

J. C. RYLE'S NOTES ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN
11:47-57

47. Then the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered a council and said, What shall we do? For this man does many miracles. 48. If we thus let him alone, all *men* will believe in him, and the Romans shall come and take away both our place and nation. 49. And one of them *named* Caiaphas, being the high priest that same year, said to them, Ye know nothing at all, 50. nor consider that it is expedient for us that one man should die for the people, and not that the whole nation perish. 51. And this he spoke not of himself, but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus should die for that nation; 52. and not for that nation only, but that also he should gather together in one the children of God who were scattered abroad. 53. Then, from that day forth, they took counsel together to put him to death. 54. Jesus therefore walked no more openly among the Jews, but went from there into a country near the wilderness, to a city called Ephraim, and there remained with his disciples. 55. And the Jews' passover was near at hand, and many went from the country up to Jerusalem before the passover, to purify themselves. 56. Then they sought Jesus, and spoke among themselves as they stood in the temple, What think ye--that he will not come to the feast? 57. Now both the chief priests and the Pharisees had given a command, that if any man knew where he was, he should report *it*, that they might seize him.

47.--[*Then the chief priests...council.*] This council was probably the great sanhedrim, or consultative assembly of the Jewish Church. It was for purely ecclesiastical and not for civil or political purposes. It is the same assembly before which, it is conjectured with much show of reason, our Lord made His defense in the fifth chapter of this gospel. On receiving the tidings of the astounding miracle which had been worked at Bethany, our Lord's bitterest enemies, the chief priests and Pharisees, seem to have been alarmed and enraged and to have felt the absolute necessity of taking decided measures to check our Lord's progress. Ecclesiastical rulers, unhappily, are often the foremost enemies of the Gospel.

[*And said, What shall we do?*] This question indicates perplexity and irritation. "What are we about? Are we going to sit still and let this new Teacher carry all before Him? What is the use of trifling with this new heresy? We are doing nothing effectual to check it. It grows, and we let it alone."

[*For this man does many miracles.*] This is a marvelous admission. Even our Lord's worst enemies confess that our Lord did miracles, and many miracles. Can we doubt that they would have denied the truth of His miracles if they could? But they do not seem to have attempted it. The miracles were too many, too public, and too thoroughly witnessed for them to dare to deny them. How, in the face of this fact, modern infidels and skeptics can talk of our Lord's miracles as being impostures and delusions they would do well to explain! If the Pharisees who lived in our Lord's

time, and who moved heaven and earth to oppose His progress, never dared to dispute the fact that He worked miracles, it is absurd to begin denying His miracles now after eighteen centuries have passed away.

Let us note the desperate hardness and wickedness of man's heart. Even the sight of miracles will not convert anyone, without the renewing grace of the Holy Ghost.

Brentius remarks that the simple answer to the question of this verse ought to have been, "Our duty is to believe at once that this worker of many miracles is the Christ of God."

48.--[*If we thus let him alone.*] This means, "If we continue to treat Him as we do now and take no more active measures to put Him down,--if we only dispute and reason and argue and cavil and denounce Him but let Him have His liberty, let Him go where He pleases, let Him do what He pleases, and preach what He pleases."

"Thus" can only mean "as at present, and hitherto."

[*All men will believe in him.*] This means the bulk of the population will believe that He is what He *professes* to be--the promised Messiah. The number of His adherents will increase, and faith in His Messiahship will become contagious and spread all over Palestine.

The word "all" in this sentence must evidently not be taken literally. It only means "the great mass of the people." It is like "all men come to Him," said by the angry disciples of John the Baptist about Christ (John 3:36). When men lose their tempers and talk in passion, they are very apt to use exaggerated expressions.

[*The Romans...take away...nation.*] The process of reasoning by which the Pharisees arrived at this conclusion was probably something of this kind: "This man, if let alone, will gather round Him a crowd of adherents who will proclaim Him a Leader and King. This our governors, the Romans, will hear and consider it a rebellion against their authority. Then they will send an army, deal with us as rebels, destroy Jerusalem and the temple, and carry away the whole Jewish nation, as the Babylonians did, into captivity."

In this wretched argument, it is difficult to say which appears most prominent, ignorance or unbelief.

It was an *ignorant* argument. The Pharisees ought to have known well that nothing was further from our Lord's teaching than the idea of an earthly kingdom, supported by an armed force. He always proclaimed that His kingdom was not of this world and not temporal, like Solomon's or David's. He had never hinted at any deliverance from Roman authority. He distinctly taught men to render to Cæsar the things that were Cæsar's and had distinctly refused, when appealed to, to be "a Judge or divider" among the Jews. Such a person, therefore, was not the least likely to excite the jealousy of the Romans.

It was an *unbelieving* argument. The Pharisees ought to have believed that the Romans could never have conquered and put down our Lord and His adherents, if He really was the Messiah and could work miracles at His will. The Philistines could not overcome David, and the Romans could not have overcome David's greater Son. By their own showing, the Jewish nation would have had protection enough in the miracle-working power of our Lord.

That there was an expectation throughout the East, at the time of our Lord's ministry, that some remarkable person was about to arise and become a great leader, is mentioned by Roman historians. But there is no evidence that the Roman government ever showed jealousy of anyone who was merely a religious teacher, like our Lord, and did not interfere with the civil power.

The plain truth is that this saying of the Pharisees looks like an excuse, caught up as a weapon against our Lord, and a pretext for stirring up enmity against Him. What they really hated was our Lord's doctrine, which exposed their own system and weakened their authority. They felt that their craft was in danger, but not daring to say this publicly, they pretended a fear that He would excite the jealousy of the Romans and endanger the whole nation. They did just the same when they finally accused Him to Pilate as One that stirred up sedition and made Himself a King. It is no uncommon thing for wicked people to assign very untrue reasons for their conduct and to keep back and conceal their true motives. Demetrius, and his friends at Ephesus, said that the temple of the great goddess Diana was in danger when in reality it was their own craft and their own wealth. The Jews at Thessalonica who persecuted Paul pretended great zeal for "the decrees of Cæsar," when their real motive was hatred of Christ's Gospel. The Pharisees here pretended fear of the Romans when in reality they found the growing influence of Jesus pulling down their own power over the people.

Calvin observes: "They double their wickedness by a plausible disguise-- their zeal for the public good. The fear that chiefly distressed them was that their own tyranny should be destroyed; but they pretend to be anxious about the temple and worship of God."

Bucer compares the Pharisees' pretended fear of the Romans to the absurd fears of the consequence of printing and literature, which the Papists used to express at the period of the Reformation.

Flacius remarks that "through fear of Cæsar, God is despised and His Son crucified, and this under pretext of preserving religion, the temple, and the nation. Human wisdom preserves itself by appeasing man and offending God!"

Ferus remarks that the council entirely forgot that "rulers, whether the Romans or any others, are not a terror to good works, but to evil. If the Jews had believed and obeyed God, they had nothing to fear."

That the leading Jews at Jerusalem had a strong suspicion that Jesus really was the Messiah, in spite of all their outrageous enmity and unbelief, is evident not only from comparison of other places, but from their nervous

anxiety to get rid of Him. They knew that Daniel's seventy weeks were run out. They could not deny the miracles that Jesus did. But they dared not follow out their conviction and draw the conclusion they ought to have drawn. They willingly shut their eyes against light.

How miserably mistaken the policy of the Pharisees proved to be, it is needless to say. If they had let Jesus alone and allowed His Gospel to be received and believed, Jerusalem, humanly speaking, might have stood to this day, and the Jews might have been more mighty and prosperous than in the days of Solomon. By not letting Jesus alone and by killing Him, they filled up the measure of their nation's sin, and brought destruction on the temple, and scattering on the whole people.

"Take away," applied to place here, must mean "destroy." Thus Matt. 24:39: "The flood took them all away."

Some, as Heinsius and Bloomfield, think that "our place" means the city, Jerusalem.

Some, as Olshausen and Alford, think that "our place" means "our country."

Others, as Maldonatus, Hutcheson, Poole, and Hammond, with whom I entirely agree, think "our place" means the temple (compare Acts 6:13,14). Lampe thinks this view is proved by Micah 1:3.

Calvin observes, how many people in his day were always hanging back from helping the Protestant Reformation, from the very same motives as these Jews--the fear of consequences. "We must consult public tranquility. There are dangers in the way."

49.--[*And one of them, named Caiaphas.*] This man, by comparing Acts 5:17, would seem to have been of the sect of the Sadducees. We also know that he was son-in-law to Annas, of whom Josephus specially mentions that he was a Sadducee. If this view be correct (and Guyse, Gill, Scott, and Lampe agree with me in it), it rather accounts for the contemptuous way in which he seems to speak in replying here to the saying of the Pharisees. It is remarkable, however, to observe how Pharisees and Sadducees, who disagreed on so many points, were agreed in hating and opposing Christ. Formalists and skeptics, in all ages, make common cause against the Gospel.

[*Being the high priest that same year.*] This expression shows the disorder and irregularity which prevailed in the Jewish Church in our Lord's time. According to the law of Moses, the office of high priest was tenable for life. In the last days of the Jews, the office seems to have been obtainable by election and to have been held with great variety of term. Caiaphas was high priest when John the Baptist began his ministry, and Annas with him (Luke 3:2). He was also high priest after the Day of Pentecost and before the persecution of Stephen. No wonder St. Paul says, on a subsequent occasion, of Ananias, "I did not know that he was the high priest" (Acts 23:2).

Poole remarks: "After Herod's time, there was no regard to the family of Aaron, but the Romans made what high priests they pleased. Josephus tells

us that the Jews had thirteen high priests from Aaron to Solomon, which was 612 years; eighteen from Solomon to the Babylonian captivity, which was 460 years; fifteen from the captivity to Antiochus, which was 414 years; but they had no less than twenty-eight between the time that Herod began to reign and Jerusalem was destroyed, which was less than a century."

[*Said...Ye know nothing at all.*] The word rendered "ye" is here emphatic in the Greek. It seems not unlikely that it expresses Caiaphas' contempt for the ignorance and helplessness of the Pharisees' question. "You and all your party do not understand what the situation of things requires. You are wasting time in complaints and expressions of vexation when a sterner, severer policy is imperatively demanded."

Chrysostom remarks: "What others made matter of doubt and put forth in the way of deliberation, this man cried aloud shamelessly, openly, and audaciously--*One must die.*"

Pearce thinks that some of the Jews in council must have talked of only putting a stop to Christ's preaching, as they afterwards tried to stop the Apostles (Acts 4:18), but that Caiaphas ridiculed such weak counsel and advised more violent measures. May we not suppose that Nicodemus and others spoke in favor of our Lord?

50.--[*Nor consider.*] The word thus rendered is almost always translated "reason" and is nowhere "consider" except here. It seems to imply that Caiaphas wished the Pharisees to know that they had not reasoned out and properly weighed the right thing to be done. Hence this perplexity. He would now show them the conclusion they ought to have come to.

[*It is expedient...nation perish.*] Caiaphas' conclusion is short and decisive. He gives it elliptically. "This Man must die. It is far better that one should die, whether innocent or not, for the benefit of the whole nation than that the whole nation should be brought into trouble and perish. You are thinking that if we do not let this Man alone, and interfere, we are injuring an innocent person. Away with such childish scruples. Let Him be put out of the way. It is expedient to kill Him. Better He should die to save the nation from further trouble than live and the nation be brought into trouble by Him."

I cannot suppose that Caiaphas meant anything more than this. He simply argues that Christ's death would be a public benefit, and that to spare Him might bring destruction on the nation. Of the full meaning that His words were capable of bearing, I do not believe he had the least idea.

Let us carefully note here what crimes and sins may be committed on the ground of *expediency*. None are so likely to be tempted to commit such sins as rulers and governors. None are so likely to do things unjust, dishonest, and oppressive as a Government under the pressure of the spurious argument that it is expedient that the few should suffer rather than the many should take harm. For political expediency Christ was crucified. What a fact that is! Ought we not rather to ask always what is just, what is right, what is honorable in the sight of God? That which is morally wrong can never be politically right. To govern only for the sake

of pleasing and benefiting the majority, without any reference to the eternal principles of justice, right, and mercy, may be *expedient* and please man; but it does not please God.

Calvin observes: "Let us learn never to separate what is useful and expedient from what is lawful, since we ought not to expect any prosperity and success but from the blessing of God."

Ecolampadius remarks that we must never do evil that good may come. "If you could by the slaying of one good man work the saving of many, it would be unlawful."

Poole observes: "Never was anything more diabolical spoken. Like a wretched politician, concerned for nothing but the people's safety, Caiaphas said not that it is lawful, but that it is expedient for us that one Man, be He never so good, never so innocent and just, should die."

Doddridge remarks: "When will the politicians of this world learn to trust God in His own ways, rather than to trust themselves and their own wisdom, in violation of all rules of truth, honor, and conscience?"

51,52--*[And this he spoke not of himself, etc.]* These two verses contain a parenthetical comment by St. John, on the address of Caiaphas to the Pharisees. It is a peculiar passage and not without difficulty. That a man like Caiaphas should be said to prophesy, and that his prophecy should be of so wide and extensive a character, is undoubtedly strange. I offer a few remarks that may help throw light on the passage.

That God can employ a wicked man to declare prophetic truth is clearly proved by the case of Balaam. But the positions of Balaam and Caiaphas were very different.

That the Jewish high priest at any time possessed, by virtue of his office, the power of predicting things to come, I can nowhere find. David certainly speaks of Zadok as "a seer" (2 Sam. 15:27). The high priest's ephod conveyed a certain mysterious power to the wearer, of foreseeing things immediately near (1 Sam. 23:9). The "urim and thummim," whatever they were, which dwelt in the breastplate of the high priest, appear to have given the wearer peculiar powers of discernment. But even they were withdrawn at the destruction of the first temple. In short, there is an utter absence of proof that a Jewish high priest, in the time of our Lord, had any power of prophesying.

I believe that the verses before us are very elliptical and require much to be supplied in order to convey the meaning of St. John. The only satisfactory sense I can put upon the passage will be found in the following free paraphrase.

[This spake he not of himself.] He spoke these words, though he was not aware of it, under the influence of an overruling power, making him say things of far deeper meaning than he was conscious of himself. As Ecolampadius says, "God used him as an instrument." (See Isa. 10:15.)

[*But being high priest that year, he prophesied.*] He spoke words which, as the event showed afterward, were eminently prophetic; and the fact that they fell from his lips when he was high priest made them more remarkable, when afterward remembered and noted.

[*That Jesus should die for that nation.*] He actually foretold, though the fulfillment was in a manner very different from his intentions, that Jesus would die for the benefit of the Jewish nation.

[*And not for that nation only, etc.*] And He also foretold what was practically fulfilled afterward, though in a way marvelously unlike what he thought, that Jesus would not only die for the Jewish nation, but for the benefit of all God's children at present scattered all over the world.

The utmost, in fact, that I can make of John's explanatory comment is that he remarks on the extraordinary manner in which Caiaphas' words proved true, though in a way that he never intended, wished, or expected. He lets fall a saying on a great public occasion, which comes from his lips with great authority on account of his office as high priest. That saying was afterward fulfilled in the most marvelous manner by the overruling providence of God, but in a way that the speaker never dreamed of. The thing was afterward remembered and remarked on; and it seemed, says St. John, as if being high priest that year, he was miraculously compelled by the Holy Ghost to prophesy the redemption of mankind at the very time that he thought he was only speaking of putting Christ to death. Caiaphas, in short, meant nothing but to advise the murder of Christ. But the Holy Ghost obliged him unconsciously to use words which were a most remarkable prediction of Christ's death bringing life to a lost world.

The Greek word rendered "should die" would be more literally "was about to die." It simply expresses a future coming event.

The "children of God scattered abroad," I believe, means the elect of God among the Gentiles. They are put in contrast with "that nation" or "the nation," as it would be more literally rendered.

The "gathering together in one" I believe to be that final gathering of all Christ's members, which is yet to come at His second advent. (See Eph. 1:10, John 12:32, and Gen. 49:10.)

Lightfoot says that the Jews thought the greatest work of Messiah was to be the "reduction, or gathering together of the captivities."

I leave the passage with a very deep sense of its difficulty, and desire not to press my views on others dogmatically if they are not satisfied with them.

Chrysostom remarks: "Caiaphas prophesied, not knowing what he said; and the grace of God merely made use of his mouth, but touched not his accursed heart."

Musculus and Ferus remark how striking the resemblance is between Caiaphas unintentionally using language fulfilled in a sense totally unlike what he

meant, and the Jews saying of Christ to Pilate, "His blood be on us and on our children." They little knew the awful and tremendous extent of the saying.

The absurdity of the Roman Catholic claim--that the Pope's words and decrees are to be received as partially inspired because of his office on the ground of this passage--is noted and exposed by all the Protestant commentators of the seventeenth century.

Lightfoot thinks we should lay great emphasis on the expression "that same year," and justly so. He observes that it was the very year when the high priest's office ended, the veil was rent, the Jewish dispensation wound up, and the Mosaic priesthood was abrogated by Christ's becoming manifestly our Priest. He thinks that when St. Paul said "I did not know that he was the high priest" (in Acts 23:5), he may have meant "that he did not know there was any high priest at all." He also observes that this very year at Pentecost the Holy Ghost was poured out as the spirit of prophecy and revelation in an extraordinary measure. What wonder if "that year" the last high priest, like Balaam, should prophesy.

53.--[*Then, from that day forth...death.*] We see here the result of Caiaphas' counsel. His stern, bold, outspoken proposal carried all the council with him, and even if Gamaliel, Nicodemus, and Joseph were there, their voices were silenced. From that very day it became a settled thing with the Jewish leaders at Jerusalem that Jesus was to be put to death. The only difficulty was to find the way, the time, and the means of doing it without creating a tumult. The great miracle just wrought at Bethany would doubtless increase the number of our Lord's adherents and make it necessary to use caution in carrying out the murderous plan.

The conclusions of great ecclesiastical councils are seldom wise and good, and sometimes are wicked and cruel. Bold, forward, unscrupulous men, like Caiaphas, generally silence the quieter members and carry all before them.

54.--[*Jesus therefore walked...Jews.*] From this time our Lord found it necessary to give up appearing openly at Jerusalem and came there no more till the week of his crucifixion. He knew the result of the council just held, either from His own Divine knowledge or from the information of friends like Nicodemus. And as His time was not fully come, he retired from Judea for a season.

The expression "no more" is literally "not yet." It must mean "no more at present."

May we not learn from our Lord's conduct that it may be a duty sometimes not to court danger or death? There are seasons when it is a duty to retire as well as seasons for going forward. There are times to be silent as well as times to speak.

Hutcheson remarks: "It is lawful for Christ's servants to flee when their death is decreed by enemies and the persecution is personal."

[*But went from there...Ephraim...disciples.*] Nothing whatever is known for

certain of the distinct locality to which our Lord retired or of the city here named. It seems, purposely, to have been a quiet, isolated, and little frequented place. The probability is that it was beyond Jordan, in Perea, because when our Lord came to Jerusalem the last time, He passed through Jericho.

Ellicott suggests that Ephraim was a town also called Ophrah, about twenty miles north of Jerusalem on the borders of Samaria. He also thinks that on leaving Ephraim those words of St. Luke (chapter 17:11) come in, which say that our Lord "passed through the midst of Samaria and Galilee." After that he thinks He went through Perea to Jericho. But I am not satisfied that he proves these points.

It is worth noticing that our Lord chose a scene of entire quiet and seclusion as His last abode before going up to His last great season of suffering at the crucifixion. It is well to get alone and be still before we take in hand any great work for God. Our Savior was not above this. How much more should His disciples remember it! In saying this, I would not be thought to commend the ostentatious "retreats" of the Romish Church and its followers. It is of the very essence of Christian retirement, if it is to be profitable, that it should be without parade and should not attract the notice of men. The life of the Eremite has no warrant in Scripture.

When it says that our Lord continued or tarried at Ephraim "with His disciples," it is worth noticing that we do not hear a word of any public works that he did there. It looks as if He devoted the last few quiet days that remained before His crucifixion to uninterrupted communion with the Father and private instruction of His disciples.

55.--[*And the Jews' passover was near at hand.*] This expression, like many others in John's Gospel, shows that he wrote for the Church generally, and for many readers who were not familiar with Jewish feasts and customs.

[*And many went...before the passover.*] This seems mentioned as a simple matter of custom among the Jews and not as a thing done this year more than any other. They always did so, and thus drew together for seven days before the passover a larger collection of people at Jerusalem than at any other time of the year. Hence the crowds and expectation when our Lord appeared--He had been talked of by people from all parts of Palestine.

[*To purify themselves.*] This refers to the ceremonial washings, purifications, and atonements for ceremonial uncleanness, which all strict Jews were careful to go through before eating the passover (see 2 Chr. 30:18,19). It is impossible to read the book of Leviticus carefully and not be struck with the almost endless number of ways in which an Israelite could become ceremonially unclean and need going to the priest to have an atonement made. (See Numbers 9:6-11.) That the Pharisees, in such matters, added to legal strictness by their absurd scrupulosity (such as "straining at a gnat") we cannot doubt; but the simple law as it stood was a yoke that was very hard to bear. No wonder that thousands of devout Jews came anxiously to Jerusalem before the passover to be made ceremonially clean and fit for the feast.

It is worth noting how singularly particular men are sometimes about forms and ceremonies and outward correctness while they coolly plan and execute enormous crimes. The Jews, zealous about "purifying" themselves while they were planning the murder of Christ, have had imitators and followers in every age of the Church. Strictness about forms and ceremonies, and utter recklessness about gross sin, are found quite compatible in many hearts.

56.--[*Then they sought Jesus, etc.*] The persons here mentioned seem to me to have been the Jews from all parts of Palestine, mentioned in the last verse, who had come up to prepare for the passover. The fame and history of our Lord were probably so great throughout Palestine that one of the first inquiries the comers would make of one another would be about Him. And as they stood in the temple court waiting for their turn to go through ceremonial purification, or talking with old friends and acquaintances who had come up, like themselves, from the country, Jesus would probably be a principal topic of conversation.

[*What think ye...feast?*] This is mentioned as one of the principal inquiries made by the Jews of one another. Our Lord, on a former occasion, had not come up to the passover (see John 6). They might, therefore, naturally feel doubtful whether He would come now.

It is noteworthy that the question admits of being taken as one, or divided into two distinct ones.

Some think that it means, "What think ye of the question, whether He will come to the feast or not?"

Others hold that it means, "What think ye of Christ, and especially of His position at this time? Do you think that He will not come to the feast?" I myself prefer this view.

It is noteworthy that the very question with which our Lord confounded the Pharisees a few days after, as recorded in St. Matthew 22:42, begins with precisely the same Greek words as those here used: "What think ye of Christ?"

57.--[*Now both the chief priests...command...seize him.*] This verse shows the first steps which had been taken after the session of the council which adopted the advice of Caiaphas to kill Jesus. A general order had been given that if any man knew where Jesus lodged in Jerusalem, he was to give information in order that He might be apprehended.

I cannot help thinking myself that this order must only have referred to Jerusalem and the house where our Lord might lodge when He came to the passover, if He did come. I cannot suppose that our Lord's enemies could be ignorant where He was between the miracle of Bethany and the passover. But I fancy they dared not run the risk of a tumult or rebellion, which might be caused, if they sent into the rural districts to apprehend Him. Indeed, it is doubtful whether the jurisdiction of the priests and Pharisees extended beyond the walls of Jerusalem, and whether they could lay hands upon our Lord anywhere outside the city. This might have been the reason why He often lodged at Bethany.

Musculus here discusses the question whether obedience to the powers that be obliges us to give up a man to those who are seeking to apprehend him. He answers, "Decidedly not, if we believe him to be an innocent man."