

2. The opposition of the high priests

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[0 : 00] Amen. Well, let's open our Bibles, please, at John's Gospel, chapter 18. And if you have one of our visitor's Bibles, you'll find it's on page 904. I'm just going to read a short excerpt, not the whole of verses 12 to 24, but simply the two little excerpts which deal with Jesus before the high priest.

So I'll read verses 12 to 14, and then verses 19 to 24. 12 to 14, and then 19 to 24. So John 18, verse 12.

So the band of soldiers and their captain and the officers of the Jews arrested Jesus and bound him. First they led him to Annas, for he was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, who was high priest that year.

It was Caiaphas who had advised the Jews that it would be expedient that one man should die for the people. Verse 19. The high priest then questioned Jesus about his disciples and his teaching. Jesus answered him, I've spoken openly to the world. I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple where all Jews come together. I've said nothing in secret.

[1 : 18] Why do you ask me? Ask those who have heard me what I said to them. They know what I said. When he had said these things, one of the officers standing by struck Jesus with his hand, saying, Is that how you answer the high priest?

Jesus answered him, If what I said is wrong, bear witness about the wrong. But if what I said is right, why do you strike me? Annas then sent him bound to Caiaphas, the high priest.

Amen. This is the word of the Lord and may it be a blessing to us. It's a remarkable thing that the Son of God, the finest human being that the world has ever known, should be on the receiving end of very great hatred.

That hatred was so great that Jesus was only allowed to be publicly active for about three years before he was put to death by mock judicial process.

Isn't that remarkable? You think of the way in which human beings who are obviously virtuous and noble and good are generally honoured. Think of the way in which Mother Teresa, for example, was honoured in her life and is honoured now.

[2 : 34] And yet Jesus, whose goodness and integrity were absolute and flawless, was hastened to the gallows in three years. And it's this murderous hatred that I want us to look at today in John's Gospel, chapter 18.

It's the high priests of the Jews who seem to have hated Jesus the most. But before we look at their hatred of Jesus as it comes out here in chapter 18, I want to read a passage from chapter 11 in John's Gospel, which gives us a bit more background into what was going on.

So I wonder if I can ask you to turn with me back to chapter 11, page 898, and I'll read from verse 45 to 53. This will cast some light on the interview that Jesus has with Annas, which I've just read from chapter 18.

So chapter 11, verse 45. We've just had the story of the raising of Lazarus in the earlier part of chapter 11. Many of the Jews, therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, in other words, his raising of Lazarus, believed in him.

But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the council, the Sanhedrin, and said, What are we to do?

[3 : 54] For this man performs many signs. 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.

But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, You know nothing at all. Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish.

He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad.

So from that day on, they made plans to put him to death. Now can we keep that page open for a little while? Because it's very illuminating.

It tells us certain things about the high priests and the council, the Sanhedrin, which we don't learn from Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Now most of the story of chapter 11 here is about the raising of Lazarus, who had been dead for four days.

[5 : 03] And you'll see verse 45 tells us that many of the Jews, who had seen this spectacular miracle of the raising of the dead, believed in Jesus. But some of them, as verse 46 says, marched straight off to the Pharisees and reported the incident.

And did the Pharisees then say, how wonderful, God is amongst us? They certainly did not. They immediately called a meeting of the Sanhedrin, the high council, and they said effectively, brothers, we are in great difficulty here.

This is awful. We can't deny the signs this man is performing. But if we don't stop him, everyone will start believing in him. And if that happens, there will be crowd hysteria.

The whole city will boil over. They'll be claiming that their King Messiah has come to rescue Israel from the Romans. And the Romans will come down on us like a ton of bricks. Tyrannical overlords don't like it when a subjected people threatens to rise up in revolt.

They tend to smash them down with an iron fist. Recent history has been littered with events of that kind. Just look at what the chief priests actually say in verse 48.

[6 : 12] They say the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation. You can understand the viewpoint of the chief priests.

Palestine, Israel, had been originally conquered by the Romans back in 63 BC, which was about 90 years before these events. But the Romans had come to an accommodation of sorts with the Jews. The real power in the land, of course, lay with the Roman governor and the Roman army. But the Jews had been allowed to retain their royal family, the family of the Herods, as a puppet royal family.

They'd been allowed to retain their temple with its rituals, its priesthood. They were allowed to worship in their synagogues throughout the land. So although Israel was no longer an independent state, as it would have wished to be, it was allowed to function as a Jewish nation under the lordship of Rome.

So the chief priests and the Sanhedrin had a lot to lose. If Jerusalem now were to break out in mob excitement, saying the Messiah has come, the Roman army almost certainly would come down very heavily, might even ban Judaism and ban all its institutions.

[7 : 22] Do you remember Tiananmen Square in 1989? Popular uprisings can be put down with great ferocity. That's really what lies behind their fear in verse 48.

But you'll see that Caiaphas, the high priest, moves the meeting forward in verse 49. He turns to the council and he says to them rather brutally, you're a load of ignoramuses.

You know nothing. It's not necessary for the whole Jewish nation to perish. Only one man needs to die. And he can stand in and die for everybody. Now John, the evangelist, notices in verse 51 that Caiaphas unwittingly has spoken a true prophecy.

Indeed, Jesus would die for the nation. And not just for the Jews, but for all of God's children, the Gentiles as well, who are scattered abroad. So Caiaphas spoke far more than he understood.

But at the brutal level of his fear and jealousy, he clearly saw that the way to protect the Jewish institutions and privileges was simply to get rid of Jesus. And that is why, look at verse 53, from that day on, they made plans to put Jesus to death.

[8 : 37] So in their own minds, this decision was now taken. A way must be found to put Jesus to death. They were willing to sacrifice so much in order to keep their privileged position.

They were willing to sacrifice their integrity and truthfulness. They were even willing, in the end, to say, we have no king but Caesar, which was a direct denial of the God of Abraham.

All their integrity and nobility, such as it was, could be sacrificed if only they could get their way and have Jesus annihilated. They were fiercely determined from that day on, as verse 53 puts it.

So when we get to chapter 18, this resolve to kill Jesus has only become deeper and harder. And it's that resolve to kill him which drives the agenda in the dealings that Jesus has with the high

priests.

The high priests have no real interest in what Jesus has to say because already they've categorized him or written him off as a blasphemer, a deceiver and a Sabbath breaker.

[9 : 43] And now they also see him as a threat to the whole structure of Judaism and all its privileges. So let's turn back to chapter 18 and we'll look at John's narrative and see what he is teaching us, what John is teaching us in it.

First, let's try to trace these events, which is a little bit tricky here because you'll see that John interweaves his account of Jesus before the high priest with his account of Peter's denial. We'll look, God willing, at Peter's denial next week.

So verse 13 tells us that the soldiers led Jesus, who was now bound, to Annas, the father-in-law of Caiaphas, who was officially high priest that year.

Now fathers-in-law are generally 20 or 25 years older than their sons-in-law. So Annas was almost certainly a fair bit older than Caiaphas. And Annas had been the high priest.

It seems that the Romans rather enjoyed interfering with the Jewish arrangements because officially, if a man had been appointed high priest, he would hold that office for life, just like the Pope.

[10 : 50] But the Romans wanted to show the Jews who was really top dog and quite often, apparently, they would stand a particular high priest down and then appoint somebody else for a year or two in his place.

And this seems to have been what's happened here. Annas, who'd been high priest for a while, was still very much alive and well, but he'd been demoted and his son Caiaphas had been put in instead of him.

But the ordinary people, you can understand this, they were still thinking of Annas as the high priest, the man with the real authority. And in fact, verse 15 suggests that Annas was still living in the high priest's official residence.

You'll see Simon Peter ends up in the courtyard of the high priest's house, which is Annas' house. It's only later, in verse 24, when Annas then sends Jesus down the road to the house of his son-in-law.

Now, all that is not highly important, but I think it's interesting just to work out the details to see what's actually going on here. But what is important is this interview between Annas and Jesus, which is recorded in verses 19 to 23.

[11 : 56] Jesus is brought into Annas' house led in, and verse 12 has told us that he is already bound, roped around to prevent him from moving easily or from running away.

So as we look at verse 19, let's remember two things. First of all, Jesus stands before Annas tied up. So it's hardly a discussion between two men on equal terms.

And then secondly, we know that Annas was not an unbiased interrogator. He's one of a group of people who have already determined, as we saw back in chapter 11, to put Jesus to death.

So by the standards of human justice, there is nothing just about this mock trial. It's an interrogation whose outcome has already been decided.

Now verse 19 shows us that Annas questioned Jesus about two things. First, about his disciples, presumably how many there were and what sort of people they were, because if they were numbered in their thousands, they might well mass together in a great uprising, rather as is happening in Cairo at the moment.

[13 : 07] A large mob gathering in the centre of a capital city is something for the authorities to fear. So this question about his disciples may have been born of fear. But the second question is the more important one, really, from Annas' point of view, and that's the question about Jesus' teaching.

It was his teaching that really worried and infuriated the Jewish leadership. If you look across to chapter 19, verse 7, you'll see the heart of their fear, because they say to Pilate, we have a law, and according to this law, he ought to die, because he has made himself the Son of God.

That was the heart of what they hated. He has made himself the Son of God, as they put it. Back in chapter 10, the Jews have picked up stones to stone Jesus for blasphemy, because they say, we're going to stone you because you, being a man, have made yourself God.

So they regard him as an imposter, a deceiver, claiming to be something, to be God, something which no mortal man could ever be in their view. So in John's Gospel, and this is one of the features

of this Gospel, you get this clash of irreconcilable views.

The Jews say to Jesus, you cannot be God, that's impossible. And yet Jesus says to them again and again, I am, I am, I am. That's why he quickly became intolerable to them.

[14:38] Now we'll just look fairly quickly at verses 20 to 23 here. Annas asks him these pointed questions, but you'll see that Jesus refuses in effect to answer him.

He says, I've spoken these things openly, everybody knows about it, you ask somebody else. Now the reason for Jesus speaking like this may be that in Jewish law at that time, it was not permitted apparently for questions to be asked of a defendant while he was being tried.

So a trial could only proceed on the basis of the testimony of witnesses. So first of all, witnesses would be called from the one side who spoke in favour of the accused and then witnesses would be called from the other side who spoke against him.

And then judgment would be passed on the basis of this testimony for and testimony against. But the defendant himself apparently could not be questioned. So it may be that when Jesus refuses to answer Annas' questions, he was really saying to the ex-high priest, I deserve a fair trial.

It's not legal for me to be questioned like this. Annas quickly realises that he's getting nowhere so he sends Jesus down the road to Caiaphas in verse 24.

[15:52] Why? Because Caiaphas was the official, the reigning high priest and only the official high priest had the authority in the Roman system to send an accused person to the Roman governor to be tried by him.

So let me return to my original question. How can it be that this wonderful son of God, the finest human being ever, is so hated that after only three years of public activities on trial, tried by the chief priests and about to be tried by the Roman governor?

Do you remember how John had famously said in his opening chapter? He came to his own people, but his own people did not receive him. How was it that this situation could arise?

The problem was that the Jewish establishment had lost sight of the true meaning of the Old Testament. That's why they could not recognize Jesus when he came.

They read their Old Testaments very dutifully. In fact, the scribes, the doctors of the law, studied it minutely, but they couldn't see, as it were, beyond the end of their noses. Jesus had said to them back in John chapter 5, you search the scriptures, the Old Testament, because you think that in the scriptures you have eternal life and it is they that bear witness about me.

[17:13] Yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life. They simply couldn't see or wouldn't see that Jesus was the fulfillment of the law and the prophets and the wisdom writings of the Old Testament.

I think you could put it like this. There are two great elements in the teaching of the Old Testament which find their answer in Jesus.

Namely, the plight of man and the mercy of God. The Old Testament shows us the plight of man. Remember those words from Genesis chapter 6?

Every imagination of man's heart was only evil all the time. And the history of Old Testament Israel simply reinforces that withering judgment. The Old Testament teaches that man is rightly under the judgment of God, condemned, if you like, without a leg to stand on.

But the Old Testament also shows us the mercy of God. The magnificent creator, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, he would have been perfectly within his rights to blot out the whole of the human race, to do that would have been nothing more than justice.

[18:24] But God chose to act towards us with a deeper and more wonderful justice. A justice that we would never have dreamed up ourselves. He chose to lay the punishment that we all deserved upon one representative human being, the Lord Jesus.

And that one human being bore to the nth degree the just punishment of God's anger. He bore it, he absorbed it, he exhausted it, he paid fully the penalty for our transgressions.

Now that is how Jesus fulfills the law and the prophets. He has dealt with the plight of man, the problems arising from it, and he has expressed gloriously and so tenderly the mercy and love of God by bringing forgiveness through his death on the cross.

The cross is the place where sin is punished and pardon is proclaimed. Our plight is resolved there and God's mercy is revealed there at the cross.

So why did the Jewish establishment not see it? Why did these meticulous students of the Old Testament not see the answer to the great questions of the Old Testament when that answer was

standing before them?

[19 : 42] What blindness was it that caused them to look into the eyes of the saviour and to see an imposter? It was because they misread the Old Testament. Their warped understanding of religion narrowed down their reading of the Old Testament to the point where they could not see the truth from lies and they had come to believe deeply that the way to eternal life was by keeping the rules.

The Old Testament laws and a lot of man-made laws heaped up on top. They had lost sight of the terrible plight of man a plight so awful that man cannot rescue himself from it and they had lost sight of the mercy of God who had promised to send them a sin-bearing saviour in the fullness of time. The thing is they had come to believe that they could rescue themselves by keeping all their rules. Is it lawful? That was their question. Is it lawful? And that is the nature of all man-made religion. It is based on self-reliance and self-effort. All non-Christian religions are like this at heart. Non-Christian religion will always flatter us. It says to us in effect if you will try a little bit harder to keep the rules you'll make it.

You can do it friend. Draw yourself up to your full height man. Are you a moral weakling? Of course not. Where's your self-respect? Shine your shoes stiffen your upper lip brush up your act and God will open the wicked gate to you.

[21 : 09] That's flattering talk isn't it? You can do it. Only the gospel tells us that we can't do it. That we are morally impotent.

That's why it's so humbling. John Bunyan wrote He that is down need fear no fall. He that is low no pride. The gospel humbles us.

The gospel insists that we recognise that we're sinners and that our only hope is to be rescued by a rescuer a saviour. When the Titanic had gone down in the Atlantic on that calm April night in 1912 there were hundreds of survivors floating on the calm ocean the following morning in lifeboats and life rafts.

Can you imagine those survivors saying to the captain of the rescue ship oh please go away we can get to New York under our own steam thank you very much do you take us for weaklings? The Jewish establishment were simply too proud to admit that they needed a saviour and they hated him not simply because of this fear of reprisals from the Roman army they hated him because they would have to admit they needed to be saved.

They were going to stick to their misreading of the Old Testament. they were going to carry on filtering out its humbling teaching about the plight of man and they were going to carry on overlooking its prophecies about a sin bearing saviour.

[22 : 45] It was too far for them to climb down. It was too humbling for their pride. And it's the same surely in every generation. Unless you and I are prepared to admit our plight and our need of rescue we will be proud and unsavable.

If a man floating on a life raft in mid-Atlantic refuses rescue that man in the end is a fool. And friend if you're not yet a Christian will you allow the Bible to teach you about the plight of man and about the mercy of God?

It's very humbling but it's the only way to safety. It is in the end wonderful and makes a person cry hallelujah what a saviour. So these Jewish leaders they simply had to get rid of Jesus.

He threatened everything they valued. Their hard won privileges under the Roman Empire and their religion of saving oneself by keeping the rules. And you'll notice that the Romans in the end joined the Jews in wanting to put Jesus away.

Just look back at verse 12 simple little verse but in verse 12 we read that the band of soldiers and their captain that's the Roman soldiers joined the Jewish temple officers and together the Romans and the Jews arrested Jesus and bound him.

[24 : 08] You might almost say state and church banded together to suppress Jesus. It's not only religious establishments it can be the state also that wants to get rid of Jesus and the gospel because the state can fear that Jesus' followers will not give the state their highest allegiance.

So here he is arrested, bound, led before the authorities of both religion and politics, church and state.

Verse 12, they bound him. And verse 24, Annas sent him bound to Caiaphas. The one who had said of Lazarus unbind him and let him go is now himself bound.

But not for long. So these men hated him. They had to do away with him. They would never have him as their king.

They would never admit that they needed to be rescued. So let me ask, what is he to you? Is he hated and suppressed, really?

[25 : 18] Or is he loved and welcomed? Let's bow our heads and we'll pray. Dear God, our Father, we want again to climb down from our natural pride and again to acknowledge together before you how loving and kind you are, not to have written us off as would have been only just and fair.

But you have sent out this deeper and more wonderful justice whereby our sins and the penalty for them have been paid for by another.

In my place condemned he stood, sealed my pardon with his blood. So we pray, dear Father, that you will fill our hearts afresh with gratitude to him and an ever growing understanding of the greatness of the gospel.

That you'll help us never to be ashamed of it but to tell others about this wonderful saviour who has been so kind to us. And we pray, dear Father, if there are any here this afternoon who have never climbed down and confessed their need, their plight, their need of rescue, have mercy upon them, we pray.

And bring them to yourself, to the Lord Jesus, to find in him peace and forgiveness and joy. And we ask it in Jesus' name.

[26 : 56] Amen.