

Unconventional Prophets

By : Keith Keyser

*“And one of them, Caiaphas, being high priest that year, said to them, 'You know nothing at all, nor do you consider that it is expedient for us that one man should die for the people, and not that the whole nation should perish.' Now **this he did not say on his own authority; but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation.**”* John 11:49-51 [Emphasis mine.]

There is nothing like raising the dead to get people's attention. In the aftermath of the Lord Jesus calling His friend Lazarus forth from the tomb, many people “believed in Him” (John 11:45.) Christ's enemies could not deny that He performed many miracles as signs of His identity as the Messiah. Therefore, they decided to do away with the One that they viewed as a wonder-working Nazarean upstart. What is more, they also plotted to murder Lazarus, the latest evidence of Jesus' power (John 12:10-11.) “If one does not care for the evidence, just bury it,” seemed to be their motto. This incident was merely one more example of the long history of this world's opposition to God's Word.

Asleep In The Light

The Almighty has taken great care to reveal Himself to His creatures, but in their sin they habitually refuse to receive the light that He provides through the Scriptures. Of course, the Bible shows us the Son of God, Who in turn manifests the God the Father to mankind (Matt. 11:27; John 14:7-9.) Yet some of those who claim familiarity with its contents demonstrate a woeful neglect of the God Who is revealed on every page. As the Lord Jesus told the observant Jews who confronted Him: “You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me. But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life” (John 5:39-40.)

The religious leaders who dominated the Temple and the ruling council (the Sanhedrin) set aside the miraculous evidence that vindicated Christ's claims, electing instead to do away with this nettlesome teacher. They prejudged Him without giving due consideration to the facts surrounding His ministry (John 7:51-52.) They conceded that He performed “signs”; yet these mighty works failed to sway their stubbornly entrenched opinions concerning His provenance (John 11:47.) Judaism's earliest position on the Lord's miracles was to attribute them to Satanic power, a view that was later reaffirmed in their revered *Talmud* (Mk. 3:22; cf. Tractates *Sanhedrin* 43a & *Toledoth Jesu*.)¹

The Fear Of Man Brings A Snare

The members of the council feared the Romans more than God, and so fretted that this Galilean wonder-worker would stir public emotions into a frenzy, thereby precipitating a political revolt. If this occurred, their Gentile overlords would depose them from their positions of honor and comfort. This would be disastrous for the nation, they reasoned, for they equated the destiny of the country with their own circumstances. Bruce Milne explains the tragedy of their thinking:

Thus the guardians of the sacred traditions of Israel were reduced to the level of political functionaries, to be met any day of the week in the parliaments and board rooms of the world. The primary issue is not one of principle but of expediency. Right has become equated with the avoidance of trouble and the preservation of their hold on power. Thus the cause of the living God, the glory of the age-old revelation from the patriarchs through the Red Sea and Mount Sinai, is all mortgaged in one sorry impassioned hour to save their political skins. The possibility that Jesus may in fact be authentic is not raised, even though the veracity of his miracles is

universally conceded.²

Later they displayed this same attitude towards the Lord's apostles in the early days of the church (Acts 4:16-17.)

The Politics Of Self-Interest

Chief among these arrogant naysayers was the venal Chief Priest Caiaphas. If he had confined his remarks to verse 49 - "You know nothing at all" - then he would have been correct. Sadly, he went on to frame the situation in terms of politics and pragmatism, affirming that getting rid of Christ would be a service to the nation. He maintained that it was a question of one dying, instead of multitudes perishing - a classic philosophical problem which he solved by situational ethics. As one writer describes it: "His action upon this occasion illustrates his characteristic disregard of justice and religion, and shows with what adroitness he could hide self-interest under the cloak of patriotism."³ Hendriksen agrees: "He did not shrink from shedding innocent blood. What he himself ardently craved, for selfish purposes, he made to look as if it were the one thing needful for the welfare of the people."⁴

Speaking The Truth In Spite Of Themselves

Despite their unbelief and cynical self-interest, God intervened to use their unjust machinations to achieve His purposes. This is apparent by His turning Caiaphas' words from politically motivated calculation to genuine prophecy. As high priest he was in the position of representing the people before God and the Almighty before the masses. He was a poor representative on both counts; nevertheless, the Lord employed his words to describe the penal substitutionary death of His beloved Son. In other words, unknowingly the jaded cleric with the mercenary motives was momentarily transformed into a genuine spokesman for God. As at the Cross, man's hatred was vented against Christ, but the Almighty sovereignly accomplished His purposes without condoning man's wicked treatment of His Son (Acts 2:23; Acts 4:26-28.) Thus, the Lord elected to use the high priest's office to make a bona fide prophecy in spite of the corrupt and unregenerate man who held that position (John 11:51-52.) Caiaphas would no doubt have been shocked at the true importance of his words, for it was the exact opposite of his own feelings towards Jesus of Nazareth.

In a similar fashion, a comparatively minor incident at Golgotha displayed God's overruling control of history. The cynical, power-worshiping procurator Pontius Pilate decided to tweak his nemeses among the Jewish leadership by writing "Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews." They objected to this designation, and wanted it to be reworded in such a way that weakened its force (John 19:21.) But Pilate insisted on his own version, saying: "What I have written, I have written" (v. 22.) At his level, this was a way of highlighting their envy and antagonizing them through semantic gains. By doing this, however, he ignorantly left a lasting testimony of Jesus' true identity. God worked through the Roman official's casual words to glorify His precious Son.

Prophecy To One's Own Destruction

Ironically, the Jewish leadership's judicial murder of Christ eventually brought about their exact fears. Their rejection of the Prince of Peace hastened their dispersal from the land (Lk. 19:41-44.) Hendriksen agrees: "...when the Jews murdered Jesus, they sealed their own doom. The Romans came, indeed, and destroyed the city (with its temple) and the nation!"⁵ Matthew Henry explains the principle in his inimitable way: "...Carnal policy, which steers only by secular considerations, while it thinks to *save*

all by sin, *ruins all* at last.”⁶ The Jewish priesthood and civil leadership were deposed and exiled, fulfilling their fears to the letter (John 11:48.) Someday, by God's grace, He will restore them to Himself nationally in the land that He promised (Rom. 11:25-32.) In the end, only God's Word is completely trustworthy. He used men to speak and write it – even when, like Caiaphas, they did not realize they were being employed as His spokesmen (2 Pet. 1:21.) He turns human words and actions to accomplish His plans, and therefore, will triumph in the end.

- 1 See also my article, "The Lord Jesus Christ: Vilified & Vindicated," available here: <http://goodwordsandworks.com/?p=72>
- 2 Bruce Milne, *The Message of John : Here Is Your King!* The Bible speaks today. Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993, p. 173.
- 3 J.A. M'Clymont, "Caiaphas," ed. James Hastings, *Dictionary of the Bible Dealing With Its Language, Literature, & Contents, Vol. 1*, New York: Scribner's, 1901, p. 338; <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/hastings/dictv1.i.vii.html>, accessed on 2/8/10.
- 4 William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, Vol. 2. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953, pp. 162f.
- 5 *Ibid.*, pp. 163f.
- 6 Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible : Complete and Unabridged in One Volume*. Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996 [*Italics original*]; electronic ed. (Logos.)