

God's Sovereign Plan

John 11:45-53

Over the past month or so we've been working our way through John 11. John 11 contains this fascinating story of how Jesus performs arguably one of his greatest miracles on earth. He raises one of his best friends, Lazarus back from the dead. But the way in which the story plays out, consistent with much of Jesus' life on earth, is not at all the way in which we would expect. Jesus has a knack for turning our expectations upside down.

First, upon hearing from Mary and Martha that Lazarus was sick, Jesus decides to delay his travel to Lazarus two full days. By the time Jesus does arrive in Bethany, he finds out Lazarus had already been dead for four days. But what we found out through all of Jesus' actions is that his plan was far from haphazard or random. Not at all. Jesus had a plan. Deliberate and intentional. Jesus knew exactly what he was doing.

Last week Steve preached on the climax of the story in which Jesus uses the authority of His words, He speaks, "Lazarus, come out!" And what happens? Lazarus walks out of the tomb!

This story is an incredible example that in a situation that seemed hopeless and where evil appeared to have the final word, *God was absolutely in control of the situation*. God was not surprised or taken back by the death of Lazarus. Lazarus' death proved to show that God is sovereign! Put simply, the sovereignty of God is the idea that God's power and authority overrides all other powers and authorities. He is the supreme ruler.

It is very likely that at some point in your life, you are going to face something that feels hopeless. A situation in which God appears to be disinterested and in which evil has the final word. Maybe you've already experienced this. Maybe you're going through something like this right now. Perhaps you are incredibly dissatisfied with your job. You might have

an illness that doesn't seem to be getting better. Or maybe there is a relationship that has been fractured, and restoring it feels impossible.

Today we are continuing the narrative by looking at the response to Lazarus' resurrection. And what we are going to find is that in a situation akin to Lazarus', in which it appears that evil is winning the day, God is sovereignly at work in accomplishing His plan of salvation. And if God is sovereign over a great matter such as our *salvation*, His sovereignty can also be trusted in the hardships we face in our day to day lives. Let's begin in verses 45-46.

⁴⁵ Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him. ⁴⁶ But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done.

Here we have two groups of people. Both groups witnessed the incredible resurrection of Lazarus, but the response of the two were very different. As Steve mentioned last week, miracles of resurrection do not guarantee belief. How remarkable! How wayward is the human heart! But God does not waste this. We see in verse 47-48 that God will leverage the cynicism of these unbelievers to enact a plan that would accomplish His will. Verse 47,

⁴⁷ Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin.

The Sanhedrin was the highest judicial body in the land. It is important to note that though the Sanhedrin was the highest governing body for the Jews, they were still very much under the authority of the Romans. They were reminded on a daily basis; *Cesar is in charge*. It was composed of the High Priest (whom we will be introduced to in the following verses), chief priests, religious sects such as the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Though still under the authority of the Romans, this group still possessed a lot of power. And they summon a meeting to address the whole raising of a dead man to life issue. Second half of verse 47,

"What are we accomplishing?" they asked. "Here is this man performing many signs. ⁴⁸ If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our temple and our nation."

The answer to the rhetorical question of "what are we accomplishing?" is "nothing." We are accomplishing nothing. Jesus is walking around performing miracles and our worst fears are being realized...people are believing in Him! This is a problem for the Sanhedrin, and they know it. They tell us why in verse 48. If people keep believing in Jesus, the Romans are going to find out and they will destroy the Jewish temple and nation.

It is worth noting here that their evaluation of the situation wasn't that far off. Rome was hypervigilant about snuffing out anything remotely resembling any kind of threat to their rule and authority. If they sensed any kind of rebellion or risk to the peace of Rome, they were swift to extinguish it. The ministry of Jesus was already growing in popularity, and the news of the resurrection of Lazarus was sure to spread quickly. They were terrified. But there is one member who speaks up quickly. Verse 49,

⁴⁹ Then one of them, named Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up, "You know nothing at all!"

Here we are introduced to a man named Caiaphas. John specifically mentions that Caiaphas was High Priest *that year*. In the book of Numbers chapter 35:25, we see a reference that the office of High Priest was assumed to last for life. But the reality in Jesus' day is that the office of High Priest was often passed around like a political football. For the time, Caiaphas served as High Priest for an impressive 18 years. Which says that he was exceptionally resilient and cunning, able to navigate the political and religious obstacles that would overthrow His authority. And we see his straightforwardness on display in his words at the end of verse 49, "You know nothing at all!"

For you business people out there, do you want to know a bad way to begin a board meeting? Tell everyone in the room that they have no idea what they are talking about! Caiaphas obviously failed to read the popular book *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. Don't do it. Verse 50 he continues His inspiring speech,

⁵⁰ *You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish."*

I find it fascinating that since the beginning of this counsel meeting of the Sanhedrin, not once is it ever considered that Jesus might actually be who He claimed to be...the Son of God. It's never considered. From the moment the Pharisees heard about the resurrection of Lazarus, they immediately summoned a meeting where the first item on the agenda is, "What are *we* accomplishing?" Not "what is God up to here?". Never once did you ever see them begin the counsel meeting with a word of prayer, asking God's sovereign will to be revealed so that they might humbly submit to His rule and reign. Rather, the focus for the counsel was, "what are *WE* accomplishing."

This reveals the agenda of the Sanhedrin: **self-preservation**. Jesus' ministry is a threat to their autonomy. They are terrified. They want to extinguish this fire as quickly as possible. So much so that later on chapter 12 verse 10 they put in motion a plan to kill Lazarus. They wanted at all costs to keep this news from getting out. Belief in Jesus threatened their way of life, and they were panicking.

But this makes sense, does it not? Jesus *is* disruptive to our lives. If we choose to accept Jesus and believe in His name, nothing stays the same. There is a new allegiance. There is absolutely no room for Jesus to be King and Lord of your life *and* for you to be in charge. The Jewish ruling council was threatened by the authority of Jesus. They liked being in charge. Caiaphas had no intentions of giving up His role as High Priest.

The attitude of the council in response to Jesus is a cautionary tale. It is a warning to all of us. We can do the same thing, can't we? Reject Jesus out of a desire to keep our independence. I know inside of my own heart, I am easily persuaded by my flesh to keep my autonomy out of a desire to preserve my rights. Let us be wary that we do not fall into the same sin that the council did. We need to always be asking, "God, what are you up to here?" Not, "What am I (or we) accomplishing?"

So Caiaphas, out of self-preservation, prophesies that Jesus should die for the people. Caiaphas is mentioned again at Jesus' trial in John chapter 18 verse 14,

¹⁴ Caiaphas was the one who had advised the Jewish leaders that it would be good if one man died for the people.

If you haven't noticed it yet there is a dramatic irony going on here. Caiaphas is speaking words that on the surface appear to be against God's will. Everything surrounding these words from Caiaphas are emphasizing the hostility of the Sanhedrin toward Jesus. The Sanhedrin does not like Jesus. And when threatened by His ministry, Caiaphas prophetically speaks words that he believes are intended to serve His agenda. Staying in power. But there is a deeper, wider work of God going on. Something Caiaphas and the ruling council does not see.

At first reading I thought to myself, "this doesn't sound so bad. Isn't that the whole point of Jesus' life on earth? To die for the people? The righteous for the unrighteous? Maybe you are thinking this too. And you would be right! And that is the beauty and power of the irony the author John is trying to illustrate here. Caiaphas couldn't see that what he was prophesying was...the gospel! Caiaphas is preaching the gospel to the Sanhedrin, and he has no idea.

Our author John anticipates this and provides commentary on what is going on verses 51-53,

*⁵¹ He (Caiaphas) did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die **for** the Jewish nation, ⁵² and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one. ⁵³ So from that day on they plotted to take his life.*

In these words, we see two things happening simultaneously. Caiaphas is concerned with his self-preservation, but God is clearly using Caiaphas' prophecy to fulfill His own purposes, the unification of His children. Caiaphas' prophetic words fall perfectly in line with the very words Jesus spoke earlier in the book of John. Jesus says this in John 10:16,

¹⁶ I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.

These other sheep Jesus speaks of are what Caiaphas refers to as the scattered children of God. Jesus is saying in this verse that he came to bring not only Jews to faith in Him, but also those outside the Jewish faith. All gentiles. You. Me. We all are invited to come and believe in the Lord Jesus. And what is the result of this believing body? In Jesus' words there will be *one flock and one shepherd*. In Caiaphas' words, *Jesus would...bring them together and make them one*.

So, was God speaking or was Caiaphas speaking? The answer, "Yes!" Caiaphas is speaking prophetic words that he believes will serve the purposes of extinguishing the growing fire of Jesus' ministry. What he did not know was that God had something else in mind. God was working behind the scenes to accomplish *His plan* to bring those who would believe in Him into the fold of God's family.

This is consistent with the way God works throughout Scripture, is it not? God leverages the evil schemes of man to achieve His good pleasure. Consider in Genesis, when Joseph was sold into slavery by his very own flesh and blood. The outcome was not at all what

anyone would have expected. Second only to Pharaoh, Joseph became the most powerful person in the world. Joseph expresses this in his words in Genesis 50:20,

²⁰ You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.

Consider the Apostle Paul, a murderer and persecutor of the early church. Let's read His words in 1 Timothy 1:16,

¹⁶ But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life.

God took a murderer and persecutor and used Him to accomplish His purpose; to display his immense patience toward sinners. God was sovereign over Paul's ignorance.

Throughout the pages of scripture, we see a God who is sovereignly at work behind the evil schemes of man to accomplish good for His people. We see this clearly in today's passage. Caiaphas, a corrupt high priest, who compromised so many Jewish laws to crucify Jesus it is not even funny, prophesied the Gospel that we know and believe today *without knowing it*. God was in control. God knew what He was doing. (Pause)

What can we take from this?

God's sovereignty can be trusted.

Consider the story we've been in the for past month with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. God's sovereignty led Martha and Mary to experience unfathomable hardship. Think about it. Mary and Martha did all the things appropriate for burial *before Jesus ever showed up*. They witnessed Lazarus breathe his last breath. They washed his dead body, rubbing fragrances and spices into his lifeless, cold skin. They wrapped his face and body in cloth, never to

see him again. They placed him in a tomb. All of this took time, effort, expense, and emotional energy. And we can only imagine that while they were doing these things, they constantly wrestled with the nagging thought in the back of their minds, "Where is Jesus? Why didn't he come? I thought he loved him. I thought he loved me."

But we know how the story ends, do we not? Jesus did come. And Jesus raised their brother from the dead, and many believed in Him as a result. Evil did not have the final word. God did. God's sovereignty won the day.

Consider this truth. Over 2,000 years ago a group of about 70 men got together to discuss what they were going to do about Jesus of Nazareth. A Jewish rabbi who claimed to be the Son of God and performed many miracles to back it up. And they decided to put into motion an elaborate plan to kill him. They thought they were pretty smart. It was a foolproof plan. Kill Jesus and move on with life. Did they succeed in their plan? Yes, yes they did. They accomplished it spectacularly. But was the result what they expected?

Here we are, two thousand years later in Manhattan, KS. Where is the Roman empire? What about Caiaphas, or the Sanhedrin counsel? Are we singing their praises? Far from it. We just sang about the All Sufficient Merit of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. Jesus promised that he would bring the scattered sheep into the fold and make them into one unified family of God. I can say with confidence today that I am a child of the living God, all because God sovereignly used the evil schemes of man to bring me to Him. I echo the words of the Apostle Paul in Romans 11:33,

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!

How unsearchable his judgments,

and his paths beyond tracing out!

God is sovereignly at work in accomplishing His plan of salvation. And if God is sovereign over a great matter such as our *salvation*, His sovereignty can also be trusted in the hardships we face in our day to day lives. Romans 8:38,

³² He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?

I am not going to pretend to know what you are going through today, and I definitely don't know what future waits for you. How all of this works is beyond me. And it's possible that the outcome you are hoping for is not going to be seen in this life. This world is not our home. But here is one thing I know with absolute certainty. The sovereignty of God is not some surface church answer to make us feel better when things get hard. The sovereignty of God is not fluffy theology. It has robust evidence all throughout the pages of scripture, and it can be trusted, my friends.

Today we take communion. The question that I'd like for us to consider during this time is this: **Where do you need to trust in the sovereignty of God?** Where in your life do you feel as though evil is winning? Where in your life are you tempted to believe that God is disinterested or not at work? Bring that to mind, and at the table, fix your eyes on the calvary, where God achieved his sovereign plan to die on your behalf, and win you back. Let the bread and cup remind you today that no matter what you are going through, whatever hardship, whatever trial, God is sovereign, and he can be trusted.

If you are not yet a believer in Jesus, we would ask that you use this time to consider all that we have discussed thus far. Reflect on the sophistication of God's plan to bring you to Him. Does that kind of love warm your heart? What keeps you from trusting Him?

I will give us a moment of silence to pray. After I'll read scripture, and we will take the bread and cup together. Take a moment and prayerfully consider God's sovereignty in your life.

Communion

The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, ²⁴ and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me."

²⁵ In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." ²⁶ For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Benediction

I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. ² Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. ³ Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. ⁴ There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. Amen.