
An Unintentional Prophecy

“But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, ‘You know nothing at all, nor do you take into account that it is expedient for you that one man die for the people, and that the whole nation not perish’” (John 11:49, 50).

After being interrogated by Annas, Jesus was taken to Caiaphas, the acting high priest, who would take the trials of Jesus to another level (John 18:24). While Annas and Caiaphas were conducting their hearings with Jesus, the Sanhedrin was gradually assembling. The fact that the Sanhedrin was being convened in the early morning hours made it difficult for a quorum of the high council to be brought together quickly. No doubt, messengers had to scurry from house to house to achieve this.

As John introduced this examination of Jesus by Caiaphas, the second stage of the trials, he reminded his readers that Caiaphas was the high priest who had earlier rebuked the Sanhedrin for not acting promptly regarding the elimination of Jesus (John 18:14; see 11:49, 50). He had told them that it was “expedient” for one man to die so that the nation might be spared. He believed that it would be necessary for Jesus to be put to death in order for the nation of Israel to retain its privileges under the Roman government. “If we as the governing body of the Jews do not act,” he had said in effect, “the movement brought about by this man from Nazareth will take over, and our nation and our power as the Sanhedrin will be lost.” His words to the council were “It is expedient for you that one man die for the people, and that the whole nation not perish” (John 11:50).

As Caiaphas spoke to the council, God used his office and his words to declare a significant truth, a divine prophecy. John the apostle said, “Now he did not say this on his own initiative,

but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus was going to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but in order that He might also gather together into one the children of God who are scattered abroad” (John 11:51, 52). Since God in the past had revealed divine truth through Balaam, a prophet more interested in gold than in God’s people (Numbers 22—24), and through Nebuchadnezzar, a Babylonian king who worshiped many gods (Daniel 2; 4), we are not totally surprised by His using Caiaphas to make this announcement concerning the crucifixion of Christ. John revealed that Caiaphas did not speak “on his own initiative.” This divine commentary on what he did must mean that he was unaware that he was speaking by the inspiration of the Spirit. Although he was corrupt and self-serving, Caiaphas did occupy the once holy and once God-controlled office of high priest in Israel. God had in Old Testament times spoken through the high priest with the Urim and Thummim, using this office to give revelations to the people. At this historic time, through this wicked high priest, God, the sovereign Ruler of the universe, chose to make a special announcement of things to come concerning Christ.

Against the backdrop of the death of our Savior, this prophecy depicts the selfishness, envy, and pride of Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin. This high priest and the council were more concerned about their positions, their wealth, and their power over the Jews than they were about justice, innocence, and truth.

Caiaphas' prophecy was made in the shadow of the resurrection of Lazarus (John 11:35-44). This miracle had convinced several Jews that Jesus was the Christ. Neither the high priest nor the council could deny the miracle. The evidence was clear; Lazarus had been raised from the dead. Jesus' enemies said, "If we let Him go on like this, all men will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation" (John 11:48). They did not say, "Let us accept this evidence and believe in Him." No, they said, "Unless we do something, He will ruin us!" Those who stood for the truth did not want the truth when they actually found it!

Even though this prophecy came through the lips of an immoral religious leader, it is one of the most meaningful prophecies regarding Jesus' death in the New Testament. It declares that Jesus would die not only for Israel, but also for those scattered abroad. "The children of God who are scattered abroad" (John 11:52) must be a reference to the Gentiles. Further, this prophecy said that His death would bring together all the children of God in one family. In one expressive statement, the prophecy foretold the vicarious nature of Jesus' death, for He would die for others; the universality of His death, since He would die for Jews and Gentiles; and the unifying effect of His death, for He would gather into one all the children of God. Even though Caiaphas did not know it, God through his lips was giving the world a deeper understanding

of why Jesus had to die. The corrupt high priest thought he was simply arguing that Jesus must be put to death, but in reality he was prophesying about the purpose of Jesus' death! God took his words of hate and turned them into a chorus of love.

This prophecy reminds us of how God, throughout the earthly life of Jesus, was continually moving the world toward the cross. The death of Jesus was not an accident or an afterthought. It was the climax of the life of Jesus toward which eternity and time had looked. God was putting into place His eternal plan for the salvation of the world. God informed us about this plan through the prophets, the apostles, and other inspired men—and even through a conniving high priest. We must not allow anything that God has said about Jesus' death through His holy servants, or even through the most notorious high priest of all time, to slip past our sincere meditation.

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According to His divine wisdom, God has at times used people to accomplish His purposes even though they were totally unaware that they were doing His will. He worked through Balaam's donkey and through influential men such as Cyrus, Nebuchadnezzar, and Caiaphas. If God can use those who do not yield to His will, we can be confident that He will use mightily those who do yield to Him.