

The Politics of Hardened Hearts – *John 11:45 – 12:11*

Introduction – While John tells us that these signs were written down for us so that we might believe, we continue to see that these signs also continue to harden unbelief and opposition to Jesus. In the preface, John writes, “*He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him*” (1:11). But it continues, “*But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name*” (v12). And then it makes clear what brings forth that faith, “*...who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God*” (v13). The raising of Lazarus was a polarizing event that threatened the power and prestige of the chief priests. Made up mostly of Sadducees (who were resurrection-deniers) who had their ecclesiastical courts only at the pleasure of their Roman rulers, this Jesus problem was becoming more and more political. And as we will consider, this is the perennial problem with King Jesus.

The Plots of Hardened Hearts (11:45-48) – One Puritan said, “*the same sun that melts the butter hardens the clay.*” The glorious and undeniable miracle of a man dead for four days raised to life brought two polarizing reactions. Many of the Jews believed (v45) but some went away and reported these things to the Pharisees (v46) who with the chief priests gathered a council (v47). Their fear was that the people would switch their allegiance from the council to Jesus and jeopardize the favor they had with Rome.

We are reminded here that faith is a gift and not something we can muster up ourselves (Eph 2:8-9). But both faith and hardening of unbelief are the unconditional work of God (Rom 9:14-18). It can be so difficult for those who believe to understand why others will not. The problem is not so much that they will not but that they cannot. God’s ways here are “*past finding out*” (Rom 11:33).

The Thoughts of Hardened Hearts (11:49-52) – It turns out that those most hell-bent on rebelling against God, destroying Jesus (and later His followers), and His kingdom, are actually following exactly, step-by-step, what God has predetermined they will do – even to what they think. Caiaphas, motivated by political expediency, argued for a lesser evil to be committed in order to prevent a larger one, here the death of Jesus for the sake of the nation. Even in his words, while forsaking Christ, he prophesied the truth of Christ (vv51-52). Jesus would die for the nation, and far more, but not in the way Caiaphas thought. The irony is thick, for after rejecting the true Messiah, the Jews went on to follow many false messiahs who led them in revolt against Rome, with the result of the bloody Jewish wars, the siege of Jerusalem in 67AD, and the total destruction of the temple and the people killed or led off into captivity in 70AD.

This is the profound wisdom of God’s sovereignty over the affairs of men. All things, in the final analysis, are of God. And this is nowhere more evident than in these actions of wicked men upon the Lord Jesus. Acts 4:26-28 tells us that this had been decreed in the eternal counsels of the Godhead. This is the greater fulfilment of the evil works of Joseph’s brothers and God’s sovereign and good intentions through their actions (Gen 50:20). The history of Christendom continues to attest to this. The blood of the martyrs becomes the seed of the church. “*In days of trouble...believers may rest patiently in the Lord. The very things that at one time seem likely to hurt them, shall prove in the end to be for their gain*” – Ryle.

The Passover and Hardened Hearts (vv53-57) – The irony continues. The council agreed and plotted to put Jesus to death (v53). Jesus went into hiding with his disciples in Ephraim (we aren’t sure where that was, but close enough to return at Passover – v54). Passover is the remembrance of the Angel of Death “passing over” the homes of the Hebrew slaves in Egypt. The angel would see the blood of a slain lamb spread over the doorposts of the house and that sacrifice was sufficient to keep the death-plague at bay. But the Jews here have rejected the Lamb of God and command those in Jerusalem to report if they know where He is (v57). The pilgrims come early, for the priests require that they obey God’s laws of purification prior to Passover (v55, Num 9:10ff) so that their ceremonies are not defiled. And so, while performing their ritual purification, they openly plot the defilement that was about to happen.

Rituals and liturgies can be received as gifts from God. They are directions from Him as to how we are to approach Him “*with reverence and godly fear*” (Heb 12:28), rejoicing with trembling (Psalm 2:11). But for hardened hearts, they can be outward shows of piety while hiding dark hearts of unbelief and treachery. The solution is not to throw out liturgy; it is to throw out the hard hearts.

Hearts of Devotion and Betrayal (12:1-9) – In stark contrast, John gives us another story. Jesus returns to Bethany and a dinner is thrown for Him. Comparing with the other gospels (Matt 26 and Mark 14) it appears Jesus arrived 6 days before Passover and this meal occurs at Simon the Leper's home. In a sign of deep devotion, Mary took a pound of spikenard and anointed the feet of Jesus (most likely His head and body as well, according to the Synoptics). John the Baptist had said that he was unworthy even to tie the sandals of the Messiah and so even the highest place we can rise to cannot even reach the feet of Jesus. She wipes the oil with her glory-hair and the room is filled with the fragrance (Song of Songs 1:12 must be on John's mind – the King is at the table – and the next morning the King is coming – 12:12-13).

This is a pouring out of devotion and an anointing of a king, for this is how you declare someone to be king (remember Samuel making Saul, and then later David, king). “Messiah” and “Christ” mean “*the anointed one.*” He is being anointed as Messiah-King. But Jesus says that she is also anointing Him for the day of His burial (v7). For Jesus sees His throne will be the Cross. He will become King through His anointing to the Cross.

At the exact same time, Judas was sitting at the table, playing upset at the extravagant gift. His pious concern was a front for his greed (vv4-6). Jesus tells him to “*Leave her alone...*” and then makes this statement, “*For the poor you have with you always.*” This is worthy of a couple of side notes. The Bible is clear that we are to care for the poor, but we are not to see relative poverty as a sign that a society has done something wrong. Second, trying to manipulate people by making them feel guilty about the existence of poverty is a thief's tactic. Christians give out of gratitude, not guilt, because God has given us so much, and not because someone is twisting our arms.

Finally, word gets back to the chief priests that many are going to see Lazarus, possibly more are now believing in Jesus because of his testimony, and so they plot to put Lazarus to death as well (vv10-11). And down through the ages, men and women with effective testimonies to Jesus' divinity and power become targets for destruction by those in political power.

The Politics of Unbelief – Ever since Jesus came, and especially since the Holy Spirit was poured out at Pentecost, the worldwide conquest by the Gospel has brought ongoing strife and violence from the established world of unbelief. Most of the time if Jesus is Lord of your heart, they are fine. It's when you say Jesus is Lord of theirs, and their thrones and powers, and their prestige and riches, and their eternal state, that they get mad. And their anger inevitably turns violent.

The latest cry against faithful followers of Christ is that we are “Christian Nationalists,” an intended pejorative term. The church really didn't give itself the term; it has been given to them. But if defined to simply mean that we believe that as more and more people come to Christ, they are going to seek to govern themselves according to the laws of God as they should, then we can winsomely agree. Jesus said to go and disciple the nations. We are pro-life and pro-family (as God defines) and we are against sexual and identity perversions, not according to our preferences, but because Jesus is the Creator God and Lord over all the earth. And because, like Jesus, we love people.

The Caiaphases and Judases of our day can plot, steal, and kill all they want, and they will. But God is writing this story. And it's a good one. It's Gospel, good news.