

The Gospel of John

Session Twenty-Four: The Plot to Kill Jesus

Commentary

John 11:45-57

11:45–48. Many unbelieving Jewish religious leaders believed as a result of this dramatic miracle, but others complained to the Pharisees, who called a meeting of the Sanhedrin. Such religious upheaval could destroy the carefully protected Pax Romana and bring Roman armies thundering into Jerusalem. We dare not forget that happened in a.d. 70. Since John wrote this Gospel about a.d. 90, we find a fascinating irony about the way he stated their concerns.

Note there was no denial of the miracle but a clamor for some plan to cut losses and protect the religious hierarchy in the future. The faith of some was countered by the hostility of others as formal religious leaders put aside other differences to combine their opposition to this annoying prophet who opened the eyes of the blind and raised the dead.

Verse 47 contains the only mention of the Sanhedrin in this Gospel, but we find it mentioned frequently in Acts. Furthermore, this is the only place in the New Testament where we find the singular without an article, and Caiaphas seems to be just one of them, not the moderator. This leads us to conclude that this was a gathering of the council, not the formal Sanhedrin. As Morris points out:

In convening it the chief priests apparently take the initiative. It is noteworthy that from this point on the Pharisees are not mentioned often and the opposition to Jesus is firmly in the hands of the chief priests. In all four Gospels the Pharisees are Jesus' principal opponents throughout His ministry, but in all four they are rarely mentioned in connection with the events associated with the Passion ... 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 whole-hearted opposition, not for faith. In their hardness of heart they continue on their own chosen line and refuse to consider the evidence before their eyes (Morris, Leon. *The Gospel According to John*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971, p. 565).

11:49–53. The arrogant Caiaphas made a prophecy far beyond his own understanding when he described the death of Jesus as an event in which one would die for many, particularly for the entire nation of Israel. We call this substitutionary (or vicarious) atonement. But Israel alone was not and is not the beneficiary. Jesus is our substitute as he is for all people. Unwittingly and in the providence of God, the high priest became a channel of divine revelation. Substitutionary atonement would reach beyond the Jewish nation to the "other sheep" of John 10 (Rom. 9–11).

Did Jewish law allow the murder of a person in order to benefit the state? Two possible answers emerge. First, as we know from the Book of Acts, the Sanhedrin or any of its tributaries held law and tradition in contempt when it suited their purposes. Obviously this was considered one of those emergency situations in which law made no difference. But also we have to look

back to 2 Samuel 20 where another “troublemaker” was pursued and beheaded. But as John pointed out, the Caiaphas suggestion was a great deal more than that loathsome leader intended.

For centuries the hope of Israel rested not just on reclaiming the land and the temple, but on the return of the scattered children of God. Now, from his position on the mount of retrospect, John told his readers that Caiaphas prophesied the death of Jesus on Calvary for Jews, Gentiles, and the whole world to bring together the one flock that he had already described in chapter 10. The last week was upon them (12:1), and assassination efforts were well underway.

11:54. The public ministry had finished and Jesus isolated himself near the Judean desert, a safe haven for the fugitive he had become. We know little about the town of Ephraim, though it may be the Aphairema of First Maccabees 11:34. As Jesus told his disciples in 12:23, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.”

11:55–57. If one does not accept the suggestion that the unnamed feast of 5:1 refers to a Passover, this would be the third and last Passover of Jesus’ public ministry, extending it for a period of just over two years. I have already argued, however, for a Passover recognition in 5:1, thereby extending Jesus’ ministry over three years, possibly as long as three and one-half. The four Passovers mentioned by the Gospel of John include 2:13; 5:1; 6:4; and 11:55–12:1.

John noted that the visitors at the Passover kept looking for Jesus, presumably because of the resurrection of Lazarus. Tasker offers an interesting observation suggesting that the pilgrims “were eager to know where Jesus was, for they had the feeling that this particular Passover was likely to be memorable, if Jesus were present” (Tasker, R. V. G. *The Gospel According to Saint John*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960, p. 141). Conjecture, of course, but interesting. Those who thought that were certainly right, but just as certainly not in the way they expected.

Jesus is our friend, our life, our power, and our substitute. But how do we activate that now? Future hope such as that treasured by Martha is wonderful and very important, but how do we enact friendship with Jesus now? When we read a chapter like this and understand the behavior of Mary, Martha, and the disciples, how does our faith compare with theirs? The expectation of hope beyond the grave is not just some eschatological creed, but a life force that ought to engage our hearts and minds on a daily basis.¹

¹ Gangel, Kenneth O. *Holman New Testament Commentary: John*. Edited by Max E. Anders. (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2000).