

Jesus: are we for him or against him?

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[0 : 00] We are going to turn to our Bibles now, though, and we're going to be reading this evening in John's Gospel. Edward is preaching through this little section in the middle of John's Gospel.

And we come to John 11, and we're reading from verse 45 through to verse 8 of chapter 12. It's page 898 if you have one of the church visitors' Bibles.

And we join the story after the extraordinary events of chapter 11, where Jesus calls a man called Lazarus out of his tomb and raises him back to bodily life, having been dead for several days.

And having seen that extraordinary miracle, verse 45 says, Many of the Jews, therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, 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 together the council and said, What are we to do? For this man performs many signs.

[1 : 11] 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's 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. Jesus, therefore, no longer walked openly among the Jews, but went from there to the region near the wilderness, to a town called Ephraim.

And there he stayed with the disciples. Now the Passover of the Jews was at hand, and many went up from the country to Jerusalem before the Passover to purify themselves.

They were looking for Jesus and saying to one another as they stood in the temple, What do you think? That he will not come to the feast at all? And the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that if anyone knew where he was, he should let them know so that they might arrest him.

[2 : 38] Six days before the Passover, Jesus, therefore, came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. So they gave a dinner for him there. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him at the table.

Mary, therefore, took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair. The air was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples, he who was about to betray him, he said, Why was this ointment not sold for 300 denarii and given to the poor?

He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief. And having charge of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it.

Jesus said, Leave her alone so that she may keep it for the day of my burial. The poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me.

[3 : 48] Amen. And may God bless us his word. Let's turn to John's Gospel, Chapter 11, and you'll find this on page 898 in our hardback Bibles.

And as you know, we're considering this last section of Chapter 11 and the first small portion of Chapter 12. With the title, Jesus, Are We For Him or Against Him?

Now, any study from a passage in John's Gospel must center upon Jesus, because Jesus everywhere is the central subject of every part of John's Gospel. And throughout this Gospel, John the Evangelist is saying to us, Jesus is the Christ and the Son of God.

Believe it. Stake everything that you have and are upon him. Now, we'll come to Jesus in just a few minutes, but I want first to ask this question. Is John's Gospel anti-Semitic?

Now, I say that because in our passage for this evening, we see this growing determination of the Jewish leaders to get rid of Jesus, not simply to send him away into exile, but to have him put to death.

[5 : 12] As Chapter 11, verse 53 puts it very clearly, so from that day on, they, that is the Jewish leaders, the chief priests, made plans to put him to death.

So a murderous hatred for Jesus had developed, and it was the Jewish leaders at Jerusalem who were leading the attack against Jesus. Now, John the Evangelist was, of course, a Jew himself, but he's clearly very critical of the Jewish establishment leaders who hounded Jesus to his death.

And make no mistake, it's quite clear from all of the four Gospels that it was the Jewish leaders who forced Jesus to his crucifixion. Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, was a weak and spiteful man, but he actually tried to defend Jesus and prevent his execution.

There were several moments when he brought Jesus out to them and said, look, I bring him out to you so that you may know that I find no fault with him. So he tried to defend Jesus and prevent his execution.

But the Jewish leaders put him under such pressure that eventually he gave way before them. So here's the question. Is this Jewish evangelist, John, is he anti-Semitic, writing as he does so critically about the Jewish establishment?

[6 : 30] A few weeks ago, I was listening to one of those sermons on Radio 4 given by a Church of England minister. It was a Sunday morning sermon that comes on at about half past eight. And this Church of England minister, as he began his sermon, explained that he himself had had Jewish grandparents who had fled to England from Eastern Europe in the 1930s because they could see which way the wind was blowing and how the Nazis were beginning to put pressure on the Jews.

So this man, understandably, had a great sensitivity about anti-Semitism. But the main point of his sermon was this, that historically, over many centuries, it was the Church that had stirred up anti-Semitism by frequently pointing out that it was the Jews who had put Jesus to death.

Now, this preacher forced me to think rather hard about this question. Does the Bible, in any sense, countenance or encourage anti-Semitism? When Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John tell us in no uncertain terms that it was the chief priests and Pharisees who forced Pontius Pilate to allow Jesus' crucifixion, were the evangelists themselves stirring up hatred against the Jewish people, either consciously or unconsciously?

Now, this question about anti-Semitism is an important contemporary question. Not simply for this day and age, it has always been an important question, but it's particularly so at the moment. In the last few months, the Labour Party in this country has been in great turmoil about it.

Even as I was driving into church tonight and listening to the 6 o'clock news, again, it was one of the headline items about anti-Semitism in the Labour Party. But it's a much wider issue than simply an issue of one particular political party.

[8 : 19] Well, let me briefly make three points as I try to address this question. First, the Bible teaches us that all the blessings of God's salvation have come to the world via the Jews.

In this very Gospel, John chapter 4, Jesus meets the Samaritan woman by the well. And he says in his conversation with her, he says, salvation is from the Jews.

And in saying that, he's telling us what the whole Bible teaches. The Jewish nation was constituted in the beginning by God calling Abraham. Genesis chapter 12.

And God says to Abraham, this is the founding blueprint, if you like, or constitution of the Jewish nation. God says to Abraham, I'm giving you three things. First, a land to live in, the promised land, the land of Israel.

Secondly, a numerous people who will be your descendants, as numerous as the stars in the sky. And thirdly, through you and your family, your nation, all the peoples of the world will be blessed.

[9 : 29] In other words, salvation will come to the world through the Jews. It was the Jews who gave us the Lord Jesus. The Old Testament is a detailed and developing prophecy of the King who is to come, bringing salvation for the world with him.

It's the Jewish people who have brought us our Savior. So the only way in which Gentile Christians can rightly think about the Jews is to thank God for them. It was the loving, saving purpose of God that created the Jewish people in the first place.

Salvation comes to us from the Jews. Now secondly, in the New Testament, Jews who come to Christ and love him and follow him are sharply distinguished from Jews who reject him.

And there are very clearly two types of Jew in John's Gospel. Think of it. The very first Christians were almost all Jews, with the exception of Luke.

All the authors of the New Testament were Jewish people. Matthew, Mark, John, Paul, Peter, James, Jude. All Jewish. Within John's Gospel, we meet many Jews who come to believe in Jesus.

[10:41] So look at our passage, chapter 11, verse 45. Many of the Jews, therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did in raising Lazarus from the dead, believed in him.

Or look on to chapter 12, verses 10 and 11. So the chief priests made plans to put Lazarus to death as well because on account of him, many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus.

And in the course of John's Gospel, John also highlights various individual Jews who become believers, famously Nicodemus. Or think of Joseph of Arimathea, who was a member of the Sanhedrin, the high council, who came with Nicodemus to ask for the body of Jesus to bury it.

Or think of Thomas, one of the 12 apostles, who becomes a convinced believer when he puts his fingers and hands in the place where the nails and the spear had gone into Jesus. John is not for a moment saying that all the Jews rejected Jesus.

John sharply distinguishes Jews who welcome Jesus from those who reject him to the point of killing him. In John's teaching, the Jews who reject Jesus, and this is an important point, the Jews who reject Jesus in John's Gospel are part of the world.

[12:02] It's the world that hates Jesus. These chief priests who hounded Jesus to his death, they were not true Jews. Jesus says to them in John chapter 8, you pride yourselves on being Abraham's children.

And indeed you are in terms of your blood ancestry. But you're not true children of Abraham at all. Your real father, your spiritual father, is the devil. You don't belong to God or to Abraham at all.

So it wasn't true Jews, authentic Jews, who killed Jesus. It was Jews of the world, the God-hating, Christ-rejecting world that pressed Jesus to his death.

And you and I, we too, belonged to the world before we came to Christ. If you and I, as non-Christians, had been there in Jerusalem at that time, would we not have called for the death of Jesus too?

The hymn writer Stuart Townend captures this, I think, so well. Behold the man upon a cross, my sins upon his shoulders. Ashamed, I hear my mocking voice call out among the scoffers.

[13:12] Isn't that you and I by nature before we come to Christ? It's the world that killed Jesus, not the true godly Judaism that recognized their Messiah when he came.

Then thirdly, let's remember that the death of Jesus, although it was forced by the chief priests, was purposed and planned by God himself.

And perhaps you'd turn with me to Acts chapter 2 at this point to a very important verse. Acts 2 verse 23. Now Acts 2 is, it's the moment when the Holy Spirit is poured out upon the disciples at Pentecost.

And Simon Peter is standing in Jerusalem preaching to the great crowd there on that great day. And he's explaining to them the miracle, the wonder of the coming of the Holy Spirit to them. And here's what he says in verse 23.

This Jesus delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.

[14:20] Now just, it's such an important verse. Notice what Peter is saying here. Two things. First of all, it was an act of lawlessness to crucify and kill Jesus.

Therefore, the men who did it are culpably responsible. But secondly, the death of Jesus, he is explaining, was part of God's definite plan and foreknowledge.

So we have to learn that in a very wonderful way, Bible logic is not quite the same as human logic. Human logic might say, well, if God planned the death of Jesus as a good and saving act, you can't blame the human beings who carried it out.

But here is Peter, inspired by the Holy Spirit, and that's exactly what he is doing. He is saying God planned it and yet the perpetrators of it acted lawlessly. Now there are other examples of just this kind of thing in the Bible.

Think of Joseph who in some senses was a precursor of Jesus as a kind of savior of the people. Joseph was wickedly sent away, sold into slavery by his own brothers.

[15 : 27] But God caused him by means of their wicked action to provide life and food and a new home for the Jewish people later on in Egypt. Or think of Pharaoh's wickedness 400 years later in the book of Exodus.

Pharaoh cruelly, culpably, oppressed the Israelites and made their lives miserable. But it was that very cruelty which was the catalyst for their liberation and their subsequent entry into the promised land.

Our sovereign God has this wonderful ability to override the wickedness of human beings and turn it to saving effect. And the supreme Bible example of this is the death of Jesus.

So to sum up this little section, it may well be true that sections of the church over the centuries have stirred up anti-Semitic feeling by loudly blaming the Jews for the death of Jesus.

And it's certainly true that the chief priests of a corrupt and worldly Judaism pressed Pilate to allow the crucifixion of Jesus. But the Bible itself teaches us to thank God for the Jews because it was they who provided the only Savior for both Jews and Gentiles.

[16 : 43] Our responsibility now is to show our love for the Jews by evangelizing them just as we might do to the Gentiles as well. The Jews are not saved eternally because they're descended from Abraham.

Not at all. In his letter to the Romans, think of Paul. He expresses his heart's desire that Jews should be saved and he expresses his anguish that so many of them were refusing to obey the gospel and to recognize Jesus as the Messiah.

So let's long for the Jews as Paul and John and the others longed for them. But let me add this. To love the Jews because they provided our Savior is not at all to commit ourselves politically to any form of modern Zionism.

The gospel now is non-geographical. There are a number of prophecies in the Old Testament that say that God will bring his people back to their land after the exile.

But those prophecies were fulfilled in the 6th century BC as the Jews began to return to Jerusalem from 539 BC onwards. With the coming of Jesus the range of God's work becomes immediately global non-geographical.

[18 : 00] To care about the Jews today commits us to evangelize the Jews. It does not commit us to a geographical Zionism centered on the nation-state of Israel.

Well let's turn now to our passage. John, the evangelist is deliberately presenting us here with a sharp contrast. On the one hand we see the murderous hatred for Jesus in the final section of chapter 11.

But on the other hand we see great love for Jesus in the action of Mary in the first section of chapter 12. And ultimately those are the only two attitudes which any of us can take towards Jesus.

Either we will reject him and side with the chief priests who wanted to clear him out of their life altogether. or we will love him and thank him and follow him and commit ourselves to serve him.

So let's look at the chief priests first and their murderous hatred for Jesus. The key verse here in the final part of chapter 11 is verse 53.

[19 : 05] So from that day on they made plans to put him to death. So what acted as the catalyst to produce this determination to kill Jesus?

Well the answer is the raising of Lazarus. That's what started it all off at this point. This glorious deed of love and power. The raising of a dead man.

This wonderful foretaste of the new creation. This demonstration of the power of Jesus over the last enemy proved to be the last straw for the chief priests.

Let's pick up the story in verse 45 and see how it all happens. Many of the Jews therefore who had come with Mary to the tomb of Lazarus and had seen what Jesus did in other words the raising of Lazarus believed in him.

Well that is hardly surprising. Lazarus had been buried for four days. His corpse now was stinking and decomposing in that warm climate. Martha had pointed that unpleasant fact out in verse 39.

[20 : 09] And these Jews had actually seen Lazarus step out of his tomb into the sunlight. They had seen him having his grave clothes removed from him. They had seen him dressed and talking.

They had seen the delight and joy of Martha and Mary in getting their brother back again. In fact in Jesus' words in verse 40 what they had seen was the glory of God.

Anybody who had seen all that and had not put their trust in Jesus must be hard-hearted indeed. But verse 46 some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done.

Now I said a moment ago that the raising of Lazarus was the last straw for the Jewish leaders but there had been other straws before other miracles of power. The Jewish leaders took issue with Jesus because he broke their Sabbath rules and also because he was calling God his Father in a way that demonstrated that he believed himself to be divine to have the same nature as God the Father.

In fact back in John chapter 10 verse 20 he had said I and the Father are one and as soon as he said that they tried to stone him to death.

[21 : 27] They couldn't bear it they hated him. So how do they respond to this news that Jesus has raised Lazarus from the dead? Well look at verse 47 they call a meeting of the council the Sanhedrin the highest ruling body of the Jews and they say there what are we to do?

For this man performs many signs. Now just notice they're not denying the demonstrations of his power they acknowledge his miracles they can't deny that he really has done these things.

But in verse 48 they show where their hearts and their interest really lie. What they fear for is their own niche in society. They're jealous of their own privileges.

So they say in verse 48 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.

So what they mean is if Jesus raises a massive following there will be messianic fervor in the streets of Jerusalem riots and crowd hysteria and the Romans our military overlords will come down on us like a ton of bricks.

[22 : 38] As you know tyrannical overlords do not take kindly to popular uprisings. I remember Tiananmen Square in Beijing in 1989 some of you will remember that when the communist authorities came down ferociously on the thousands of young protesters there and killed many of them.

In our verse 48 our place and our nation really means our temple our national way of life and our very existence as the Jewish people.

The high priests saw Jesus as a threat to everything they cherished. It was bad enough to have the Romans as an occupying power but at least Judaism and its trappings the synagogues and so on were allowed to continue.

But Jesus appeared to threaten their whole way of life. So Caiaphas the high priest comes up with what he thinks is a foolproof solution to the problem.

He says in verse 49 to the council you know nothing at all which really means you don't know what you're talking about. So verse 50 get this into your heads it is better for you that one man should die for the people not that the whole nation should perish.

[23 : 52] In other words kill Jesus and our problem is solved. Now look at John's comment in verse 51 he did not say this of his own accord.

In other words God gave him that sentence to say. Caiaphas didn't know that it was God speaking through him of course not but it was it was a genuine if unwitting prophecy that the death of Jesus would achieve something wonderful that he would die for the nation for the Jewish people but not just for the Jewish people also for Gentiles so as to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad.

Look at verse 52 it's a wonderful summary of the purpose of the death of Jesus. Caiaphas thought that killing Jesus would simply wipe him off the face of the earth and bring an end to their local problem.

But John is showing us that the death of Jesus gathers into one the far-flung people of God from all over the world. Now aren't we people enjoying the fruits of that at this very moment?

We're being gathered aren't we into the very kingdom of God. Look at us here Christians from Scotland Ireland England Europe the Middle East Far East China Africa all points South and East and West.

[25 : 17] if the person sitting next to you is a Christian he or she may come from a very different background and culture from yours but you are united to each other and part of the same eternal family you're being gathered together and if you're somebody who is here not yet a Christian what you need more than anything is to be gathered into the Lord's family you're isolated at the moment you're scattered as it were you're far distant from God but if you will put your trust in the death of Jesus and trust him you will become part of the family for which he cares so deeply the family for which he died look at that verse 53 again the verse which sums up the whole paragraph from that day on they made plans to put him to death they thought that his death would mean the death of

Christianity but John is teaching us that his death means the birth of Christianity and more than that the very gateway into heaven now the rest of this chapter from verse 54 onwards shows us that Jesus is the master of the whole situation he knows of course about their plan to kill him he's known that for a very long time he's been teaching his disciples that he's going to be rejected by them and killed but it's not going to happen until just the right moment arrives Jesus is in charge of the timing his hour has not yet quite come and that's why in verse 54 he goes away with his disciples to a town called Ephraim which is about 12 miles north of Jerusalem and there they stayed for a while until verse 55 the Passover was just a few days off and that's very important because Jesus knew that he was the Passover Lamb and therefore he must be sacrificed at Passover so that his blood like the blood of the original Passover would protect his people from death and destruction so the chapter ends with the Passover looming but it ends with a sense of anxious expectation everybody is coming into

Jerusalem verses 55 and 56 and they're looking for Jesus and what are they talking about there look at verse 56 they're not talking about the weather there seems to be just one topic of conversation is he coming what do you think what's your opinion maybe he won't come at all and verse 57 is ominous now the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that if anyone knew where he was he should let them know so that they might arrest him now back in verse 53 the priest's decision to kill Jesus is confined to their own council it's private but in verse 57 it becomes public the Jewish leaders give orders that if anybody should know where Jesus was they must tell them because he must be run in verse 57 is a bit like one of those posters that you see in American western films wanted dead or alive but preferably alive Jesus of Nazareth notable outlaw enemy of the nation if you see him bring him to us murderous hatred isn't it extraordinary extraordinary just think of the Lord Jesus sinless perfect lovely the very perfection of humanity the very perfection of love and truthfulness kindness honesty balance sanity and yet hated but the next section shows us just how much he was also loved and John deliberately puts these two sections back to back because he's challenging the reader with the question are you against Jesus or are you for him will you identify with the priests and their hatred or with Mary and her love for Jesus so let's pick up the story again after staying at Ephraim for a little while Jesus in chapter 12 verse 1 comes to

Bethany which is only a couple of miles from Jerusalem and he returns to the home of his good friends Lazarus Martha and Mary now we know from Luke's gospel that Martha was a hard-working hostess you know the little story about the time when Jesus is there and Martha is serving the dinner and she gets a bit upset and anxious because there's too much work on her plate and Mary is not helping her so it's the same Martha here it's no surprise in verse 2 that when they're giving a dinner in honor of Jesus she seems to be the head waitress but Lazarus is there at the table and Mary also but at some point during the meal Mary does something extraordinary something shocking she takes she takes a pound weight that's pretty heavy isn't it a pound weight of expensive perfume ointment made of nard now you and I don't know too much about nard I guess but nard apparently is an oil extracted from the root of the nard plant which grows in

[30 : 35] India so back in those days it would have been very expensive to import nard into Israel I remember at Christmas a few years ago I went to John Lewis's on about the 23rd of December as one does to buy a present for somebody close to me anyway I went to the perfume department to the Chanel number 5 counter and I asked the lady in charge how much a small bottle of pure Chanel number 5 perfume would cost she told me anyway about 10 seconds later when I'd pick myself up from the floor I said to the lady I think I'll perhaps have a cake of bath soap please now this ointment that Mary had would have been far more expensive than that possibly worth a thousand pounds in today's money but Mary took this ointment and as Jesus reclined at the table they ate slightly differently from us they would sit up at the table with their feet sort of angled backwards we sit there with our feet like this don't we but it was a bit different so his feet would have been angled backwards and Mary came from behind him she rubbed the ointment into his feet and wiped his feet with her hair it was a gesture of extravagant devotion of love for Jesus submission to him and above all she somehow sensed and understood that she was preparing his body for burial

Judas Iscariot whose nature was twisted complained about her but Jesus interprets her action in his words in verse seven he says leave her alone if you look at the footnote to number to verse seven it brings out his meaning a little bit more clearly he says she intended to keep it for the day of my burial interesting thing to say look at Jesus he was a healthy young man in his early thirties but

somehow Mary understood that he must die soon so her extravagant action not only expresses her devotion to him but her understanding of his purposeful glorious saving death and John includes this incident because he is saying to his readers both back in the first century but also today he's saying look at the example of this extravagant love for Jesus and follow this example it's not soft or soppy or sentimental it's sacrificial it's costly how can we follow her example well think of it like this Jesus is the bridegroom of the church and if we're Christians we're the church and we're betrothed to the bridegroom we're looking forward to the great marriage feast in the new creation loving him therefore will be shown in lifelong loyalty to him a kind of marital fidelity he is our master and lord there is no other the bridegroom delights in his bride and the bride learns to delight in the bridegroom therefore we can't love him too much we can't rejoice in him too greatly we can't serve him too devotedly he died for us he was buried for us he took upon himself the infinite liabilities that our sin had accumulated he paid the price for our ransom and rescue and his resurrection is the guarantee of the resurrection of every last person who belongs to him does he not therefore command our love and our lifelong devotion our love at the age of 20 love him then but keep loving him at 40 love him more at 60 and 80 and 90 and 100 it may be very costly for us at times but Mary teaches us not to think about the cost it may mean losing a lot of money or a lot of status or a lot of reputation but what is that look at that lovely detail in verse 3 the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume now that's what the church can be like when its members are willing to love Jesus and serve him extravagantly fragrance bringing into this sad old world the fragrance of the world to come the sweet scent of eternal life in our nostrils even here so John is saying to us take note all you who read my book you will either in the end side with Caiaphas and the high priests whose concern was to preserve their own life and status in this world or you will side with Mary who loved the Lord Jesus and staked everything on him and on the world to come let's bow our heads and we'll pray Jesus the very thought of you with sweetness fills the breast we think of you so utterly pure delightful lovely in character loving those for whom you came loving those for whom you have died loving the world and expressing that love in your willing self sacrifice we know that greater love has no man than this that a man should lay down his life for his friends and that indeed is what you have done for us laid down your life for us help us therefore Lord Jesus to lay down our lives willingly for you as the proper response the response of delight and love keep us Lord Jesus in marital fidelity as the bride to the bride groom help us not to turn our eyes upon other gods and to go after them but to love you with a pure sincere devotion and may our church and many other churches display the sweet fragrance of devotion and love to you so that others may notice it and be drawn to you and we ask it for your dear name's sake Amen