

Sunday 15th March 2026 - Journey To Jerusalem: The Plot Against Jesus

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Preacher: Ian McKeown

[0 : 00] Good morning, everyone. Lovely to see you. Now, where's the clicker? Who doesn't like a cheeky hot cross bun?

! They're tempting, aren't they? Don't get me wrong, I love them, I do. Preferably lightly toasted with a cup of tea. And full disclosure, a slice of cheese doesn't go amiss by the side as well. Have you noticed, though, that these are now kind of just a staple item on supermarket shelves, available literally all year round?

You can even, if you're into that sort of thing, eat one as you're doing your Christmas shopping. Literally, they're available all the time. I mean, traditionally, you were supposed to be eaten as a treat from Good Friday onwards, but what seems to have happened now is that over the Easter period, there is an explosion of choice.

Now, any of these take your fancy. We've got peanut butterfield. Any takers? Oh, dear, no. Don't look too impressed with that one. How about Marmite and Cheese? No? I don't know, I might be willing to give it a go, just to see, you know.

Rocky Road? Banoffee buns? Anyone want to shout out any particular favourites that you have? No, not really. John Burton, all right, okay.

[1 : 38] Now, arguably, there is some theological significance to a tasty bite from a hot cross bun on Good Friday. The bread is a nod to the body of Christ.

The seasoning, the spices that Jesus was wrapped in in the tomb. And the cross, of course, on top, reference to the crucifixion. And that, of course, as we move through these final weeks of Lent and to Holy Week, is where we are heading.

So, last week, Laura explored the significance of the raising of Lazarus. That delay doesn't mean God isn't at work in our lives.

And that Jesus comes right alongside us in our suffering. And so, on the heels of that, what I'd like to do this morning is reflect on the reaction and the response of the religious authorities to this miracle.

And just to kind of zoom out for a moment on John's Gospel, looking at the whole arc of it, if you like, you'll notice that the narrative is doing something very deliberate at this point.

[2 : 56] The tension is rising. Jesus is drawing closer geographically, theologically, and inevitably to Jerusalem and the events of Holy Week and the cross.

Arguably, the raising of Lazarus is the miracle that the whole of this Gospel, up to this point, has been building towards.

Setting into motion every subsequent event that happens. It's like, if you want, a hinge. It's a transformative turning point that fundamentally refocuses the trajectory that Jesus is now on.

And so, just to give a little bit of context here, John's Gospel, which I'm sure you know, is a carefully, almost architecturally constructed piece of writing.

These are not random stories put together. And it is growing gradually in intensity. The first half of the Gospel, certainly chapters 2 to 11, is what biblical scholars have called the Book of Signs.

[4 : 15] Seven signs. Okay? Seven miracles. Each one revealing something about who Jesus is. And each one escalating, if you like, in scope and significance.

So, in chapter 2, we have Jesus turning water into wine. And then in chapter 4, healing an official's son from a distance.

Then healing a paralyzed man at Bethesda. And then feeding the 5,000, walking on water, and restoring sight to a man born blind in chapter 9.

And then, in chapter 11, the seventh sign, the final sign, the one that John has been building up to, Lazarus.

Four days dead. Walks out of a tomb. Seven is not an accident here. In Jewish literature, seven is the number of completion.

[5 : 22] Okay? Of perfection. Of divine wholeness. So, John places the raising of Lazarus as the seventh and final sign, very deliberately.

The conquering of death itself. And that, of course, foreshadowing the resurrection of Jesus. Lazarus will, of course, die again.

But when Jesus emerges from the tomb, his is a different kind of body. It's a new creation. The fullest expression of who Jesus is.

The resurrection and the life. And this seventh sign, the raising of Lazarus, is also the one that triggers the Sanhedrin to convene.

And the plot against Jesus is set into motion. So, let's watch and listen to the reading from John's Gospel, chapter 11, verses 45 to 57.

[6 : 24] Therefore, many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary and had seen what Jesus did believed in him.

But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin.

What are we accomplishing? They asked. Here is this man performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him. And then the Romans will come and take away both our temple and our nation.

Then one of them, named Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up. You know nothing at all. You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.

He did not say this on his own. But as high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation.

[7 : 38] And not only for that nation, but also for the scattered children of God to bring them together and make them one. So from that day on, they plotted to take his life.

Therefore, Jesus no longer moved about publicly among the people of Judea. Instead, he withdrew to a region near the wilderness, to a village called Ephraim, where he stayed with his disciples. When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, many went up from the country to Jerusalem for their ceremonial cleansing before the Passover. They kept looking for Jesus.

And as they stood in the temple courts, they asked one another, What do you think? Isn't he coming to the festival at all? But the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that anyone who found out where Jesus was should report it, so that they might arrest him.

So, Jesus, John tells us that many of those who witnessed Lazarus walking out of the tomb believed in Jesus.

[8 : 54] And you might expect, mightn't you, that the chapter would end there. You know, on a high note. Hallelujah. Amen. But news travels fast, doesn't it?

And some of those who were there went straight to the Pharisees and reported what had happened. And so the Sanhedrin, the Supreme Religious Council, the most powerful Jewish institution of the day, call an emergency meeting.

And item one on the agenda is this. What are we going to do about Jesus? Not should we investigate this miracle or is this man perhaps who he says he is?

Or even should we at least go and speak with this Lazarus fellow? No. Now, just simply this. What do we do about the threat that he poses to us?

Here is this man performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him. And then the Romans will come and take away both our temple and our nation.

[10 : 12] These weren't cartoon villains, you know, twirling their moustaches. These were educated, religiously devoted men who genuinely believed that the sacred religious systems and temple practices that they devoted themselves to required guarding and protecting above all else.

And when they looked at Jesus, this disruptive, uncontrollable, radical, boundary-spanning rabbi, who had described them as hypocrites, obsessing over the microscopic things and catastrophically missing the real point of their faith, blind guides, cold-blooded vipers poisoning what they claimed to protect, gatekeepers who'd themselves become locked gates.

Well, people were listening to Jesus. He was drawing vast crowds, upending the status quo. And now this miracle. Things had come, you could say, to a head. Do you wonder, do you think maybe they were asking themselves, you know, is he gathering so much support for some sort of prophetic action?

Perhaps even marching on Jerusalem itself. And once that happened, Rome wouldn't stand idly by. And so they made a calculation.

[12:06] And Caiaphas, cunning, pragmatic, politically savvy, we might say, cuts through the debate. Right. You know nothing at all, he says.

You do not understand that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish. It's a pretty, I don't know, it seems to me a pretty cold calculation, isn't it?

Quite harsh. One man dies, the religious institution survives, problem solved. And the gospel writer can't resist a bit of divine irony here.

And steps out of the story almost and speaks sort of directly to us. You know, he did not say this of his own accord. But being high priest that year, he prophesied.

Prophesied. Caiaphas thought he was being politically shrewd. When he was actually prophesying the truth in a way that he didn't even realise or understand.

[13:16] Yeah, one man will die for the people. Caiaphas got that bit right. But not to protect the religious system. And not to keep Rome happy.

And not to preserve the Sanhedrin. The Romans will destroy the temple. In less than 40 years from these verses in AD 70.

And Jerusalem will be left a smoking ruin. What Caiaphas intended for evil.

God was working for good. To gather all those who are excluded and overlooked in his kingdom.

And not just the insiders.

The Greek word that John uses here. Okay. I'll take a run up to this one. Okay. Go on. Anyone want to have a go? Okay.

[14:18] The Greek word is diaskopismina. Okay. Which means the scattered children of God.

Scattered like seed. Scattered to the winds. And Jesus' death and resurrection, John says, will be like the gathering of that seed.

The bringing together of all people. That every exclusive, fearful, gatekeeping, religious system has tried to exclude.

Caiaphas meant his words as a threat. And God used them as a promise. The theologian, Tom Wright.

Some of you might be familiar with his books or his talks. And he points out something I think that's really insightful here. He suggests that the Sanhedrin on some level understood what Jesus represented.

[15:21] And not necessarily from their perspective that he was the Messiah. But that Jesus was performing the function of the temple itself.

You know, being the place where God and humanity met. The connection between heaven and earth. And that for those whose entire institutional power rested on the temple.

Well, that was a genuinely terrifying prospect. Now, you may be familiar with the books or the films in the series The Hunger Games.

If you're not, it's a story set in a post-apocalyptic future. In which the nation of Panem has risen out of the ashes of what was once North America.

The central government controls 12 oppressed districts through a combination of fear, spectacle. And an annual ritual in which two young people from each district are reaped.

[16:33] That doesn't sound ominous, does it? By lottery. And as tributes, they are forced to fight to the death on live television. As sport for the capital's citizens.

And to remind the districts who is in charge. The sacrifice of the few for the lives of the many. It's not a gentle story.

But it is a story of hope. With our hero, Katniss Everdeen. And I want to suggest to you a story that has parallels with these verses in John's Gospel.

Because at the heart of The Hunger Games, written into its logic, if you like, is Caiaphas' calculation. And there is a scene early in the first film where President Snow, who's in charge of the capital, explains to the game's chief architect exactly why The Hunger Games exists.

She earned it. She shot an arrow at your head. Well, at an apple. Near your head. Sit down. Seneca, why do you think we have a winner?

[17 : 56] What do you mean? I mean, why do we have a winner? I mean, if we just wanted to intimidate the districts, why not round up 24 of them at random and execute them all at once?

Be a lot faster. Hope. Hope? Hope. It is the only thing stronger than fear.

A little hope is effective. A lot of hope is dangerous. Spark is fine. As long as it's contained. So?

So, contain it. Hmm. Hope. Hope. It's the only thing stronger than fear.

President Snow says. A little hope is effective. A lot of hope is dangerous. So, contain it. It's the same calculation Caiaphas makes.

[19 : 06] The French philosopher, René Girard, spent much of his vocation unpacking the mechanism at work in this passage in John's Gospel.

He argued that Caiaphas' statement is the foundational logic at the heart of most human civilizations.

That those with power take an institution or community's fear and anxiety and exploit it. And concentrate it into an easy target.

Or a single victim. Or an identifiable group. And then sacrifice them in order to maintain or restore order.

The scapegoat. Or in the Hunger Games, the tribute. Or we might call it the politics of fear. The Hunger Games makes this kind of mechanism visible.

[20 : 07] Literally puts it on television. And makes the whole population watch. And that's the point. To retain power and maintain control.

And what Jesus does. What the cross does. In Girard's reading. Is to expose that mechanism.

For exactly what it is. By becoming the willing sacrifice. By refusing to fight back. By refusing to become. What the system needed him to be.

And willingly surrendering his life. Jesus comes back in abundance. He doesn't escape death. He goes through it.

And comes out a new creation. Bringing forgiveness and hope. Rather than hatred or despair.

Jesus doesn't just survive the scapegoat mechanism.

[21 : 09] He subverts it and dismantles it. Showing it up for the lie that it always was. Because the abuse of power.

Fear driving institutions. Towards self-preservation. At the expense of others. Isn't just a first century phenomena.

Is it? It surfaces anywhere. In a community. An organisation. Or even a church. That starts to prioritise.

Our place. Our position. Over the people. That it was supposed to serve. And sadly. Even the findings of this 2020 report.

Which concluded that the Anglican Church. And the. Of England and Wales. Failed to adequately. Protect children. From sexual abuse. Highlighting poor record keeping.

[22 : 09] A failure to prioritise survivors. And a culture. Of secrecy. You know. The moment. Any institution.

Or community. Closes ranks. And puts its reputation. Or survival. Above the dignity. Of those standing. In front of it. In that moment.

It has chosen Caiaphas. Over Jesus. Fear. Makes for terrible. Theology.

Because fear. Is always trying to hold on. To protect. Something. And Jesus. Scandishly so.

Refuses. To play. That game. And he asks us to. To let things. Go. After the.

[23 : 08] Sanhedrin's plot. Is hatched. John tells us. In verse 54. That Jesus. Withdrew. To a small. Quiet town. Called Ephraim. And stayed there.

With his disciples. It was probably. Only just a. Small town. Around about 14 miles. North east of Jerusalem. Out in the hills. Near the desert. In the wilderness.

Nothing particularly special. About that. It was. Well. Quiet. He'd be back in Jerusalem.

Before. The week was out. So this wasn't a retreat. Born out of fear. This was something else. And I'm guessing. This was Jesus.

Refusing. To allow his opponents. To set the timetable. Refusing. To be rushed. Refusing. To let them. Determine. The moment.

[24 : 04] Of his arrival. In Jerusalem. Even as. And we heard in that reading. They wondered. If he would come. To the festival. The wilderness.

Of course. Is not just. A geographical. Location. Is it? It's a theological one. It's a place. Of preparation. It's a place.

For. Encounter. When you need. To hear God. More clearly. Than the noise. Around you. Allows. And so. Jesus goes to Ephraim.

And he stays. With his disciples. Deepening. His ties. With them. Before the final. Push. I wonder. If there's. Something here.

For us. Something. Very practical. In these. Remaining weeks. Leading up to Easter. An opportunity. Maybe. To pause. To deepen.

[25 : 01] Our connection. With the people. Around us. To find. Our Ephraim. And take a moment. To be. Still. And to reflect.

On Jesus's journey. To Jerusalem. Jesus. Didn't rush. And neither. Should we. The Sanhedrin. Were frantic. Jesus. Was. Still. And that stillness. Rooted. Not in passivity. But in trust.

The Sanhedrin. Thought. They. Were in. Control. And every. Single thing. That they did. Every calculation. Every plot. Every political.

Maneuver. Was being. Woven. Without. Their knowledge. Or consent. Into the most. Breathtaking. Act. Of liberation. And grace.

[25 : 58] That the world. Has ever seen. They thought. They were ending. The story. They were simply.

Setting up. The final chapter. Because. What Caiaphas. Never understood. Is that you cannot. Stop. Someone. Who has already. Decided. To lay down. His life. Freely. For others. Fear. Has no. Leverage.

Over love. That has already. Chosen the cross. And so. As we. Draw closer. To Easter. May we. Learn.

To trust. That in all things. God. Is at work. Not just. In some of them. And not just. In the things. That make sense.

[26 : 51] But in all of it. Every. Last. Complicated. Painful. Bewildering. Thing. Going on. Around us. That he works. For the good of those.

Who love him. Because he. Loves us. Amen.