

## They Met at the Cross: The Traitor Who Sold Him

Matthew 26:14-25 (NRSV)

There's a terrible sound in the word "traitor." **A traitor is the very opposite of a loyal friend;** and the more we love loyalty, the more we will loathe a traitor. In this hard and occasionally cruel world, people may expect to be opposed and "done in" by their enemies, but no one, except perhaps a cynic, expects to be opposed and hurt by one's friends. Although he seemed to know what was going to happen, our Lord was no cynic; and so I'm sure that, in all the heaped up pain of his passion, few things **must have hurt him** more than to be betrayed by one of his own disciples.

And, to our **Lord's pain** in his betrayal, we must add **a good deal of perplexity** in subsequent ages among Christians too. Throughout the years, countless believers have found it really difficult to really understand **the mind and the motives of Judas Iscariot**.

It may be that **Judas' part** in this cosmic drama **was only a minor one**. If mighty forces were bent upon the arrest, trial and death of Jesus Christ, and if he himself had no intention to resist their evil will, the part of the man who said "I know where he is; I can lead your soldiers there," isn't a major one. Sooner or later, we may assume, Jesus' enemies would have got him. If Judas hadn't acted as the chief priests and council elders guide, some other informer outside the apostolic band would have been found.

But **the perplexities** do not center chiefly in that.

It perplexes us, **first**, that anyone who had **known Jesus Christ with intimacy**, who had lived with him, talked with him, walked with him, eaten with him, and watched him work, could do such a horrible thing.

It perplexes us, **secondly**, that anyone would commit such a foul deed for **such a small bribe**. "Thirty pieces of silver!" The sum, of course, wasn't fixed at random. Surprisingly, perhaps, thirty pieces of silver, as laid down in the Old Testament, was the price of a slave (Exod. 21:32; Zech. 11:12). In the currency of today -- it's been calculated -- it would amount to about \$15. Good God! You wouldn't sell a dog you loved for that! The reward seems so dreadfully out of proportion to the deed.

It perplexes us, **thirdly**, because there are passages in the Scriptures that leave us **wondering if Judas was a free agent** in this ghastly crime, passages that almost seem to suggest he was born to do this dire deed, and that he couldn't escape his destiny (Lk. 22:3; Jn. 13:2; Acts 1:16; 2:23).

These are the uncertainties, and not these alone, which have made it difficult for Christians through 20 centuries to understand the mind and the motives of **Judas Iscariot**, a name that has forever been **branded with betrayal**.

### 1. What some think of Judas.

In an effort to evade these difficulties, some Bible students have been making **suggestions which set Judas in a kindlier light** than the Scriptures do, which aim almost at whitewashing him, or which try to prove he wasn't quite the degenerate villain he appears to be. That is not to say that Judas couldn't have been forgiven or rehabilitated (see for e.g. Ray S. Anderson, [The Gospel According to Judas: Come Home, All is Forgiven!](#) 1991). I've read a few of these.

The chief of these theories run like this: **Judas is said to have been an honest patriot** who had come to the conclusion that Jesus was unable to fulfill the hopes and dreams of the nation for a Messiah who would turn things around. Jesus was a disappointment, and therefore a deluded danger to the nation, and so Judas betrayed him out of pure love for Israel. What he did, these apologists say, may seem foul to us, but it was the outcome of honestly mistaken judgment.

In a variation on this theme, **Judas is said by others to have been a loyal but impatient disciple**, completely confident in our Lord's ability to extricate himself from any situation. Had he not seen a hungry multitude fed by a few loaves and fishes? Had he not seen the sick made well and the dead raised up? How could he help but have supreme confidence in his Lord's ability to deal with any people who wanted to arrest him against his will? The whole purpose of Judas' betrayal, they argue, was to precipitate events that would put Jesus into the kind of peril that would compel him to display his sovereign, miraculous power. Unfortunately, this argument forgets that this is exactly what Satan tempted Jesus to do in the wilderness and Jesus had refused him.

Still others hold a similar theory, though they express it in a slightly different way. Judas Iscariot, they argue, being in close touch with people in the crowds, knew that after Jesus' triumphal entrance into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday the people were on the very point of insurrection. Unhappily, from his point of view, **Jesus seemed at that very point to become a procrastinator**. He didn't act as Judas thought he should. Instead of striding on from the popular acclaim to denounce the Roman occupation and take steps to deal them a mighty blow, he seemed to slip into a kind of retirement, and spent a whole day at Bethany. Judas, therefore, brought the soldiers to Gethsemane, these students of the Bible argue, **so that Jesus might be forced to end his inaction and step out strongly** as the King of Glory; and, though Judas was wrong there, he was **wrong in judgment and not wrong in heart**.

There are those who argue **Judas was wavering in his conviction of the messiahship of Jesus**. Some moments he was sure; other moments he was quite unsure. He remembered the wonders Jesus had done, but then he also remembered what the Pharisees and Sadducees were saying about him, and the question that shaped itself in his mind was: "Is he the Messiah or not?" How could this question be resolved? Judas came to believe it could only be resolved in one way. Let him be put to a test. Let him be arrested on a capital charge, and then, if he was the Messiah, all his mighty, godlike power would flash out, and he'd be seen as such. If he wasn't the Messiah, **he was a terrible imposter and deserved what he got**.

Another theory, recently revived by supporters of the authenticity and importance of the second-century, Gnostic **Gospel of Judas**, found in the desert sand of Egypt years ago, say Judas actually followed Jesus' own bidding in betraying him and thereby released his mortal, human body to an eternal heavenly, spiritual realm.

These are, I think, **some of the major efforts** that have been made **to explain the perplexities concerning Judas Iscariot** that have troubled Bible students for centuries. I find them, frankly, more ingenious than convincing. Many of them are the desire of theologians and preachers to say something new rather than something true. The impressive objection to all these variations on the theme is this: each one runs counter to the Scriptures.

In spite of all the hullabaloo made about the Gospel of Judas a few years ago, we know nothing about Judas Iscariot outside of what we're told in the Gospels. If we are to understand and interpret his character, we must sit close to the evidence as we have it. We may find things difficult to explain and inferences unpleasant to draw, but to escape from these difficulties by scorning Scriptural evidence isn't serious exposition. It's doing violence to the Word of God. Let's look, then, at some of the facts concerning Judas in the Bible.

## 2. What the Bible says about Judas.

**John** says Judas kept the disciples' common purse and that he was known to have occasionally dipped his own hand into it (12:4). **Luke** says, in effect, "Satan entered into him" (22:3). **And Jesus** says, "It would have been better for him if he had never been born" (Mk. 14:21).

Pleasing as it is that Christian preaching should be eager to say the kindest things it can about the world's most infamous traitor, we must nevertheless keep to the evidence, and one part of the evidence is, alas, in such sayings as these.

Notice, also that **Judas Iscariot was the only Judean** in the apostolic band. All the others were Galileans. It's not an unimportant fact. Of the twelve Jesus chose to "be with him," eleven came from the country in the north, and one from the south. Judas would have spoken with a different accent. It's possible he felt a bit on his own right from the start.

Notice **he was also a man of some financial acumen**. So it seems, for he was appointed as the disciples' accountant. We are told, certain women supported the cause, "providing" for their needs (Mk. 16:41). No doubt, the disciples received other monetary gifts from those they served. Judas managed it all. Their business enterprise, as it moved from place to place, was a **small company** of thirteen. (That is probably the origin of the superstition concerning the number thirteen. Thirteen sat down to the last supper, and one of them was a traitor. Superstitious people have dreaded the number thirteen ever since.) When a company of that size moves from place to place and has special needs for food and lodging, it's better for one person to pay the expenses; it save trouble for the company and the people with whom they deal. It's better for one person to keep their receipts and record of their expenditures. Judas was the man. He had business ability and our Lord made use of it.

It's impossible to believe that our Lord chose Judas in order that he might betray him. That doesn't harmonize with the character of Jesus.

If you believe that **our Lord's incarnation involved some lack of knowledge** (and we remember that there were some things he himself confessed he did not know, and that he expressed surprise on a number of occasions), then it will present no difficulty to your mind that **he chose Judas with the same affection he chose the others**, and entrusted him in a position of particular responsibility.

If, on the other hand, you believe **our Lord carried long foreknowledge** of all these events – and, therefore, that he knew the destiny of Judas from the beginning of his ministry (cf. Jn. 6:64b) – you will still remember that **foreknowledge is not the same thing as foreordination**. I know that the sun will rise tomorrow morning, but my knowing it does not make it rise. It was at least possible for Jesus to have some inkling that Judas would betray him – based upon his experience of him in the apostolic band -- without that knowledge compelling Judas to act as he did. Judas acted for reasons of his own and with as much freedom as any one of us possesses.

The painful truth appears: **Judas was a covetous man**; avarice was his sin. We're told that he had been pilfering from the common purse some time before there was any talk of his betraying our Lord. The accountant had turned embezzler. Why, he could even hide his greed under the cloak of piety. When Mary of Bethany brought some "costly perfume... [and] anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped them with her hair," Judas was the only one who couldn't see the love of it all. He said, as though he had been shocked by the extravagance, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii [a year's wages] and the money given to the poor?" (Jn. 12:5). It all sounded so pious!

But, meanwhile, he was – as **John Haycock** and his BC Securities Commission "God Squad" warns us, certain people in church do -- "**preying on those who pray.**" The apostle John tells us "He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it" (12:6). Our Lord, with the shadow of the cross upon him, said: "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me" (Jn. 12:7-8).

### **Judas couldn't control his own demons.**

After Palm Sunday, and when Jesus plainly began to disappoint the hopes and dreams of his disciples of achieving an earthly kingdom, Judas Iscariot – as I sadly believe – came to the conclusion that **there was nothing in this Jesus business**, no success, no money, anyhow. As far as he was concerned it was all a farce. He'd thought when he joined up that it would lead to fame and fortune. The only outcome he now saw was penury and ruin. However, he could make a little more money out of it – not much – thirty pieces of silver. So he went to the high priest and made a deal.

**Perhaps it didn't work out just as he'd expected.** Maybe he only promised at first to take them to Gethsemane and thought the soldiers would do the rest; but as they drew near, they saw a cluster of people together and the soldiers didn't know which one of the group to arrest. Judas had to help them again – even more than perhaps he wished. He then said, “The one I shall I kiss is the man; seize him” (Mk. 14:44; Matt. 26:48). Judas stepped forward out of the darkness of the night, into the light of the blazing torches, and said, “Hail Master!” and kissed Jesus. Was ever a symbol of love so utterly prostituted? So they took him away.

We all know the **terrible remorse that broke over Judas** later. Did it come to him immediately? Or did it happen after he followed our Lord and saw how meekly he allowed himself to be arrested, incarcerated, summarily tried and convicted by the Sanhedrin? It appears that the next morning he accosted the chief priests as they were taking Jesus to Pilate and told them “I have sinned by betraying innocent blood” (Matt. 27:4). But, by now, the chief priests and elders knew they had Jesus in their hands and they were not going to let him go. They passed on spurning him. He had played his unimportant part and to them he mattered no more. He ran after them, and before the door completely closed, he hurled the coins at their backs. Then with a rope in his hands he disappeared into the dark (Matt. 27:5; Acts 1:18).

### 3. What we must learn from Judas.

Does the story of Judas speak in any way to our own lives and needs? We learn from it, I think, that **it's possible to live near to Christ and still to fall away.** We learn that it's possible to be in his company, and to be regarded as one of his intimates, and yet to become guilty of the foulest betrayal. If anyone, in some place of security, asserts with the misplaced confidence of unfounded bravado that **“nothing could happen to me here,”** that one has already ignored, in his overconfidence, the danger we mortals are always in.

I recently read the story of **a powerful play** about the Holocaust. It took place in Poland, a most Catholic and Christian country. It's meant to help us ponder the surprising swiftness with which various players find themselves unexpectedly complicit in the deportation of the Jews.

We may infer, **secondly**, that **it's possible to be in the church of God and yet not be a true disciple in heart.** Was Judas ever a disciple in heart? Who can answer that question? Did he respond, in the first place, out of a sincere devotion to our Lord and then fall away in his company, or did he begin with low motives right from the start, and never capitulate to him with all his heart and soul? No one can answer that question concerning Judas, but it's not to be doubted that people can be in the church in any age without any serious commitment to Christ in their heart. Their lack of loyalty can even be concealed from themselves. Until some severe test comes, they are like everyone else. But then a trial comes and they are revealed. So we ask, would you and I stand if a crucial test came?

There is **a third thing** to bear in mind. With some people's natures there is nothing so holy that money cannot besmirch it. Watch money. It is enormously useful; yet, the love of it is terribly dangerous (1 Tim. 6:10).

**Finally**, we may learn, I think from the sad end of the story of Judas, **how wrong it is to ever limit our Lord's forgiveness**. The Bible tells us that after the betrayal, Judas took his own life. He forgot his betrayed Master's message of forgiveness. Perhaps he wasn't listening when Jesus said that the love of God was so mighty it would **always meet penitence with pardon**. Fortunately, there is another story towards the end of the gospels that let's us see that in spite of his own particularly nasty denial, Peter was finally able to figure that out (Jn. 21:15-19).

Knowing what you and I know of **the forgiveness of God**, don't you think if Judas had gone, not to hang himself, but to the cross, and flung himself before our dying Lord and said, "Lord Jesus, forgive me" – if he'd done that -- don't you think that Jesus Christ who prayed for his murderers as they nailed him to the wood, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Lk. 23:34), and for the thief on a cross beside him, who admitted his sin, "Today you will be with me in Paradise (Lk. 23:43), that that same Saviour would have refused forgiveness to the man who kissed him into their hands. I can't believe he wouldn't have done that. It was the crowning error of Judas' miserable life.

Don't add that sin to any others you may have committed. Don't deny that God will forgive you – God will forgive the smallest and the greatest sin – if we come to him, with repentance in our heart and a determination to live a new life in the light of his amazing grace. Put no limit on the grace of God.

Amen

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