

## The Caiaphas Prophecy

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Calvinists and other substitutionists use John 11:50 to promote their doctrine of the substitutionary death and vicarious suffering of Christ. “Substitutionary atonement” is the theory that all human sins were literally and actually placed upon Jesus at the Cross, so that He literally “became sin,” “died spiritually,” and was “disfellowshipped” by His Father. Calvinist commentators are particularly fond of the passage, for it is easily misused to advance their doctrine of *limited atonement*. They claim that Caiaphas was divinely directed to predict that Jesus would die “instead of” or “in the place of” the people (more on this later). Non-Calvinist substitutionists appeal to only certain aspects of this passage to advance their notion, but are forced to ignore the remaining context in order to avoid being saddled with the doctrine of “limited atonement.”

### A Look At The Text

Caiaphas “prophesied” that it was “expedient” for the Jews *“that one man should die for the people, and not that the whole nation should perish”* (John 11:50; 18:14). Many people claim that God actually authored these words and spoke them through Caiaphas, but that Caiaphas was unconscious of God’s intended purpose. They then conclude that this so-called “prophecy” supports the doctrine of substitutionary atonement. For the several reasons that I list below, I reject the notion that the Caiaphas “prophecy” was authored by God. Let us get the entire context before us, then consider a few points:

{49} *“And one of them [the Jewish Council, th], Caiaphas, being high priest that year, said to them, ‘You know nothing at all, {50} nor do you consider that it is expedient for us that one man should die for the people, and not that the whole nation should perish.’ {51} Now this he did not say on his own authority; but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, {52} and not for the nation only, but also that he would gather together in one the children of God that were scattered abroad. {53} Then, from that day on, they plotted to put Him to death”* (John 11:49-53).

1. This text does not say what the substitutionists need for it to say. Caiaphas did not say that Jesus would die *as a substitute* for either the Jewish nation or for the “scattered children of God.” Caiaphas proposed

that it would be better for one man (Jesus) to die “for” the nation, rather than the entire nation perish. The apostle John then added in verse 52, “*but also that He would gather together in one the children of God that were scattered abroad.*” John did not say that Jesus “died for” the “children of God,” and he certainly did not say that Jesus “died as a substitute for” the children of God! Such language is a mere contrivance by substitutionists. John spoke of God “gathering together the children of God that were scattered.” He said nothing about Jesus dying as a substitute for them or others. Incidentally, substitutions usually depict Jesus as “taking the place of” sinners. How do they turn “children of God” into “sinners?”

2. If this passage does actually teach substitutionary atonement, then it teaches that Christ died (“substitutionally”) only for the Jewish nation. As noted above, neither Caiaphas’ “prophecy” nor John’s comments say anything about Jesus dying for the “*children of God*” (more on their identity in point 4). However, for the sake of argument, let us include the “children of God” in the “substitution” scenario. Let us assume that John meant that Jesus died “for” the Jewish nation and “for” the scattered children of God. Either way, this would constitute a “limited” type of atonement, such as that which was taught by John Calvin. Calvin taught that Jesus died only for the “elect,” not for all people. Substitutionists have Jesus dying for the Jewish nation and for “the children of God.” The Bible teaches that Jesus “*died for all men,*” and “*tasted death for every man*” (2 Cor. 5:14; Heb. 2:9). If one uses John 11:49-52 as proof of the doctrine of penal substitution, then he must also accept the full-blown Calvinistic doctrine of *limited atonement*. This is the unavoidable consequence of using the Caiaphas “prophecy” as a proof-text for substitutionism.
3. Caiaphas was not a moral man. He was a wicked, murderous, envious, self-interested, power-hungry politician. He was an avowed enemy of Christ. He saw Jesus as a blasphemer who was worthy of death. Caiaphas wanted to *kill* Jesus (John 11:53), not exalt Him as a Savior! His proposal that “one man (Jesus) should die for the people” was his means of accomplishing his own selfish purpose of preserving his following and delivering his nation. Caiaphas was concerned for the survival of the Jewish nation and he spoke from that perspective. He

had hoped that Rome would vent its frustrations on Jesus, and leave the Jewish nation alone.

4. The “children of God” who were “scattered” (v. 52) could not have been “Christians,” for there were *no Christians* at that time. There would be none until the gospel age (Acts 11:26). **The “children of God” of John 11:52 were the scattered Jews of the *Diaspora* (the dispersion).** It was the dream of every Jewish nationalist and patriot that the millions of Jews that were dispersed throughout the known world would some day be “gathered” and reunited in the Jewish homeland. This was what Caiaphas hoped for, and this was the basis of his so-called “prophecy.” The “children of God” of John 11:52 were Jews, not Christians or even *prospective* Christians!
5. Contrary to popular opinion, John’s commentary on the “prophecy,” which begins with the words, “*Now this he did not say...*” (Jn. 11:51), does not introduce a different perspective on Caiaphas’ proposal: It actually explains it further. Most everyone agrees that Caiaphas’ purpose was to (physically) save the Jewish nation from Rome. Even Calvinistic commentators agree that it was not Caiaphas’ intention to kill Jesus as some type of *spiritual* substitute for the sins of the Jewish people. However, most Calvinists and substitutionists do believe that *John* intended to make the substitutionary application of the prophecy. Those who believe this should read the passage again, for John merely reiterates and explains Caiaphas’ purpose in the larger context of Jewish nationalism. This is why John points out that Caiaphas was “*high priest that year*” and that he spoke *in that capacity* or by the “authority” of that office (v. 51). Some believe that John’s observation that Caiaphas spoke as high priest implies a divine origin of the Caiaphas “prophecy.” This leads me to my next point:
6. Caiaphas was not a prophet of God. No passage of Scripture so identifies him. Jesus said that “*The law and the prophets were until John*” (Lk. 16:16). John was a prophet, but Caiaphas was not.
7. The test of a true prophet was in whether his prophecy failed or succeeded (Deut. 18:22). A failed prophecy was proof that a prophet was uninspired and false. Caiaphas’ prophecy about the Jewish nation failed, for Jerusalem and the Jewish nation were destroyed by the Romans in 70 A.D. The Jewish nation was not saved from Rome. Some

might try to argue that the Caiaphas prophecy was fulfilled — just not in the way that he intended. However, as explained above, John 11:50-52 describes only the one “prophecy” (proposal) offered by Caiaphas, not two entirely different sets of purposes and actions.

8. Many people are fooled by the word “prophesied” in John 11:51. They assume that the word “prophesied” always implies divine guidance and authorship of the testimony that is given. This is incorrect. The fact that Caiaphas “prophesied” does not necessarily imply that he was a prophet or that his prophecy was true. There is such a thing as *false prophecy* (1 Kings 18:29; Neh. 6:2). False prophets give false prophecy (2 Pet. 2:1).
9. In order to obtain special information from God, High priests had to consult the Urim and Thummim (Num. 27:21; Ezra 2:63; Neh. 7:65). The Urim and Thummim were long gone by the time that Caiaphas became high priest.
10. The word “for” in verses 50, 51 and 52 is from the Greek word *huper*. Calvinists, imputationists and substitutionists need for the word to mean “instead of” or “in place of,” but of the 160 times that the word is used in the New Testament, it is only twice translated “in stead,” and only in the King James Version (2 Cor. 5:20; Phm. 1:13). It is most often translated “for.” Jesus did die “for” humans, but He did not die as their sin “substitute.” Jesus did not become a sinner on the cross.

### **Conclusion**

Errorists typically look for passages that at least have the appearance of supporting their theories. They then rely upon people giving only a cursory glance at the passages. They must hope that people do not take the time to actually examine the immediate and remote contexts of the passages or the word meanings. Error flourishes where apathy and ignorance abound. The Caiaphas prophecy was *political*, not *theological*. It does serious injustice to the context to use this passage to support the theory of substitutionary punishment or atonement.

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