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John 11:45-54

Thirty-fourth Message

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LIFE CHOICES

Every day we make hundreds of choices, choices about cars, food, clothing, vacations, activities and careers. Do we want Starbucks or Peet's, Coke or Pepsi, Burger King or McDonald's, Mac or PC, Toyota or Honda, plasma or LCD, Stanford or Cal? It's mind-boggling to think of all the choices we are forced to make. Whether we are aware of it or not, we make many of our decisions based on what will enhance and benefit our lives. We hope to derive pleasure, contentment, fulfillment, satisfaction or comfort from our choices. For example, we don't buy a car just for transport, we want the identity it offers and the life promised by the advertisement.

We also make spiritual choices – which church to attend, which books to read, which Bible Study to join, but most importantly, what to believe and how deeply to believe it. Like all of our other choices, our motivation is for life, although in the spiritual realm we are either seeking or rejecting the life of God. Every day people all over the world are making spiritual decisions that have huge ramifications in their lives both now and in the future.

In the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead in John 11, Martha is asked to make a choice. Jesus tells her that he is the resurrection and the life. He then asks her, "Do you believe this?" Martha affirms her belief in Jesus, but as the story unfolds we realize that her faith has a ways to go. At the decisive moment when Jesus tells her to roll away the stone in front of the tomb, she is hesitant to take action consistent with her statement of belief. She is forced to make a choice as to whether Jesus can truly raise the dead not only on the last day, but also in the present. Martha is forced to take her belief to a deeper level than she had ever imagined.

She is not the only one asked to make a choice. Others present were forced to respond to this miracle of Jesus. Those who heard the report or read John's account, including us today, face the same choice. The story asks everyone who saw the miracle or hears about it whether Jesus is the resurrection and life. It also asks all who profess to believe how much the life of Jesus will impact them. How much are we willing to risk, how much are we willing to give for the life that Jesus offers to us? Every day we make life choices that have huge consequences.

As we continue in John's story we see people's responses to this climactic sign of Jesus. We also see one of the primary obstacles to embracing and experiencing Jesus as the resurrection and the life.

Therefore many of the Jews who came to Mary, and saw what He had done, believed in Him. But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them the things which Jesus had done. (John 11:45-46 NASB)

It's interesting that nothing more is ever said about Lazarus. As Tennyson observed in his poem *In Memoriam*:

Behold a man raised up by Christ!
The rest remaineth unreveal'd;
He told it not; or something seal'd
The lips of the Evangelist.

Instead, John now turns his attention to how people responded to the miracle. There was a large crowd of witnesses present when Lazarus stepped out of the tomb, as many of Mary's friends had come to Bethany from Jerusalem to be with her in her grief. As we noted last week, it was Mary rather than Martha who had a large group of friends.

In these verses we see two initial responses. On the one hand, there are those who believed in Jesus and attributed the miracle to the glory of God. The degree of their faith is not indicated. We have seen a great deal of spurious faith previously in John, the kind that wilts under pressure. But the indication here is that some accepted Jesus for who he said he was.

On the other hand, some people present "went to the Pharisees." One would hope they wanted to win the Pharisees to Jesus, but their intent was probably malicious. They wanted to report the event to the authorities in order to stir up the pot. When you think about it, it's absolutely amazing that some who witnessed this miracle chose to not accept it. Their hearts were so stubborn and obstinate they made a choice to reject it. We see here the polar response to Jesus that John has pointed out elsewhere in his gospel (6:14-15; 7:10-13, 45-52). Jesus always causes division.

Several years ago, I took my brother-in-law to our men's retreat. In the middle of the weekend we were talking about spiritual things and how he was responding to what he was observing. He said, "You would have to be a fool not to want what these men have." He actually accepted Christ that weekend.

Yet for some people, the gospel is foolishness. They choose to reject the light and live in the darkness. God never crams the gospel down our throat, although some people come into the Kingdom kicking and screaming. God does not force us to believe. He gives us the freedom to choose.

Next, we see the response of the religious authorities upon hearing the news of what Jesus did in Bethany.

Therefore the chief priests and the Pharisees convened a council, and were saying, "What are we doing? For this man is performing many signs. 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." (11:47-48)

The council was likely the seventy members of the Sanhedrin, the highest judicial body in the land (rather like our Supreme Court). The Sanhedrin controlled all Jewish internal affairs. The council was dominated by the chief priests, who were drawn from the extended family of the high priest. Virtually all the priests were Sadducees, the wealthy class, while the Pharisees were the blue-collar workers, men very much into keeping the law. The two groups were not particularly fond of each other, but here we see the two joining forces to face a common enemy.

John does not report a trial of Jesus before the high priest and the Sanhedrin, as do the Synoptic gospels. And the Synoptics do not record a formal decision of the Sanhedrin to destroy Jesus, like we find in John. But all agree that Jesus was judged and condemned in abstentia.

We see here a classic damage control meeting to handle the fallout from the Lazarus affair. The Sanhedrin are concerned with how the media reports the event. Jesus' popularity is rising, and recent polls gave cause for alarm. The spin-doctors and word mongers are summoned to an emergency conference. The leaders are in a panic. They want to know what they should do. They have to take action because things were getting out of hand.

What caused such concern on the part of the religious authorities? What were they afraid of? John says they feared the Romans. They were operating out of a certain messianic expectation. If the people believe that Jesus is the Messiah, then the popular messianic expectations will reach fever pitch. This in turn will lead to conflict with the Romans. This will be quite a problem, because Jesus does not meet the criteria of the religious authorities. He is not the type of Messiah who would seem to guarantee victory over the Romans. He's no William Wallace, Rambo, or John Wayne. Jesus seems to be more interested in healing people. The only sign that the crowd interpreted as messianic was the feeding of the multitude. This sign fit with what Moses did, and in response the people wanted to make Jesus king.

If there is conflict with Romans, the authorities fear losing their place and their nation. Rome will fear rebellion and so they will take over and clamp down. The reference to "place" almost certainly means the temple, while the word "nation" is a reference to the semi-autonomous status of the Jewish nation. The authorities probably are concerned too about their own positions of power and prestige. The issue is control. They

fear that if people begin following Jesus, the authorities will lose control.

Next, John turns his attention to the high priest, Caiaphas.

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." 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. So from that day on they planned together to kill Him. (11:49-53)

Joseph Caiaphas was the high priest from A.D. 18 to A.D. 36, when both he and Pontius Pilate were dismissed at the same time. The high priest presided over the Sanhedrin. The Old Testament specified that he was to serve for life. However, the office was political, so high priests were appointed and disposed of at the whim of the overlord. John records that this man was priest "that year," a phrase he uses in both verses 49 and 51 (and also in 18:13). We could take this to mean "that fateful year" or "that memorable year." It could also indicate that Caiaphas's position as high priest was re-evaluated each year.

Caiaphas proclaims rather abruptly, "You know nothing at all." Josephus records that the Sadducees were barbarous and wild even toward members of their own party. Caiaphas's bold remark reinforces that idea. The irony is that he speaks truth better than he knows, because they really don't know anything. They think they know, but they don't.

Then Caiaphas prophesies that one man, Jesus, should die for the nation, and not only for the nation but also for all the children of God scattered abroad – a reference to the Jewish Diaspora. Caiaphas is interested in keeping peace with Rome, and his solution is for Jesus to be a scapegoat. To "die for the people and the nation" is sacrificial language. The sacrifice of the few for the many is good politics. Caiaphas responds like any secular leader. He is a politician, not a believer in God.

The Pharisees and Sadducees are in bed together, so the advice of Caiaphas is accepted. The word "planned" means "resolved." The authorities plot the murder of Jesus, not his arrest. They were probably trying to work out how to get the Romans to kill him. Jesus gives life by raising the dead, by releasing people from the bondage of the tomb, and the result is that the authorities plan his death.

John's irony reaches its highest point in these verses. There are at least four ironic comparisons in the text.

1. Caiaphas states that for one man to die is better for the nation, and of course for the ruling party. Again, Caiaphas speaks better than he knows. His words carry a double meaning. In reality, Jesus would die for the children of God. But the real children are those who believe in his name (1:12,13).

The double meaning is that God will call his sheep from many folds and make them one in Jesus. This anticipates the Gentile mission. The Jews are referred to as both a people and a nation. Ironically, both terms are taken over by the Church. According to Peter, the holy nation is the Church (1 Pet 2.9).

2. Caiaphas as high priest would enter the Holy Place on Passover to make atonement with the shed blood on behalf of the people. Ironically, this high priest plots the shedding of the blood of the Good Shepherd who will give his life for the sheep – the very thing to which the ritual pointed. The high priest thinks it is a small price for the nation, and yet it is sufficient for the whole world.

3. The religious authorities fear the destruction of the temple and so plot the destruction of the true temple. Seeking to keep their temple causes the destruction of the true temple.

4. The religious authorities fear the destruction of their nation, so they plot to destroy the true Israel, God's Son. They reject Jesus as the Messiah, but in a few decades they will follow a false messiah who will lead them into the destruction they are seeking to avoid. Ironically, Jesus died, but the nation perished anyway. The Jews ended up losing both their temple and their nation.

Caiaphas is a very interesting character who reveals the sovereignty of God. God allowed Caiaphas to speak his opinion, but God was also speaking. Caiaphas acted unknowingly as God's mouthpiece and the agent of his plan. Even though the authorities are plotting Jesus' death, everything is in God's hands; no human court will decide his fate.

Caiaphas illustrates a tremendous truth. God uses even the selfish choices, evil plans and murderous intentions of man to serve his redemptive purposes. God will have his way and will even use disobedience to accomplish his will. He will use both sides. The authorities are playing out the role in a foreordained drama. They are not in control, even though they think they are. They are being used for God's purposes. Mankind is given the freedom to choose, but God can always trump what man does.

Therefore Jesus no longer continued to walk publicly among the Jews, but went away from there to the country near the wilderness, into a city called Ephraim; and there He stayed with the disciples. (11:54)

If this was the larger council, the Sanhedrin, then Jesus would have heard about their decision. He responds by going to Ephraim, or Ephron, about four miles northeast of Bethel and 12 miles from Jerusalem. It was far enough away for him to be safe for a time, but close enough to attend the Passover. Jesus' hour had not yet come, but it was approaching quickly.

I called this message "Life Choices," because God forces every person to make choices – spiritual choices, choices for life or death. John is helpful to us in three ways. First, our text helps us to understand the attitude of the world towards Jesus. The world can and does have a very hostile reaction to Jesus.

Often that response is cruel, harsh, sarcastic or apathetic, even though Jesus is the one who raises the dead to life.

Why would we expect anything different from the world? The world is in rebellion against God. It loves the darkness and hates the light. You can talk all you like about all kinds of abstract spiritual ideas or other religions, because the world is willing to buy into and accept almost anything other than Jesus. It embraces the so-called "Da Vinci code," and its fictionalized and unsupported truth about Jesus, without much investigation. However, it rejects the truth about Jesus even though historical evidence supports his death and resurrection. At the mention of Jesus and the cross, a friendly conversation can turn strange very quickly.

One of the main reasons the world reacts this way to Jesus is because people want control. They want power, prestige and pleasure, just like the religious authorities of Jesus' day. They want to believe that they can control their destiny and get life from their own choices, in their own strength. They want a Messiah who will win and not cramp their style. They don't want to admit weakness, failure or defeat. They want to live in darkness and choose sin whenever and wherever they please. The irony is that they are not really in control any more than the Jewish authorities were. The irony is that the things they think will give them life will bring death. They think they have freedom and yet they are enslaved. They can't have the life of God on their own terms.

And yet it was into this hostile and dark world that God came. He came knowing what would happen in order to gather his children and create a new nation. Nothing the world does can impede God's intentions or purposes. He even uses rebellion and disobedience to bring about his will. The world can never outsmart God to maintain power or control. God is not alarmed at how the world responds to Jesus.

And just like Jesus was in the world, so too are we as his people. We may meet with hostility and hatred in our families or workplace. That shouldn't surprise us; there is darkness all around us. But in the midst of the darkness people are being called by God. They want life, and they are willing to give up control to believe that Jesus can raise the dead. Our mission is to continue to be faithful witnesses to our Lord and the truth he has left for us to share.

Secondly, John helps us to understand what is often a problem in the Church. The Church seems to be fertile soil for high-control, ambitious, self-serving leaders. Many of you have encountered church leaders who were more interested in building their own kingdom than the kingdom of God. Some leaders can be as adept at playing the political game as any politician or businessman.

The primary fear for these kinds of leaders is the same thing that motivated the Sanhedrin to plot Jesus' death – the fear of losing control, losing their position of power. Leaders fear what might happen if people really started believing and following Jesus. They feel threatened when the Spirit begins to

work in someone's life or when someone's ministry in the congregation becomes too visible. So they eliminate anyone who might be a threat to them. They end up trying to kill the life of Jesus for their own selfish interests. Sadly, there are way too many examples of this kind of church leadership.

But again, God is not alarmed. God is committed to his Church and will continue to work through it, sometimes in spite of itself. This story reminds us that God is in control and he will bring about his redemptive purposes. Often that happens through faithful people who keep following him week after week, even though they are not formally in leadership.

Finally, John is helpful to point out the things that can keep us from the life of God. Every day we face life choices, decisions that have huge consequences. God gives us that freedom. People in the world and church leaders are not the only ones who have a hard time giving up control. We have a hard time, too. This is one of the biggest obstacles for us to live in resurrection life.

The choices we make revolve around trusting in the life of Jesus and bringing that life into everything we do. We are motivated for life. We want to control our environment because we want to guarantee life. And yet if we are not allowing the life of Jesus to be present, if we are pushing him to the side or taking things into our own hands we will not be experiencing the resurrection life we so desire.

Resurrection life is a miracle. It is one hundred per cent gift. There is nothing we do to enhance or increase the magnitude or dimensions of this life. But we do have to receive it and allow its entrance into everyday events.

Let me describe what that means for me. It involves accepting where God has you and what he has for you, rather than thinking life will come from different circumstances. It means bearing the crosses that God has given you instead of the ones you would rather carry. It means giving up your anger or resentment or grudges and believing that God is working out his purposes, despite the malicious intent of others. It means not allowing your heart to grow hard and callous because of the injustice you have suffered, but trusting that God has higher goals and higher plans for his kingdom. It means forgiving and letting go of your deepest pain, believing that nothing can thwart the work of God's redeeming love in your life. It means we stop trying to define our future and let God have his way with us.

My grandmother was the sweetest woman, even though she was abused and abandoned by an alcoholic husband. She was a strong believer who painted like Grandma Moses. When I was a child, she would read to me when she visited. Later, when I became a Christian in my early twenties, I was given her Bible, which is a treasure chest of notes and clippings. She asked that one thing she had written be read at her funeral. This has been a great source of encouragement to me over the years, and I want to read part of it to you:

Let us turn to the grave scene of Lazarus and hear the promise made not merely to Martha, but to us. "I am the resurrection and the Life; he that believeth on me through he die, yet shall he live." This is the promise of eternal life, a thing all men desire, but few are willing to accept on God's terms. The greatest of all sins is the sin of unbelief. The sin of unbelief is as truly sin as murder. You may be a child of God, but if you doubt God's promises you are going to suffer the lack of their fulfillment. Read the Bible as you would read any human will, ask God to cleanse you from every vestige of unbelief, and then occupy your mind with Christ. If he is not first in your life you do not know the first principles of joy. If he is first, He can make up for any thing you have lost. Thanks be to God for his unspeakable gift.

Let us turn away from every vestige of unbelief and choose to live fully in this gift of resurrection life. As William Wallace said in the movie *Braveheart*, "Every man has to die, but not every man will fully live."

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