel According to John, 419.

beyond dispute. The latter point is great cause for concern for the Sanhedrin, since this meant that the Jewish people were no longer listening to them. There is no doubt that the Sanhedrin (especially the Pharisees) are jealous and resentful of Jesus' fame and popularity—especially since he's bested them every time they encounter him. But like most politicians, when things happen beyond their control, or whenever bad news rears its head, the instinct for political survival immediately kicks in. The overriding motive for the Sanhedrin's subsequent action is fear.

What if Jesus' influence continues to increase, and he creates some kind of mass movement, like an armed revolt against Roman rule. The Pharisees are very worried that Romans will get wind of Jesus' fame, and then act to remove the Pharisees (and entire the Sanhedrin) from governing Palestine. It is important to notice that the Sanhedrin (to this point) does not even debate the question as to whether Jesus is indeed that one promised throughout the Old Testament—the members of the Sanhedrin have already answered that question with a resounding, “no.” In their minds Jesus has become a very serious threat to their existence, and such a threat, they reason, cannot be allowed to stand. If Jesus' popularity leads to a political movement (a revolt), they know they will be on the losing end of any military action Rome might take. They see Jesus as a threat because they do not understand that his kingdom is not of this world. They are convinced that if they are going to remain in control, well then, Jesus must go. And that means arresting Jesus, and then putting him to death before he can disrupt the Passover or provoke the Romans. And yet, since Jesus is so popular, the Sanhedrin must tread lightly.

Remember too that the Sanhedrin was a very divided body—religiously and politically. The Pharisees were the conservatives (both theologically and politically), but held a minority of seats among the seventy-member Sanhedrin. The Pharisees controlled most of the outlying synagogues (the Jews in outlying areas are more conservative than in urban areas) and are often identified as scribes or elders. Many of the Pharisees were land owners, or from well-established and influential families. The largest faction in the Sanhedrin were the Sadducees (the theological and political liberals), which, at the time included Israel's current high priest and several prominent members of his family. The Sadducees were closely allied with the Herodians—that faction most devoted to the puppet “Jewish” king put in place by the Romans—(Herod) and the Herodian dynasty. The Sadducees and Herodians wanted to keep peace with the Romans, and would make just about any compromise to make that happen.

The remarkable thing is that both of these factions (who did not like one another) see Jesus as such a serious and common threat, they are willing to unite on a course of action to address the problem that Jesus is creating for both factions. He is a threat to their mutual interest—to keep their tenuous rule over Roman occupied Palestine. This would be like the Republicans and Democrats suddenly agreeing to work together because of a common threat. This emergency meeting of the entire Jewish council is therefore quite extraordinary. In the face of the news that Jesus has raised a well-known citizen from the dead, the assembled members ask themselves, “now what?” “*What are we to do?*” But a deeply divided Sanhedrin quickly agrees on one thing. Jesus is a threat to both factions, and if they don't stop him now, well then Rome might remove them. Then they would all be out of power—a politician's greatest fear.

According to John, the high priest that year was a man named Caiaphas, whose family had held that office, or had been numbered among the priests since AD 18.² It is Caiaphas who presides over Jesus' arrest and trial just days later, and it is he who then turns Jesus over to Pilate to be tried and crucified. Hearing the various members of the Sanhedrin discussing their concerns, and hearing the laments from

² Carson, The Gospel According to John, 421.

the assembled body that Jesus was ruining everything, the high priest quickly silences the assembled group. *“But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, ‘You know nothing at all. 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.’”* According to Josephus, the Sanhedrin was more like the House of Commons, than our congress.³ Loud debate was the rule and things often got heated.

The high priest has heard enough. It is time for action. There is an easy solution. Jesus must be put to death. Better that Jesus die so as to keep the peace with Rome, than the Romans intervene and take action against the Sanhedrin. Jesus’ death will save the nation (by showing the Romans that the Jews can take care of their own troubles), and, says Caiaphas, it is better for the members of the Sanhedrin if he dies, because they will finally be rid of Jesus, and this may actually keep the current Sanhedrin in power. Politicians were pretty much the same then as now—self-interest and self-preservation trumps everything else (like doing the right thing).

Writing several decades later, John looks back upon this event through the lens of the providence of God—even though Caiaphas was freely speaking his mind, he was setting in motion the very plan of God in saving sinners from the guilt and power of sin. In other words, Caiaphas’ speech came from his own mouth, and reflected his own bad intentions, but nevertheless, the high priest’s words set forth the very purpose of God—that Jesus would die on Israel’s behalf. In verses 51-52, John comments, *“[Caiaphas] did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad.”* Caiaphas’ plan to kill Jesus actually accomplished what God had decreed all along.

When the high priest determined that it was best for Jesus to die so that Israel would not, he was actually speaking forth God’s intention that Jesus die for the sins of his people (including those in Israel who believed in him, as well as those Jews scattered abroad). As we read in our Old Testament lesson, the prophet Isaiah foretold of such a time. *“It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be lifted up above the hills; and all the nations shall flow to it, and many peoples shall come, and say: ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.’”* Jesus will usher in that kingdom which will draw people from the ends of the earth to the heavenly Zion, and one day that same kingdom will be consummated (at Jesus’ return) when he judges the nations and all war shall cease.

Indeed, as we read elsewhere in the New Testament, the true Israel (of which Isaiah, and ironically Caiaphas has been speaking) is the church. As we read in 1 Peter 2:9, *“but you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”* Although John and Peter are speaking of those Jews who are scattered abroad, the Gentiles also are to be incorporated into the people of God—the church, the true Israel. The death of Jesus not only “saves” true Israel, his death is the basis for the Gentile mission, through which the people of God (the elect from every nation on earth) are made one within true Israel.

The divided and contentious Sanhedrin quickly reaches a consensus. Says John, *“so from that day on*

³ Carson, The Gospel According to John, 421.

they made plans to put him to death.” The irony here must not be missed. Jesus has come as Israel’s Messiah. He is also the one who has come to do the will of his Father to fulfill all righteousness. But Jesus has also been preaching that his hour is not yet. With the seventh sign—Lazarus’ being raised from the dead and seven being the biblical number for completion—Jesus’ messianic mission has come to its culmination. The irony is that it is the Sanhedrin—the ruling body of Israel—which actually hatches the plot to kill Jesus, whose death fulfills his messianic mission and accomplishes our salvation. Jesus must die for the sins of the world. He must die in the place of those whom he came to save (a substitutionary atonement), and those who are given eternal life do believe in him, and then, are spiritually raised from the dead when made alive (regeneration), and will be raised bodily at the end of the age (in the general resurrection). It is Caiaphas who calls for the death of Jesus, because he fears Rome. It is Caiaphas who sets in motion those events which lead to our salvation and to the covenant curses coming upon Israel. Talk about irony . . .

Knowing that once he had raised Lazarus from the dead, the Jews would seek to arrest and then kill him, Jesus left Bethany and went to a village a few miles away. According to John, *“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.”* Although his hour is drawing near, his time is not yet. There is still much to do before the Passover, and Jesus will stay about twelve miles from Jerusalem, and will then enter the city for the last time in just days—Palm Sunday.

Meanwhile, John tells us that *“the Passover of the Jews was at hand, and many went up from the country to Jerusalem before the Passover to purify themselves. 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?’ 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.”* The “buzz” about Jesus filled the city. Would Jesus actually dare come to Jerusalem knowing that if he did, he would be put to death? Obviously, this was a serious matter if both the chief priests (Sadducees) and the Pharisees were calling for Jesus’ arrest.

Now that arrest warrant had been issued, the Jewish authorities were looking for Jesus, and commanded that if anyone saw him, or knew where he was, it was to be reported to the Pharisees immediately. Their fear was that Jesus would disrupt the Passover (the third Passover mentioned in John’s Gospel). After raising Lazarus, the Pharisees lamented that “everyone believed in him.” How sad that the members of the Sanhedrin are so blind to the truth that they cannot rejoice that prophecies such as Isaiah 2 are being fulfilled and that salvation has come to Israel. Sadly, it is because “everyone believed in him,” that the warrant is issued for Jesus’ arrest.

The stage is now set for our Lord to enter the city in triumph on Palm Sunday, to prepare his disciples for his departure (the Upper Room discourse), and to suffer and die upon the cross as the true Passover lamb, only to then rise again from the dead (his Passion). But first, Jesus must be anointed in preparation for his death and burial. And it is to John’s account of Mary’s anointing of Jesus with expensive perfume in John 12:1-11, to which we turn next time.

Throughout his gospel, John has forced all who read it or hear his words to decide. Is Jesus’ the Messiah and the Son of God? Or is Jesus nothing more than a deranged trouble-maker? The turning-point in John has come. Jesus’ hour is drawing near. Israel’s hour is also drawing near. And those of us hearing the account of John, we discover that our own hour has come. Who is Jesus? It is time to decide.