

John 11:45-57

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[0 : 00] To the end of John 11. Which if you go to Black Church Bible, it's page 898.! Christ is risen.

The Lord, the giver of life who conquered death. We sang of it, didn't we, this morning. Come people of the risen King. Who delight to sing his praise.

We've sung of the triumph. Crown him with many crowns. Songs of joy. Songs of gladness.

Because Jesus Christ has triumphed over the grave.

But now we come to a passage where people are plotting his death. And we feel a tension. It's an ironic tension.

And the passage that we're going to look at is full of irony. In fact, I think that is the way to understand it. To see the irony. It's the major transition point between the two halves of the Gospel of John.

[1 : 20] It stitches them both together. And it weaves a continuous tapestry. It's often overlooked. People often go just from the raising of Lazarus.

Straight into Mary being anointed. Jesus being anointed by Mary in chapter 12. But it's so important. And what it does in the most interesting way.

Is it shows us the same Jesus that we've seen for the last 10 or 11 chapters. Whose whole desire, do you remember, is to give life to the world.

Why did John write his Gospel? John wrote his Gospel that you might believe in him and so that you might have life. What word has come up in John's Gospel again and again and again in the first 12 chapters?

50 times the word life has been used. He came to bring life. He is the life. In him was life.

[2 : 27] But in the second half, he is the one who is going to be crucified and put in the grave. And what our passage does for us in a beautiful way is it stitches together those two things that seem so incompatible.

It shows us the irony of the fact. And what it does is it takes us into the depths of that irony. And it teaches us mysterious and yet marvellous truths about the Gospel.

We'll see two ironies. The first irony is this irony of personal resistance. The second one is political realism. But the first is personal resistance.

Now remember two weeks ago, Jesus called forth, didn't he? Lazarus, come out. And Lazarus, who has been in the grave for four days, comes out with his grave clothes hanging on him.

The unthinkable has happened. Jesus has reached into death and pulled out. He came out. Jesus says, and bind him.

[3 : 30] And in response to Jesus, there's always a mixture. So look at the response, verse 45.

Many of the Jews, therefore, because of what has just happened, they'd been with Mary, they saw what he did, and they believed in him.

But verse 46, some of them went to the Pharisees, the religious authorities, and they told what Jesus had done. There's a mixed response, isn't there, to Jesus raising Lazarus from the grave. On the one hand, many believe, but on the other hand, you get others telling tales. And the chief priests and the Pharisees, in verse 47, they gather together to discuss and to deliberate, what do we do in response to Jesus?

If you skip down to verse 53, you get the verdict of the council. So from that day on, they made plans to put him to death.

This group of people plan to put to death the man who has just conquered death. They plan to put to death the one who says, I have come to give life to this world.

[4 : 42] And he holds true to his word. In verse 25 of this chapter, Jesus declared, I am the resurrection and the life. And yet the religious authorities want to kill the life.

Why? Verse 47 and 48, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the council and said, what are we to do? For this man performs many signs. Just notice again, they don't deny the evidence. They don't deny the evidence. They don't say, oh, the miracles could never have happened. No, his opponents say, no, the miracles definitely happened. And 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. Now that might seem a little bit random to you. But the Jewish people at this time were living under Roman occupation and authority.

A bit like Welsh people. Live under the occupation and the authority of Westminster. Bitterly oppressed. And the Romans weren't too concerned about their affairs.

[5 : 52] The parallel goes on, isn't it? But as long as the Jewish leaders kept some of the law and order and nothing got too serious, the Romans would leave them alone.

But if there were any signs of political upheaval, then the Romans would get involved. And they would use violence and oppression if they needed to keep people in line. If you look down at verse 55, but given more context, you'll see that it's Passover week.

And during the Passover, estimates range really that it's around 200,000 people end up in Jerusalem. They'd flock from the countryside.

They'd come into the city of Jerusalem during Passover. And they were celebrating. They were celebrating, weren't they? The whole of the Passover was about celebrating God's goodness in liberating his people from the oppression of Egypt.

Do you remember? The reading of the law. I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt. And the Passover was all about that. Celebrating it. So you can imagine how the Romans were just a little bit nervous, weren't they?

[7 : 06] That in a festival that commemorated the throwing off of slavery and oppression, how during Passover time, religious and political fervor would run high.

And we know, don't we, that there would be messianic figures who would say we need to lead a revolt against the Romans. And so the Romans had a particularly watchful eye on the people during those seasons.

They wanted to see, is there any potential for upheaval? And if there was going to be, let's squash it immediately. And so the Jewish leaders are very, very much aware of Jesus' rising popularity. And they are worried that they will be dethroned by the Romans. Now don't get too hung up on the cultural background here, but don't miss how subtle and sneaky the motivations of the leaders really are.

Just look at verses 47 and 48. And notice with me the personal pronouns. What are we to do? For this man performs many signs.

[8 : 16] 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.

What are they afraid of? Do you see the frantic fear of losing their position? They are concerned with their own well-being.

Notice that clause, they will take away our place and our nation. And I think our place is referring to what they found their most security in.

It's referring to their security. It's referring to their position in life. It's referring to their identity. It is wrapped up, isn't it? We are the leaders of the nation.

And as you will know, when our deepest sense of security and our deepest sense of identity is threatened, we do one or two things.

[9 : 21] One is we withdraw. We kind of go to ground. Or the other thing we do is we lash out. And in this passage, they lash out.

They plan to put to death a man who has just conquered death. And that is the irony, isn't it, of personal resistance in this chapter. I want to pause there for a moment because I think it's got a real pastoral implication for us.

We should be very aware of the resistance that there is in our lives to the Lord Jesus. It's really easy, isn't it, to look at the Jewish leaders in this passage and to throw mud at them and rocks at them and tomatoes at them.

To think we are so unlike them, aren't we? And even in reading John's gospel, we can get on our high horse and we can fail to see the resistance that lies in the depths of our own soul, in my soul.

But the Bible won't allow you to do that. As you read the Bible, it functions a lot like a mirror. It shows us, doesn't it, what is deep inside of us. That's why reading the Bible and hearing the Bible preach is often so uncomfortable.

[10 : 34] And we should at times be appalled at the resistance to Jesus that is in our lives, but not surprised. And we shouldn't underestimate how subtle it can be that this resistance often is the underlying motivator to so much of what we do in life.

And it often rises, doesn't it, when it comes to decisions. So a council is gathering and is making a decision. And I think that's often the case in our own lives, that our resistance to Jesus is seen at that point.

Because our decisions reveal where our true loyalty lies. And even more, how and why we make the decisions we make show it.

They show our decisions, the true orientation of our lives. Of whether we really do believe and love the Lord Jesus. I read an article this week on making kind of big decisions as a Christian.

It's an article in the book. And the writer of the book, who's a kind of author from Canada, he gave three searching questions, he says, which expose your heart as you make decisions.

[11 : 53] First is this. Is there anything in this decision that arises from an inordinate desire for wealth or financial security?

Am I making this decision because there's an inordinate desire, too much of a desire for wealth or security? Secondly, is there anything in this decision that arises from an inordinate desire for power or influence?

The third question, is there anything in this decision that arises from an inordinate longing for recognition and affirmation?

Too much of looking for recognition and affirmation. And I think as we meditate on those questions, as we make those decisions, we can see, can't we, where am I resisting the Lord Jesus?

And we should be honest this morning, unaware, but not surprised. We shouldn't despair over it either.

[13 : 02] It's dangerous, isn't it? Of despairing of our hearts. But we shouldn't despair. Because in this passage, wonderfully, their personal resistance does not stop Jesus' ultimate purpose to give life.

Isn't it wonderful that it's at the point of strongest human resistance that God's determination to give life actually proves to be most tenacious?

God turns the whole thing upside down. And it's when the council plots to kill Jesus that the Lord, the giver of life, through that act of killing Jesus, Jesus brings life.

God's determination. Available to the entire world. And this is the second irony of our passage. The irony of political realism. Look at verses 49 and 50. In the middle of the council, the chief priest stands up, and he says, you've not got a clue what you're doing.

He says to the council, you don't understand. You don't know what you're doing. It is better for you that one man should die for the people than the whole nation should perish.

[14 : 17] Caiaphas speaks words that bear all the force of political pragmatism and realism. He says, guys, there is an obvious solution to this problem.

Just kill one man. Kill one man and you spare a whole nation. Kill one man, you're good to go. Problem over. One person or 200,000.

You take your pick. It's an obvious decision. And in a sense, he is right. But in saying what he does, he shows us something really deep about the gospel, the good news.

John explains it to us in verses 51 and 52. He wants you to see the meaning of it. In verse 51, he did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest for that year, he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation.

And not only for the nation, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad. So two things.

[15 : 27] Jesus is going to be a substitute. And Jesus is going to be a magnet. He prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation.

That's substitutionary language, isn't it? Let's think for a moment about substitution. We try to take the throne of God, don't we? We put ourselves as God's substitute.

We say, I will make the rules. I will live my life the way I want to live it. We put ourselves as God's substitute. And God takes the penalty for our humanity.

He puts himself as the substitute for sin. We don't live in a culture anymore where there are animal sacrifices. We don't even live in a culture where there's a kind of common understanding of the fabric of life.

There's not an understanding that if you do certain actions, that will bring certain consequences. That is eroding away in our culture.

[16:40] In fact, we now live in an age, don't we, where people see themselves far more as victims of circumstances than sinners in the hands of a holy God.

But you and I need to understand that the word substitute lies at the very heart of the gospel. So look at verses 50 to 52 and you'll see that three times the word for shows up.

Three times the word for shows up. It is better for you that one man should die for the people. Verse 51.

He prophesied that Jesus would die for the nations. He died on behalf of his people. The word for there, it's an Old Testament word.

It's an Old Testament sacrificial word. It connects what Jesus is doing with what happened in the Old Testament. We've seen the theme already, we're right at the start of the gospel, John 1, 21, 29.

[17:50] Jesus shows up on the scene for the first time and John the Baptist says, behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. The Lamb of God, it's sacrificial language.

If you go to John chapter 19 at the end of the gospel, Jesus is hanging on a cross and there's two criminals on either side. Jesus says, it is finished. He breathes his last breath and John tells us right at the end of John 19 that the soldiers did not break Jesus' legs.

They broke the other two criminals' legs but they didn't break Jesus' legs. Why are we told that in detail? Because sacrifices in the Old Testament were meant to have no broken bones and Jesus had no broken bones.

He is the perfect sacrifice on the cross and so Jesus is being portrayed as the Old Testament sacrificial lamb. So in the Old Testament when you had sins that needed to be dealt with, you brought a lamb to the temple and you put your hand on its head to symbolize your sin and your guilt and your shame being transferred to that lamb.

A priest would come up with a knife and he would slit the throat of the lamb symbolizing the penalty that was meant to be paid.

[19:17] And you would watch the blood of the lamb pour out. It's a horrific picture on the floor.

The priest would then gather up the blood in a bowl. He would walk into the center of the temple or the tabernacle and he would sprinkle that blood.

Or he'd pour it on the ground before the presence of the Lord and he would say spare your people O Lord for the blood has been spilt in their stead.

And so what John is doing is through Caiaphas' words we are coming to the very heart of God. Of God reaching out to humanity and saving them from their sins and providing the Lord Jesus as a substitute.

Let me read you a quote from John Stott's *The Cross of Christ*. John Stott says this The concept of substitution may be said then to lie at the heart of both sin and salvation.

For the essence of sin the heart of sin is man substituting himself for God. While the essence of salvation is God substituting himself for man.

[20:27] Man asserts himself against God and puts himself where only God deserves to be. But God sacrifices himself for man and puts himself where only man deserves to be.

man claims prerogatives which belong to God alone and God accepts the penalties which belong to man alone.

Jesus is our substitute. But secondly Jesus is a magnet. Look at verse 52 and I think this is a little bit unexpected.

Verse 52 John is speaking about Jesus' death for the nation but not only the nation but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad.

That's us. The imagery is the biblical picture of I'm being gathered in from exile. It's somewhat telling isn't it that one of the primary purposes here of Jesus' death is to gather his people together in unity.

[21:47] And I think this verse will speak to us slightly differently depending on what background we come from. For some of us we've grown up in a Christianity that really emphasises the cross and it emphasises personal salvation.

that Jesus died for your sins personally and that is wonderful. But sometimes a background like that can emphasise very little church unity.

And what this does is it slightly distorts our understanding of Christianity Christianity. Because unity is essential. There's no such thing as individual Christianity.

We are together. Jesus died for our sins but he also died to make us one family. And so what we see here is that unity is one of the major purposes of Jesus' ministry.

That's why in John 17 just before Jesus dies he prays to the Father one last time and he says, Father I pray that my people may be one as you and I are one.

[22 : 56] Why? So that the world may know that they are my disciples. There is some sense in which when we are united in life giving relationships with one another that when we come around the Lord Jesus Christ it shows the world what God is like.

And so that means in church life our relationships are deeply important. Maybe for others you've grown up in churches that love and emphasize unity, church unity but tragically the cross might not have been as central as it should have been.

And the major question has to be what is it that unifies the people of God? What unifies us as a church family?

It's not primarily a common interest. It's not a fondness of musical style or that you like a certain preacher. It's not a vague sense of humility.

It's not tradition. It's not even ecclesiastical structure. But what unites us first and foremost is Jesus Christ in his person and him crucified.

[24 : 20] In the act of him giving his life away for the sake of his people. And what unifies us is the person of Jesus on the cross for our sins.

And that is important because that is the only thing that will bring healing to a fractured and fragmented world. in a world that is more divided than any time in my lifetime and it is more fractured than at any time.

In church we see the Lord Jesus who substitutes his humility for our pride. And that changes the way that we relate to one another. another.

He substitutes his grace for our shame and our guilt and that changes the way we relate to one another. He substitutes his life for our sin and our brokenness and our death and that changes the way that we relate to one another.

So to conclude Jesus, John wants us to see the ironies of this passage. That the leaders plan to put to death the man who's defeated death.

[25 : 31] And when their plan is accomplished it means more life for all the world. And I think it's no wonder is it that when we come to Revelation chapter 5 and God gives to John a glimpse of his triumphant church.

And we get a glimpse of the company of heaven marvelling at the wonder and the wisdom and the power of God. And we have all the living creatures and all the angels and all the saints and all the elders bowing before the throne of God.

God. And they are singing what Revelation 5 describes as a new song. And what is the new song? It is worthy is the lamb who was slain.

Worthy is the lamb who was slain to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing. for you were slain and by your blood you ransomed for God a people from every tribe and every language and every nation.

Amen. Let's pray. Amen.