

Theme: Ironies of the Passion: “It is Better That One Man Die for the People!”

John 11:45-53 (EHV)

⁴⁵ Therefore many of the Jews who came to Mary and saw what Jesus did believed in him. ⁴⁶ But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. ⁴⁷ So the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin. They asked, “What are we going to do, because this man is doing many miraculous signs? ⁴⁸ If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him. Then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.” ⁴⁹ But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, “You know nothing at all. ⁵⁰ You do not even consider that it is better for us that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.” ⁵¹ He did not say this on his own, but, as high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus was going to die for the nation, ⁵² and not only for that nation, but also in order to gather into one the scattered children of God. ⁵³ So from that day on they plotted to kill him.

“Isn’t it ironic? Don’t you think?” That was the refrain of a very popular song from 1995 called “Ironic.” If you were in high school around that time like I was, then you’ve probably heard that song on the radio more times than you can count. In fact, maybe you even had that line from the song playing in your head when I said it! The real irony of the song, as many people have pointed out over the years, is that most, if not all, the situations the singer goes on to describe aren’t typically what would be defined as “ironic” (rain on your wedding day; a free ride when you’ve already paid; having 10,000 spoons when all you need is a knife, etc.). They’re all unfortunate situations, yes, but *ironic*, no. And so the real *irony* of the song “Ironic,” is that it really isn’t “ironic!”

In this year’s Lenten series, we’re talking about irony—specifically about the *Ironies of the Passion* (“suffering”) of Jesus. For this series we’re using this dictionary definition of *irony*: “a combination of circumstances or a result that is the opposite of what might be expected.”

The song that I mentioned before is probably the most famous incident of someone trying to be *ironic*, but failing to do so. In our text for today we have the opposite situation: Someone who wasn’t trying to be ironic, but actually was! Call it “unintentional irony.” Caiaphas, the high priest, makes one of the clearest statements of Gospel you’ll ever find—and he never even realized it, and he certainly didn’t mean it to be. His words are today’s *Irony of the Passion*: **It is better that one man die for the people.**

Now, Caiaphas said this several weeks before Jesus’ last trip to Jerusalem. Ordinarily during Lent we focus on events that took place during the week before Jesus died. But this incident lays the foundation for so much that was going to happen during Holy Week that it is worth our attention during the Lenten season.

John tells us in the first verse of our text that “**many of the Jews who came to Mary and saw what Jesus did believed in him**” (v. 45). Do you know what Jesus had just done? He had just raised Lazarus from the dead. A man who had been dead for four days came out of the tomb alive again after Jesus shouted, “**Lazarus, come out!**” (John 11:43 EHV). After witnessing Jesus power over death many people believed in Him.

“**But,**” our text tells us, “**some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done.**” (v. 46). You’d think that everyone would have been moved to faith by this incredible miracle of Jesus, but all some people could do is go and tattle on Him to the religious leaders. Our text continues, **So the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin** [the Jewish ruling council]. **They asked, “What are we going to do, because this man is doing many miraculous signs? ⁴⁸ If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him. Then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation” (v. 47-48).**

Did you catch their words? The Sanhedrin admitted, **“this man [Jesus] is doing many miraculous signs” (v. 47)!** Jesus’ enemies recognized that he was doing miracles. They didn’t deny that Lazarus had been dead and now he was alive. They couldn’t deny it! Lazarus was walking around alive! What was their response? Or a better question is, “What should their response have been?” They should have believed! Instead they were terrified that **“everyone will believe in him [Jesus]. Then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation” (v. 48).** They weren’t concerned with their faith, or the faith of the people. They were only worried about themselves and the threat that Jesus was to their authority.

While the rest of the Sanhedrin was wringing their hands wondering what to do, Caiaphas, the high priest, had the “solution” to their problem. He said to them, **“You know nothing at all.⁵⁰ You do not even consider that it is better for us that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.”** That statement ended the discussion, and the last verse of our text tells us, **“So from that day on they plotted to kill him” (v. 53).**

Why did they reach that conclusion? It wasn’t politics. It was hatred. In the next chapter of John we learn they even plotted to kill Lazarus (**John 12:10**). That’s how much they hated Jesus and His message. Where did that hatred come from? Unbelief. The Bible tells us that the sinful mind is God’s enemy (**Romans 8:7**). Jesus Himself tells us that the world will hate us because it hated Him (**John 15:18**). This is simply the most concrete example of that truth. So in the face of Jesus’ greatest miracle, his enemies determined to kill him. How ironic!

It is also ironic that with his words Caiaphas proclaimed the very Gospel of Jesus even though all he intended to communicate was his hatred and self-serving agenda. Obviously, Caiaphas was not in control that day. God was. John says in our text, **“He did not say this on his own, but, as high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus was going to die for the nation” (v. 51).** God always intended His Old Testament priests to speak for Him to His people. Just as He had done when the high priests were faithful, God made this high priest speak for Him one last time.

For 1,500 years the high priest brought blood sacrifices to God to show that Jesus would one day come and sacrifice Himself to pay for our sins. One last time, God spoke through the high priest to close out the Old Covenant and bring an end to symbols and sacrifices and to replace them with their fulfillment in Christ. After this prophecy was fulfilled, the Old Testament priesthood ended. There was no more need for sacrifices.

So Caiaphas was right, it was better in God’s sight that one man—His only beloved Son—die so that the whole nation would not perish. But as John reminds us in our text, Jesus died for more than just the Jewish nation, **“and not only for that nation, but also in order to gather into one the scattered children of God” (v. 52).** God had always planned for Jesus to save us Gentiles as well. That’s why He sent Jesus, **“The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29).**

That means He sent Jesus to die for your sins and mine. Did you come here today with sins weighing heavily on your heart and conscience? In Jesus, we find peace! In Jesus, God wiped away those sins and completely wiped out the hell that should have happened to us. He replaced it with the eternal life Jesus won. In Jesus’ blood, God declared us—strangers and Gentiles—to be His true people. Through faith in Christ, we, who are scattered thousands of miles and 20 centuries from Jerusalem and Caiaphas, are now bought-and-paid-for children of God.

All that is ours because one man died for the people. As far as we know, Caiaphas never *truly* understood what he said that day. But God has revealed to us the truth Caiaphas spoke. He revealed His saving love for us even through the mouth of an unbeliever, who had murderous hatred toward Jesus. “Isn’t it ironic?” Yes. And thank God for that! Amen.