

John 11:45-57

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[0:00] Amen and good morning. Please take your copy of God's Word and join me in John chapter 11. If you were here with us last week, rest assured, my blood sugar is doing well, and I have nothing but water to drink.

We're going to begin reading in verse 45 and continue through the end of the chapter for our study this morning. And as we do, we're going to be in a passage that in one sense feels almost like an epilogue to the raising of Lazarus.

Though John intends us to understand that what happens here is actually much more significant than just that. The raising of Lazarus is finished.

The stone has been removed. Jesus has prayed to his father. He has cried out with a loud voice, Lazarus, come out. And the man who had been dead for four days has walked out of his tomb still wrapped in his burial cloths.

As we saw last week, that miracle is not merely an extraordinary display of raw power, but a sign revealing the identity of Jesus Christ. Jesus had told Martha, I am the resurrection and the life.

[1:13] Then he demonstrated that his words were not religious sentiment spoken to comfort a grieving woman, because the one who claimed to be the resurrection stood outside of the grave and commanded the dead to live.

And Lazarus lived. Now, if we were writing the story, I suspect most of us would expect John to conclude chapter 11 differently. We might expect something like this.

Lazarus comes out of the tomb. Everyone falls down in worship. The religious leaders finally admit that they have been wrong about Jesus all along. Jerusalem welcomes her Messiah.

And the chapter ends in universal celebration. We, of course, know this is not how the story goes. But what more evidence could anyone possibly require that Jesus is the Christ?

Jesus turned water into wine. He has healed the sick. He has given sight to a man born blind. He has fed thousands with a small amount of food. He has walked upon the sea. And now, if there were any uncertainty remaining about the kind of authority he possesses, Jesus called a man out of a grave after four days dead.

[2:32] Surely, this should settle the question. Surely, everyone would believe now, but that is not at all what happens.

And what John shows us in the remainder of chapter 11 is something profoundly important about belief. Excuse me, about unbelief. The fundamental problem of unbelief is not a lack of evidence.

The problem is that the human heart does not want the conclusion to which the evidence points.

There are people in this passage who have just watched Lazarus walk out of his grave, and rather than falling before Jesus in worship, they begin participating in a process that will lead to his murder.

But there's even greater truth running behind the surface of these verses, because while sinful men begin plotting the death of Jesus for their own wicked purposes, God is simultaneously accomplishing his own righteous purpose through their plot.

The leaders intend murder. God intends salvation. Caiaphas intends political expediency. God speaks through him of substitutionary atonement.

[3:47] The council concludes that Jesus must die to preserve their nation, while God has determined that Jesus will die to save his people, not only from Israel, but from among the nations of the world.

And so this passage becomes one of the clearest examples in all of Scripture of the mysterious sovereign providence of God, who is so completely Lord over human history that even the wicked actions of sinful men cannot overthrow his purposes, but are, without excusing their wickedness in

any way, made to serve the very plan they intend to destroy.

So let's look at this passage together after a word of prayer. Father, we thank you for your word this morning, this end of John chapter 11, the opportunity for us to take some time to take it up, to read it, to consider all of its implications.

We humbly recognize that we need your help to do this. We are feeble in our own thinking. We have varied distractions in all of our minds, even now.

We need your help to believe its promises and obey its commands, to have affection for you, its author. So we pray that you'd help us to do this. We pray it in Jesus' name.

[5:06] Amen. John chapter 11, I'll begin reading in verse 45. Many of the Jews, therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him.

But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. 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. 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. He did not say this of his own accord. But being a 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. So from that day on, they made plans to put him to death. Jesus, therefore, no longer walked openly among the Jews, but went from there to the region near the wilderness to a town called Ephraim.

[6:17] And there he stayed with the disciples. Now 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.

All right. I'd like to consider this passage this morning under four headings. Number one, the sign produces division. Number two, the leaders protect their position. Number three, the priests proclaim more than he knows.

And number four, the Passover points us toward the cross. Well, number one, the sign produces division. We see this in verses 45 and 46.

Look first at verse 45. Many of the Jews, therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him. That is the response that we want. That's what we would expect.

[7:23] These are the people who had come to Bethany to console Mary and Martha. And after the death of Lazarus, and because they were present with the sisters, have witnessed the events that John just described.

John tells us that many of them responded exactly as the signs in this gospel are intended to lead us to respond. Perhaps these are some of the disciples in the upper room after Jesus' death.

They believed in him. Remember again the purpose statement John will give us near the end of this gospel. These signs have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing, have life in his name.

So the sign, the miracle of the raising of Lazarus points beyond itself to Christ. The miracle is not merely saying, look what Jesus can do.

The miracle is saying, look who Jesus is. And many saw the sign, understood something of what it revealed concerning Jesus.

[8:28] He is the resurrection and the life. And they believed in him. But then verse 46 introduces one of those contrasts John uses repeatedly throughout the gospel.

We've seen this theme again and again and again. Those who receive, those who reject. Verse 46 says, But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done.

Now John does not explicitly tell us the motives of these people and therefore we should be careful not to pretend that we know more than the text tells us. It is possible that some of them simply reported the event without understanding what the consequences would be.

But given what immediately follows, the contrast is really difficult to miss. Some see Lazarus raised and believe. Others see Lazarus raised and go to those who have already demonstrated their hospitality, excuse me, their hostility toward Jesus.

They've been openly hostile toward him. Same Christ, same sign, same evidence, different responses. And that pattern has appeared all throughout John's gospel.

[9:42] Jesus reveals himself and people divide. Some believe, others reject, some worship, others oppose. Some recognize the shepherd's voice.

Others accuse him of having a demon. The light shines into the darkness, but not everyone loves the light. And this raises an important question for us.

Why does one person see the signs of Christ and believe while another encounters the same testimony and remains hardened? We are often inclined to assume that unbelief is primarily an intellectual problem.

And certainly there are intellectual questions worth answering. Christianity does not ask people to turn off their minds. The Christian faith makes historical and theological claims which should be examined carefully.

But scripture teaches us that unbelief goes deeper than just a lack of information. Jesus has already said in John 3 that light has come into the world, but people loved darkness rather than light because their works were evil.

[10:55] The issue is not merely that they cannot see. The issue is that they do not want the implications of what they see. That is precisely what becomes apparent in the verses that follow.

The religious leaders are not going to deny that Jesus has done extraordinary things. In fact, they will openly acknowledge it. The problem is not that the evidence for Jesus is insufficient.

The problem is that if Jesus really is who the evidence indicates he is, then they can no longer remain the unquestioned rulers of their own lives.

And that remains one of the great obstacles to faith. People sometimes say, if God would just show me enough evidence, I would believe.

Perhaps. But the Bible makes us ask another question. If God showed you enough evidence, would you worship him or would you resent the fact that the evidence requires you to surrender yourself to him?

[11:59] Because Christianity does not merely ask you to add Jesus to an otherwise unchanged life. It tells you that Jesus is Lord.

If you're to have him as your Savior, he will also be Lord. If Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, then he possesses rightful authority over you for your eternal good.

and it is entirely possible for a person to resist Christianity not because the evidence is weak, but because the implications are costly. Sin does not merely make us ignorant.

Sin makes us rebellious. And so the question the text places before each of us is not merely have I seen enough concerning Christ, the more searching question is what have I done with what God has shown me concerning his Son.

Because exposure to truth does not automatically produce faith. These people watched a resurrection. The account is clear.

[13:07] It's undoubted. Lazarus was dead. They witnessed a man come to life with words. Some believed. Sadly, some did not.

You can sit under faithful preaching for years and remain unchanged. You can know Christian doctrine and get it all just right.

You can learn Christian vocabulary. You can understand what the Bible teaches about Christ and still refuse to entrust yourself to him. The question is not whether Christ has been sufficiently revealed.

The question is whether you will believe. he is the Christ. Second heading. The leaders protect their position.

So John goes on after this account has been reported. Verse 47. So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the council and said, what are we to do?

[14:10] For this man performs many signs. The council here is what's known as the Sanhedrin. the ruling Jewish council made up of the principal religious authorities of the nation.

It was a mix of both Pharisees and Sadducees, predominantly Sadducees. And I want you to notice the extraordinary admission they make.

They do not say this man's signs fraudulent. They do not say Lazarus was never actually dead. They do not attempt to produce some natural explanation for what has occurred. They just say this man performs many signs.

I'll pass over that too quickly. These are Genesis' enemies. They're the men who want to stop him. And their strategy is not to deny that he is doing signs because apparently the evidence has become too public and too overwhelming for that to be plausible.

Their question is, not did he do it, their question is, what are we going to do about him? That's a remarkable picture of unbelief.

[15 : 22] I'm not doubting that he has done these things, that he is powerful. What they're doing is saying it's going to be a problem. We've got to get rid of them. They have reached the point where the problem in their minds is no longer the evidence.

The problem is Jesus himself. Verse 48 explains why. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him.

The evidence will stack and stack and stack. Everyone will believe and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation. Do you hear the fear underneath these words?

If Jesus continues, people will follow him. If people follow him, Rome may interpret the movement as a political rebellion. If Rome intervenes, we may lose our place and our nation.

Now, there is a measure of historical realism in their concern. Israel lived under Roman occupation, and Rome had little patience for disturbances that threatened imperial order.

[16 : 31] They very wisely allowed religious practice to go on, kind of some puppet governance that felt local. They didn't strip people that they conquered entirely of their identity, but it could not threaten the rule of Rome.

A large messianic movement could certainly attract Roman attention, but John wants us to see that their concern for national survival is entangled with something far more personal.

They are afraid of losing, quote, our place. That may include the temple, but it almost certainly includes their position, influence, privilege, and authority within the existing religious order.

Caiaphas was appointed high priest by a Roman ruler. father. Jesus threatens what they possess, and suddenly the issue becomes very clear.

They do not ask whether Jesus is true. They ask what Jesus might cost them. That is one of the most dangerous ways the human heart can approach Christ.

[17 : 44] We begin calculating. If I believe him, what will happen to the life I have constructed? What relationships might change? What ambitions might have to die?

What sins would I need to abandon? What control would I have to surrender? What will people think of me? What might obedience cost? And if the preservation of our present life becomes our highest good, we will eventually find reasons to reject anything that threatens it, even Christ himself.

Jesus said earlier in the gospel that whoever loves his life loses it. The religious leaders are demonstrating exactly what he means. Their overriding concern is preservation.

And therefore, Jesus must be dealt with. There is an irony here that John's original readers could hardly miss. They fear that if they do not kill Jesus, the Romans would come and destroy their place and nation.

So they arranged for Jesus to be killed. And approximately 40 years later, in AD 70, Rome comes and destroys Jerusalem and the temple anyway.

[18 : 57] The very thing they attempt to prevent by rejecting Christ eventually overtakes them.

Now, we should be careful about drawing overly simplistic lines between every historical judgment and specific acts of sin, but John certainly wants us to recognize the tragic blindness of their reasoning.

They believe they can save themselves by eliminating Jesus, but no one saves himself by rejecting the Savior. And that applies far beyond first century Judaism.

Sin always makes promises about preservation. If I obey Christ here, I will lose too much. If I tell the truth, I will lose this opportunity.

If I confess this sin, I'll lose my reputation. If I obey Scripture, I may lose this relationship. If I follow Jesus faithfully, I may lose the approval of people whose approval I value.

And the lie underneath all of it is that disobedience will preserve what obedience threatens.

Sometimes, beloved, obedience does cost us.

[20:14] Jesus has never promised otherwise. there are things Christians lose because they follow Christ. But whatever obedience costs, disobedience ultimately costs more.

The safest place in all of creation is not the place where you have successfully protected yourself from every earthly loss. The safest place is obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Christ. These leaders are trying to control the future without submitting themselves to the Lord of that future. And whenever we do that, fear rules us.

That is worth considering, particularly for us as a church. Churches, I think, can begin thinking exactly like the Sanhedrin.

God how do we preserve our place, our influence, our institution? How do we keep people? How do we protect the organization?

[21:20] It begins to exist just to exist. Those questions are not always in every form illegitimate. Stewardship does in fact matter.

But the moment institutional survival becomes more important than faithfulness to Christ, the church has begun to protect the wrong thing. Christ did not promise that every local church would exist forever.

He promised that His church would. Our responsibility is not to preserve ourselves at any cost. Our responsibility is to be faithful.

If Providence Baptist Church exists, the Lord tarries for another hundred years, but abandons the truth, we have failed miserably.

And if faithfulness to Christ ever costs us influence, reputation, attendance, money, comfort, or cultural approval, then let those things go before we let the truth go.

[22:23] The church belongs to Christ. He will build it. Our task is to be faithful. Third heading.

The priest proclaims more than he knows. See this in verses 49 down through 53. Beginning in verses 49, we come to one of the most astonishing examples of divine providence anywhere in John's gospel.

There he says, but one of them, Caiaphas, who was the 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.

Caiaphas has apparently had enough of the discussion. You can hear the arrogance in these words, you know nothing at all. You know nothing. You understand nothing.

This is not kindness that he's starting with here. in essence, Caiaphas believes the answer is obvious. Stop talking.

[23:28] There's a simple political solution. Jesus is one man. The nation is many people. If one man threatens the security of the nation, then eliminate the one man.

From Caiaphas' perspective, that is straightforward utilitarian reasoning. one life is expendable if sacrificing that life preserves the larger group.

And notice that there is no concern here for justice. He simply calculates outcomes. Jesus has become inconvenient. Jesus is dangerous to their political arrangement.

Therefore, Jesus must die. This is what happens when political expediency becomes detached from righteousness. Once survival, power, security, or social stability becomes the highest good, human beings become remarkably capable of justifying evil in the name of something supposedly greater.

Political expediency disregards decorum and principle. Things can go terribly awry, and I'll now digress.

[24:43] Caiaphas believes himself to be the clearest thinker in the room. And from one perspective, his statement is utterly wicked.

He is advocating for the murder of an innocent man. But then John does something astonishing. He tells us that Caiaphas has said something far more profound than Caiaphas himself understands. He gives us commentary in verse 51. He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation.

Caiaphas speaks. Caiaphas means one thing. God means something much greater through his words. That does not mean that Caiaphas was secretly faithful.

It does not mean God approves his murderous intention. It means that God is so completely sovereign that he can take even the words of a wicked man who is conspiring against his son and make those words bear testimony to the very salvation that man's conspiracy will accomplish.

[25 : 56] That's astounding. Caiaphas says it is better for you that one man should die for the people. And heaven says in effect, Caiaphas you have no idea how right you are.

One man will die for the people. But not because he is expendable, not because Rome must be appeased, not because your political position needs to be preserved, he will die as a substitute for sinners.

The heart of the gospel. Jesus would die for the nation. That little word carries enormous theological weight for. He dies for his people, in their place, for their benefit, as their substitute. The doctrine we're dealing with here, Caiaphas' wicked words, is what we call penal substitutionary atonement. The heart of the gospel.

Penal means that there's sin that deserves judgment, penalty for sin. Substitutionary means that Christ stands in that place. He takes on that punishment for his people.

[27 : 13] The word atonement means that through his sacrifice, our guilt is dealt with, it's atoned for, and reconciliation with God is accomplished, restored back to God in Christ.

Jesus dies the death sinners deserve, so that sinners who are united to him by faith receive the life and righteousness that they do not deserve.

It's Christianity. At the cross, God does not simply overlook sin. If God merely ignored evil, he would not be righteous. The judge of all the earth must do what is just.

And therefore, the wonder of the gospel is not that God stops being just in order to become merciful. The wonder of the gospel is that at the cross, justice and mercy meet.

Our sin is truly judged. Our Savior truly bears that judgment. Isaiah had said centuries earlier, he was pierced for our transgression.

[28 : 17] He was crushed for our iniquities. And the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. Peter will later say, he himself bore our sins in his body on the tree.

Paul says, for our sake, he made him to be sin who knew no sin. The consistent testimony of scripture is that Jesus Christ died not simply to die, he died for sinners.

He stood where his people deserved to stand. He bore what his people deserved to bear. He satisfied the righteous judgment of God. And because he did, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

Caiaphas thought he was proposing a political execution. God was preparing a sacrifice. And then John takes the purpose of Christ's death even farther in verse 52.

And not for the nation only, Israel, but also to gather into one the children of God who were scattered abroad. God there's John 10.

[29 : 30] Again, do you remember what Jesus said about himself as the good shepherd? I have other sheep that are not of his fold. I must bring them also and they will listen to my voice.

So there will be one flock, one shepherd. Now, John tells us that the death of Jesus is the means by which those scattered people will be gathered into one.

Jesus is not merely dying for ethnic Israel. The saving purpose of God extends to the nations. Men and women from every tribe and tongue and people will be gathered to Christ.

The cross creates a people. Jesus creates a church, one flock, one shepherd. The cross reconciles sinners to God and because it reconciles sinners to God, it also reconciles those sinners to one another.

That means the local church is not merely a convenient gathering place for Christians who happen to enjoy the same style of preaching or music. It is a visible expression of what Christ purchased by his blood.

[30 : 38] Do you come here thinking about that? This is why divisions in the church are so serious. We belong to one another because first we belong to him.

It's a divine reality that we are united. God and notice again the providence of God in all of this.

Caiaphas intends evil. God accomplishes good.

That pattern should remind us of Joseph in Genesis who says to his brothers, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good. Not merely God responded to your evil and found a way to make something useful out of it.

The text says you meant it for evil, God meant it for good. God has a plan and God's plan will prevail.

So John records in verse 53, so from that day on they made plans to put him to death. It's not the first time we've seen Jesus' life threatened. There were instances where Jewish leaders rose up

against him, but this is kind of formalizing and finalizing a plan is in place now.

[31 : 50] This will in fact take place. God has a plan. It's going to prevail. Fourth and last heading. The Passover points us toward the cross.

This is 54 to the end of the text. Jesus therefore verse 54 no longer walked openly among the Jews but went from there to the region near the wilderness to a town called Ephraim and there stayed with his disciples.

This is about 20 miles northeast of Jerusalem. Now someone might read that and think that Jesus is frightened that once the plot becomes sufficiently serious he retreats because he is afraid to die. But everything John has told us makes that interpretation impossible. Jesus has repeatedly walked away from danger not because he's unwilling to die but because he will die only at the time appointed by his father.

Jesus functions on a divine timeline. He is not controlled by the Sanhedrin's timetable. They cannot kill him one moment before the appointed hour.

[32 : 58] And when that hour comes they will not need to drag him unwillingly toward it. He will go. His enemies are making plans but they do not possess ultimate authority over the schedule.

Jesus withdraws because the hour is approaching but it has not yet arrived. And then John says in verse 55 now the Passover of the Jews was at hand.

That's significant not merely a calendar note. John wants us thinking about Passover. The Passover feast commemorated God's deliverance of Israel from slavery in Egypt when judgment fell upon the land but passed over those homes marked by the blood of a lamb.

A lamb dies blood was shed judgment passed over God's people. And now as Jerusalem filled with pilgrims preparing to celebrate Passover the true Passover lamb is preparing to enter the city.

John the Baptist identified him at the beginning of this gospel behold the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. The religious authorities think they are arranging a political execution God is preparing the sacrifice to which every Passover lamb ultimately pointed.

[34 : 20] The timing here is not accidental. Jesus will die at Passover because he is the greater Passover! lamb. The blood of animals can never finally remove human guilt.

These sacrifices pointed beyond themselves. A greater lamb was needed, a sinless substitute. one whose sacrifice would not need to be repeated year after year because he would offer himself once for all.

Verse 55 continues, and many went up from the country to Jerusalem before the Passover to purify themselves. There's some profound irony in that description.

The crowds are preparing ceremonially for Passover. they're concerned with purification. In the middle of all that religious activity, the one who alone can truly cleanse sinners is being hunted by the religious leaders.

It is possible to become so occupied with religious observance that you miss Christ. These people are preparing for a feast that points toward Jesus while the authorities are plotting to kill Jesus.

[35 : 35] We should hear a warning like that. religious activity and saving faith. Not the same thing. You can do all of the things, all of the trappings, all the things you should do as a Christ follower, but still miss Christ.

The Pharisees and the Sadducees are not secularists. Caiaphas is the high priest. These are deeply religious men. Their problem is not that they take God too seriously.

The problem is that they have constructed a religious system in which they themselves remain at the center. And when God the Son stands before them threatening their authority, they choose their religion over the Christ.

That's always a danger. Beloved, we can love reformed theology without loving Christ. We can love Baptist distinctives without loving Christ.

Christ. We can love expositional preaching and good true deep songs without loving Christ. We can love the routines and relationships, culture, familiarity of church while remaining strangers to Christ.

[36 : 52] Every good theological conviction must lead us finally to him. The purpose of doctrine is not that we become impressed with our theological precision.

The purpose of doctrine is that we know God truly, worshiping him rightly and live faithfully before him. Verse 56 says, 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?

The city is waiting. The tension in the text is building. Everyone knows the authorities are hostile. Everyone wonders whether Jesus will come.

And John, riding with the benefit of everything that follows, knows the answer. We know the answer. Yes, Jesus will come because the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

This is not an unfortunate turn of events that Jesus fails to avoid. It's his very mission. And verse 57 closes the chapter.

[38:04] Now, the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that if anyone knew where he was, he should let them know so they might arrest him. And so chapter 11 ends with Jesus, the resurrection and the life under a death sentence, a broadcasted death sentence.

Don't miss, don't miss the irony there. Jesus has just given life to a dead man. And because he gives life to the dead man, men decide to kill him. Lazarus comes out of his tomb and Jesus moves toward him.

The life of Lazarus will contribute to the death of Christ. But the death of Christ will accomplish everlasting life for Lazarus and for everyone who believes in him.

Let's pray together.