



## BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

John 11: 45-57

Fall 2022

"Good News From Evil Counsel"

TRANSCRIPT

Well, good morning. We are in the Gospel of John and we're in the 11th chapter. We've spent two weeks in it and last week, you may remember, the Lord raised Lazarus from the dead. And just before He did that, He prayed and He said in verse 42, "I knew that You always hear Me; but because of the people standing around I said it, so that they may believe that You sent Me." He raised Lazarus, and the last verse we read last week was verse 44, where He instructed those there at the tomb to, "Unbind him, and let him go." And then we read, beginning with our text, verse 45 through the end,

<sup>45</sup> Therefore many of the Jews who came to Mary, and saw what He had done, believed in Him. <sup>46</sup> But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them the things which Jesus had done.

<sup>47</sup> Therefore the chief priests and the Pharisees convened a council, and were saying, "What are we doing? For this man is performing many signs. <sup>48</sup> If we let Him *go on* like this, all men will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation." <sup>49</sup> But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all, <sup>50</sup> nor do you take into account that it is expedient for you that one man die for the people, and that the whole nation not perish." <sup>51</sup> Now he did not say this on his own initiative, but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus was going to die for the nation, <sup>52</sup> and not for the nation only,

but in order that He might also gather together into one the children of God who are scattered abroad. <sup>53</sup> So from that day on they planned together to kill Him.

<sup>54</sup> Therefore Jesus no longer continued to walk publicly among the Jews, but went away from there to the country near the wilderness, into a city called Ephraim; and there He stayed with the disciples.

<sup>55</sup> Now the Passover of the Jews was near, and many went up to Jerusalem out of the country before the Passover to purify themselves. <sup>56</sup> So they were seeking for Jesus, and were saying to one another as they stood in the temple, "What do you think; that He will not come to the feast at all?" <sup>57</sup> Now the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that if anyone knew where He was, he was to report it, so that they might seize Him.

John 11: 45-57

May the LORD bless this reading of His Word, and bless our time in it together.  
Let's bow together in prayer.

Father, it is a great privilege to be with Your people on this LORD's day. And this is the day the LORD has made and we're to rejoice in it; rejoice in it because today we worship You. And we're to do that every day, of course, and every moment of our lives to be an expression of worship in obedience to You. But the first day of the week is the day that has been set aside for us to come together as Your people and to worship together and sing hymns of praise.

And at this time of year we think of the incarnation when Your Son was born into this world and began His ministry of redeeming us, (to "saving us", as we just sang). And so LORD, we give You praise and thanks for Your grace and mercy that sent Your Son into the world to die for sinners, (and we're reminded in our passage, some believe and some don't). We live in a world of unbelief, a world of darkness, and yet, out of all of that You have brought many sons, "children of God", to Yourself and into Your family—

and we rejoice, that by Your grace, we've done that and we're here to worship You and to learn from the text of Scripture that we've just read.

And so we pray, LORD, that the Spirit's ministry will be effective in our hearts to open our hearts to receive the ministry that's given and to think deeply upon these things—and by Your grace to be transformed, to be sanctified, and to be conformed increasingly to the image of Your Son.

We pray, LORD, that You'd bless us now as we continue our service; and prepare our hearts for a time of worship, and study, and reflection. Build us up in the faith, LORD. We pray these things in Christ's name. Amen.

*(Message)* One of the strangest stories in the Bible is the one of Balaam and his donkey. Balaam was a false prophet who came from a distant land to curse Israel. Along the way his donkey talked to him: the text says, "The LORD opened the mouth of the donkey..." (Num 22:28). He made a dumb animal talk and rebuke the prophet.

Does that teach the Bible is a book of fables, full of talking animals? No. It shows that God is in control. He who made a donkey speak then put blessings in the mouth of an evil prophet, so that instead of cursing Israel, he blessed the nation. It's Psalm 76, verse 10, 'God makes the wrath of man to praise Him.'

It also happened in the council of the Jews, the Sanhedrin, when one of the most wicked men of the day, Caiaphas, unintentionally gave one of the great prophecies of the Bible, "...it is expedient...that one man should die for the people..." (vs50). He spoke better than he knew, showing that God controls even His most implacable foes. He brought good news from evil counsel.

This event followed the Lord's greatest miracle, when He raised Lazarus from the dead. It happened in Bethany, not far from Jerusalem. The next verses give the results: First in verse 45, "Many (*who*) came to Mary, and saw what He had done, believed in

Him." 'Believed in Him' is John's expression for genuine faith, genuine trust and it would seem that that is his meaning here. It's what Jesus prayed for in verse 42.

And we see God's grace in that. They came to Bethany to comfort Mary. They weren't seeking Christ—but they found Him, (or better, they were found *by* Him). Bishop John Ryle said of these friends of Mary, "They had come as the merciful, and they obtained mercy." Now there's a lesson in that. When we go where we should be going, and are doing what we should be doing, we may have blessings that we weren't seeking. God blesses the obedient.

But there was a second response; "But some of them", John wrote, "went to the Pharisees and told them the things which Jesus had done." (vs46). Now they didn't go there as evangelists; they went there as enemies, (and perhaps as spies). As is often the case, Christ causes a division among people. Men saw the same miracle. They saw a mighty miracle, raising a man from the dead, and had two completely different responses. Why is that? We can explain it only by, (*one*), the deadness of man and, (*two*), the sovereignty of God's grace.

Paul wrote, "...the god of this world, (*Satan*), has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light..." (2Cor 4:4). Men are blind. Only God's grace and His power can open blind eyes spiritually, so that they see and believe. He did that here with some, while others continued in their unbelief, (as so many do who hear the Gospel).

And things didn't improve. The remaining verses of the chapter contain one, of what one of the old commentators called, "A melancholy picture of human nature." And so it does. It comes as the scene shifts from the graveside in Bethany to the courthouse in Jerusalem. Disturbed by the report about Jesus, a council convened to discuss it. This was the ruling body of the Jews, the Sanhedrin. It was both the supreme court and the legislative body of the people, it's 'Congress', made up mainly of priests, who are the Sadducees, but also some Pharisees.

"What are we doing?", (vs47), they asked, meaning 'What are we accomplishing in all of our efforts against Christ?' And the implied answer is, 'Nothing. Nothing's working; we're not accomplishing anything.' Everything they had done to stop the Lord's influence had failed. They were the rulers of the Jews—and yet they were frustrated by a carpenter from Nazareth.

You'd think it was supernatural. In chapter 7, verse 46, they sent the police to arrest Him; but they came back empty-handed and amazed, saying, "Never has a man spoken the way this man speaks." His very words arrested them. Next the leaders had been completely embarrassed in their exchange with the man that Jesus healed—the blind man He healed in chapter 9. Nothing they did succeeded, for they admit, "...this man is performing many signs." (vs47b).

Now that is an indictment on them. They recognized He had performed miracles, many miracles in fact. And this statement is in the present tense, so it's indicating that He was continually doing them and they were continually aware of them, seeing them, hearing about them. John selected only seven signs to feature in his Gospel; but he states at the end of the Gospel that, 'Jesus did many other things', more than he could possibly record. (Jn 21:25). And these men admitted it was so.

Yet the miracles didn't cause them to reassess their opposition to Him, or to even open up the question of what the signs might indicate about who Jesus was and His claims. No, this is willful blindness. As the late political pundit, Irving Kristol, commented, (he was commenting on politics, but it applies broadly), he made the statement, "When we lack the will to see things as they really are, there's nothing so mysterious as the obvious."

And these men lacked the will. They had closed their minds. And when a person's mind is closed against Christ; has heard the truth, has seen the evidence of the truth, (perhaps in the changed lives of those who had given the Gospel to him or her)—once their mind is closed against Christ, no amount of evidence can convince him or her of it. The strength of unbelief is great.

The story of Lazarus and the rich man makes that very clear. (Luke 16). Both men died; Lazarus went to Paradise, and the rich man went to Hades—and from his torment the rich man cried out to Abraham to send Lazarus back to his father's house to warn his five brothers so that they would not end up where he was. But Abraham said, "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead." (Luke 16:31).

Miracles alone won't do it—they don't have the power to convert, for the soul of the unbeliever is dead. It needs the special work of the Holy Spirit, which comes through the preaching, teaching, and reading of the Word of God. Only that can overcome the strength of unbelief and its self-centeredness.

And unbelief, essentially, is that—it is selfish. We see that in the reason these men gave for their opposition to Christ; verse 48, "If we let Him *go on* like this, all men will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation." "our place" is a reference to the temple—and "our nation", of course, is the Jewish nation which the Romans had granted limited self-government; and they were the governors.

But all of that would be lost, would cease to exist, they feared, if enthusiasm for Christ continued to increase. They imagined Jesus would inflame popular Messianic expectations among the people, which would set off an uprising, and would bring the fist of Rome down on their heads. So they feared a catastrophe, not because of their concern for the wellbeing of the people, but because they worried that the Romans would take everything from them, personally.

The word "*our*" is in an emphatic position in the statement that they make. It puts emphasis upon '*them*': 'It is our place, and it is our nation.' They feared that their positions of prestige and power were in jeopardy—and they wanted to protect them. They wanted to protect their own, personal interests, but they didn't know how to do it; so they were frustrated.

One man among them, though, was in no doubt about what needed to be done. In his mind the only course that was open to them was a ruthless one—but he was willing to follow it, willing to do whatever it took to protect his own self-interest. And he had a career of doing that. Joseph Caiaphas was the high priest that year. He was a well-connected man, the son-in-law of Annas, (the previous high priest), and a man of great political skill. At that time, the Romans appointed the high priest, which meant that he could be sacked at any time at the whim of Rome.

Caiaphas was appointed to the office in AD 18 and he would hold it for 18 years. That's a long time and it showed that he was a shrewd man; he knew how to hold on to power. He wasn't confused about what to do and had grown impatient with his colleagues. So now, over the sounds of their frustration and indecision, he made his voice heard: "You know nothing at all,..." he said. (Or, 'You can't figure out what is obvious'), "...that it is expedient for you that one man die for the people, and that the whole nation not perish." (vs50). Or, 'Expedient for you, useful for you, that's the whole thing.'

This was a court of law, the highest court in the land, but justice wasn't blindfolded there. Right and wrong were irrelevant here. What mattered to Caiaphas was what was useful for him and his friends. Jesus was innocent. He did miracles. —But for Caiaphas, the cold reality was, if they wanted to live, He had to die.

But he wasn't that blunt, for he disguised his counsel as concern for the people and the national good. (Politicians often do that.) But their real consideration was themselves and their self-preservation—Caiaphas and that whole company. It was ruthless; it was unjust—but the council fell in line and without any debate they fell in line from that point on...and they began to plot the death of Jesus. And as terrible as that was, there was nothing terribly unusual about it. Men have plotted and murdered down through the ages—they killed a brother, or an uncle, for a throne or a fortune.

But what is remarkable about this is that Caiaphas' evil counsel was prophecy. John wrote that in verse 51; "Now he did not say this on his own initiative, but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus was going to die for the nation..." Caiaphas consciously spoke wicked words. He wasn't a puppet—but God mysteriously directed his words to produce prophecy; not only of Christ's death but also of the nature and the scope of His death.

We find other examples of that in the Gospels; statements or actions that were taken, or given, that were intended one way but had a different meaning. When Christ was crucified, Pilate placed a placard above His head reading, "This is Jesus, the king of the Jews." (Math 27:37). Now he did that out of disdain for the Jews—he did that to taunt the Jews. But his taunt proclaimed the truth.

Around the foot of the cross, the priests and Pharisees jeered the Lord with statements like, "He saved others. He cannot save Himself." (Mar 15:32). They meant, 'He's helpless up there. This proves He's a fraud.'

But in mocking Him, they really spoke the truth. They explained what was going on, on the cross: If He was to save others, He could not save Himself.

He could not take Himself off that cross...but He could have done that, He had the power. He could have prayed to the Father, who would have sent myriads of angels to rescue Him...no, for if He'd done that, He couldn't have saved us. He had to die in our place. So, they, (*the crowd*), were right; He saved others—but He cannot save Himself if He is to save you and me.

'God makes even the wrath of man to praise Him', (Ps 76:10), and accomplish His purposes. These men meant one thing by what they did—and what they ended up doing is proclaiming the truth of God.

And He did that here with the evil counsel of Caiaphas. It set forth plainly the nature of Christ's death: It was *vicarious* and it was *atoning*. *Vicarious* means substitutionary. It was not a death for Himself, it was a death for the nation, for others.



And Caiaphas' words have that meaning; 'If Jesus died, the nation lived. It was His life instead of theirs.'

And John recognized that was true in a way far greater than the high priest could have imagined because Jesus died instead of us. He died in our place, as our substitute—a vicarious death.

But John also knew that Caiaphas' words were not big enough. So he expands them from "the nation" to 'the nations': "...and not for the nation only," (he wrote), "but in order that He might also gather together into one the children of God who are scattered abroad." (vs52). In other words, He did not die for the Jew only, but also for the Gentile. His death was worldwide in its design, intended for all kinds of people everywhere.

You'll notice, though, John calls them "the children of God" even before they have been gathered. Why is that? By looking down through history he's saying, "the children of God" in each generation. But how can he describe them in that way, as "God's children", before they've been saved?

Because they are already His; they have been chosen by Him. They are His elect who are in all places and in every generation.

The Lord spoke of that earlier, back in chapter 10, when He said that He had "other sheep" in other sheepfolds, and He would "bring them also", and make them "one flock". (vs16). These are those whom He had said in chapter 6 that the Father had 'given to Him', even though they had not yet become His disciples. They'd not yet become them, but they would—they would become disciples. And He won't lose one of them, because He died for them, in their place, and will gather them all together into one family.

And He will gather them because His death was also *atoning*. It was a sacrificial death that makes peace between God and man, and gains forgiveness for our sins. We've seen that from the beginning of this Gospel when John the Baptist pointed to

Jesus back in chapter 1, verse 29, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"

He has done that because, as Isaiah said, 'The Father laid on Him the iniquity of us all.' (Is 53:6). And as Paul said, "He made Him who knew no sin *to be* sin on our behalf..." (2Cor 5:21), —not *to be sinful*, but *to be the sin bearer* on our behalf. Then, bearing our sin, He represented us in judgment and was punished in our place in a sacrificial death, (which was the only way to take away our sins). If He had saved Himself, our sins would not have been removed—and we could not be saved.

Well, the importance of suffering death, with the shedding of blood, is taught all through the Bible from the beginning; from Abel's sacrifice to Christ's death. "Without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sins", Hebrews, chapter 9, verse 22b, (and you can cross reference that with Leviticus 17, verse 11). This is all through the Word of God: His death was *substitutionary*, (in our place)—and *atoning*, (satisfactory)—it satisfied the justice of God. Luther spoke of His death as "The Great Exchange". Christ took our sins upon Himself, and He gave us His righteousness in their place.

And He could do that because of who He is—no mere man. This is what we reflect upon this time of the year, the incarnation: He came as the God-man. The eternal Son of God took to Himself a human nature and was born into this world. It was the Son of God, the Son of Man, the God-man who hung on the cross—which means that Jesus was infinitely valuable. So He could take the place of an infinite number of people, and in a period of three hours, endure endless punishment.

Our substitute was one of us; the infinite Son of God, who died in His humanity. He didn't die in His deity. Deity can't die; it is immortal, unchangeable. He represented us in His humanity—and there He died for us. And His deity invested that life that He offered up with infinite value.

His death was that great because He is that great. By it, by His death, He opened the door to our justification, our pardon, and acceptance by God—and our adoption into

His family. That is "The Great Exchange": Christ has taken what is ours and He has given to us what is His. Now that's the Good News. You don't have to die, not eternally. Someone has died in our place—and that is true for everyone who will receive Him.

Caiaphas, of course, had no idea that he was speaking such good news. He was just engaging in political realism. But God is such that He makes Caiaphas' proposal of murder a prophecy of *life*. God can produce pure water out of a polluted stream—and He did on this occasion.

But oblivious to that, the Sanhedrin set out to devise a plot to kill Jesus. It was no secret to the Lord. —Nothing ever is. And John says that He, "...no longer continued to walk publicly among the Jews." (vs54). He knew what was up. He knew what they were plotting, and so He wisely withdrew from the area. And by doing that, He made it clear that no human court, nor no plot of the most powerful men in the land, could force Him to the cross. He was in control. Nothing took Him by surprise. He knew that the hour of His death was coming. It was near, (He will speak of that in the next chapter, in chapter 12), but it would come at the Father's appointed time, not the Sanhedrin's. He still had work to do. And so He withdrew from the area to Ephraim, a remote town on the edge of the wilderness.

The Passover was near, and many pilgrims went up to Jerusalem to purify themselves with ceremonial cleansing to prepare themselves for the feast. The Lord felt no need to cleanse Himself, and so He stayed away.

But the city was filled with talk of Him, which increased in excitement because of this plot by the authorities and the warrant that they'd put out for His arrest. But again, they were powerless to arrest Him until His hour had come and He was ready to offer Himself up as a sacrifice. Only then would He give Himself into their hands.

But the result would be very different from what Caiaphas anticipated. The aftermath of the cross, some years later, was the catastrophe that he feared. A

revolutionary spirit grew among the unbelieving Jew, which resulted in a revolt against Rome in AD 66 that Rome brutally crushed. The temple was destroyed, the city was sacked, and millions of people were either slaughtered or made slaves.

A generation later, the Romans scraped the city and built a new city, a Roman city over the ruins of Jerusalem. The nation was lost, and the Jews became wanderers in the Earth. It is impossible to oppose God and win. We see that throughout history. Christ was crucified, but the church was born.

The problem, that these men tried to rid themselves of, only spread and increased. In spite of persecution it only grew and filled Jerusalem. The chief inquisitor of the priests saw, became a Christian, and Christ's greatest missionary. By the end of the first century, the Sanhedrin was gone and the church was well established throughout the Roman empire and beyond.

But opposition continued. The Roman emperor's persecuted Christians in the first three centuries—but the more they persecuted them, the more they increased. 'God makes the wrath of man to praise Him.' Our passage is a great illustration of that, and an example of the power and purpose of God at work in this world for us.

The God who made a donkey talk and a mad prophet give blessings instead of curses made an evil priest prophesy 'Good News'. He can bring good out of bad. —And that's what He's done for each one of us. That's what He's done in our lives. We, who have believed in Christ, just as He called Lazarus from the grave, He called us out of spiritual death into spiritual life.

Now that is great power. And with that power and purpose at work for us, what can't the LORD do for us, and what can't we trust Him to do for us? If He can use an evil priest, think of how He can use you as you look to Him and live in obedience to Him. If He gave His own Son as a sacrifice in order to gather you into His family, what won't He do for your good? There's nothing He won't do for your good. It may not seem to be

good at the time, but it always is. 'All things work together for our good'; for Him, from Him, (from His hand), and so we are to trust Him and live by faith, not by sight.

That's what the men of this passage could not do. They lived by their wits. Caiaphas certainly did. That's deadly. It was for him and the council of priests and Pharisees. By trying to hold on to their world their way, they lost it—lost it all; lost their place, lost their position, lost everything—and lost their souls. And people do that whenever they reject Christ out of the love for this life or from a fear that they will lose this life if they turn to Him, just like those priests who imagined that Christ would end everything. That was foolish, just as foolish as people today who think Christ will deprive them of the best in this life.

He promised the abundant life—eternal life, and He gives that. He has finished the work of salvation, invites all to come to Him, to believe in Him. And really there is nothing more expedient for you, for us, more useful than that—and to do that. It's the way to eternal life, through faith and faith alone. Simply receive it.

I read a story about an English evangelist named Ebenezer Wooten who had just concluded a preaching service in a village square. As the crowd was dispersing, a young man approached him and asked, "Mr. Wooten, what must I do to be saved?" Mr. Wooten sensed that the young man was trusting in his own goodness, much like that rich young ruler Jesus spoke to. So he answered in a kind of unconcerned way: He said, "It's too late." The man was startled by that and said, "Oh, don't say that, sir." But Mr. Wooten insisted, "No, it's too late."

Then looking the young man in the eye he said, "You want to know what you must do to be saved. I tell you, it's too late now or any other time. The work of salvation is done, completed, finished! It was finished on the cross." And then he explained that, "Our part is simply to acknowledge our sin, acknowledge our need, and receive by faith the gift of life and forgiveness."

If you've not done that, look to Christ and trust in Him. He is the Savior. He did miracles. He did great signs. But His greatest work was gaining life for us by His death. Through the cross, He opened up the door to heaven through which we may pass through faith alone, obtain complete forgiveness of sin, and adoption into God's family. We *receive* it all, as I said, through faith alone—we can add nothing of our own good works. We can add nothing to what He has done. It's finished. It's complete. We can only receive it. May God help you to do that, if you've not.

And you who have, (hope it's everybody here), rejoice in what He's done for you and what you receive by His grace—and then live for Him.

Father, we do thank You that we know the Savior of mankind. And as we reflect upon His birth this week, we pray that You would enable us to remember He came to die. He came to offer up His life as a ransom for many. And we rejoice that by Your grace, we've been enabled to see the truth of it, and to lay hold of it by faith. We join ourselves to Him. It's all a work of Your grace and we give You the praise for it.

And now, LORD, help us to run the race, as we just sang, and run it by faith.

The LORD bless you and keep you. The LORD make His face shine on you and be gracious to you. The LORD lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace. In Christ's name. Amen.

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