

MATTHEW 26:14-25, 47-49; 27:1-5

THE JUDAS POTENTIAL

“Then one of the twelve, named Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests, and said, ‘What are you willing to give me to deliver Him up to you?’ And they weighed out to him thirty pieces of silver. And from then on he began looking for a good opportunity to betray Him. . . .” (26:14-25, 47-49; 27:1-5).

One of the indications of the truthfulness of the Bible is its *honesty*. The Bible does not paint a rosy picture of various “heroes of the faith”; it relates the good and the bad. It tells about numerous rogues and renegades, some of whom were supposed to be men and women of God! Early in the Bible, we read about the murderer Cain. Later comes the sordid story of Ahab and Jezebel, two of the most wicked people who ever lived. In the New Testament, King Herod committed infanticide in trying to prevent the Christ from taking his throne. In the midst of the generosity of the early Christians, Ananias and Sapphira became noteworthy for their pretense.

Among them all, though, one stands alone as the epitome of a villain: Judas Iscariot. The Gospels describe him over and over as “the one who betrayed Him.” Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are reserved in their treatment of Judas. They never slander him or exaggerate his crime; it was evil enough and requires no embellishment.¹

We say so little about Judas today. Some-

¹Harrison comments that only once is Judas ever called “traitor” in the Gospels (Luke 6:16). The evangelists usually use some form of *paradidomi* (to deliver, hand over) to describe him, a word which is neutral in connotation. This, he says, indicates “an avoidance of any tendency to blacken the reputation of a figure already pitiable enough” (E. F. Harrison, “The Son of God Among the Sons of Men: XIII. Jesus and Judas,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 105 [1948]: 170-81).

thing about him disturbs us, perhaps even frightens us.

HIS WICKEDNESS

How could anyone do so despicable a deed as betray the Son of God! Jesus’ purity and innocence only makes Judas more guilty. Such an act is so unthinkable that many have tried to exonerate Judas, as if it were impossible to believe that anyone could do anything so terrible. Some, such as William Barclay, say that Judas was misunderstood by the Gospel writers and still is today. Barclay maintains that Judas did not intend to betray Jesus to death, that he only wanted to spur Him to action, to get Him to arise and take control as he thought a real Messiah should.² Others suggest that Judas was possessed by the devil and thus had no choice in the matter. After all, does not John 13:27 say that at the Supper “Satan entered into him”? But Satan entered Judas only *after* he had made his plot to betray Jesus and had refused his final opportunity to repent. Besides, Mark 14:21 shows that Judas *was* responsible for his actions: “For the Son of Man is to go, just as it is written of Him; but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been good for that man if he had not

²Barclay thinks that Judas’ kiss in the garden was not for identification, since the Jewish authorities must have known Jesus by sight. Rather, he thinks the kiss was one of genuine affection, and that Judas expected Jesus then to “blast” His enemies (William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, vol. 2, Daily Bible Study Series [Philadelphia, Pa.: Westminster Press, 1957], 370-71). Such a theory does unpardonable violence to the text and shows no regard for the integrity of Matthew’s account. Matthew 26:48 shows that the kiss *was* for identification and that Judas expected the authorities to “seize” Jesus. If not, why tell them at all what he was about to do? And what did the kiss have to do with “blasting” them?

been born.”³ One highly imaginative study of Judas claims that the whole incident of betrayal was one of mistaken identity—that Judas was actually the author of the fourth Gospel and it was really John who betrayed Jesus!

In spite of the efforts to lessen the hideousness of what Judas did, the Gospels are unanimous in saying that he did betray Jesus. This fact is accepted even by those who are generally skeptical about the accuracy of the Gospels, since it is unlikely that anyone would invent such a story.

HIS MOTIVE

Why would anyone do such an awful thing as betray the Son of God? The Gospels never say why he did it, but several possibilities have been suggested:

First, he may have done it because of greed. John 12:6 says that Judas was a thief, that his real motive for wanting the ointment so lavishly donated by Mary to be sold was that he was the apostolic treasurer and frequently helped himself to the contents of the treasury (26:6-13). This is reinforced by Matthew’s statement that Judas actually betrayed Jesus for money, the “thirty pieces of silver” (26:14-16). Thirty pieces silver would amount to about 120 denarii—not an insignificant amount, but hardly enough to account for Judas’ actions.⁴ There must have been more behind what Judas did.

³Some have understood the designation “son of perdition” to indicate that Judas had no freedom of choice about his actions in betraying Jesus. But Tasker says that the Hebraic expression “son of,” indicating someone’s character, always takes for granted moral choice. Thus Judas’ character was not the natural evolution of his doom, but the reverse; his doom was the inevitable result of his perversity of heart. (J. G. Tasker, “Judas Iscariot,” in *Hastings’ Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels*, 2 vols., ed. James Hastings and John A. Selbie [New York: Scribner and Sons, 1906-08], 909).

⁴R. T. France, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, ed., Leon Morris (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1985), 363-64. Harrison adds that Matthew and Mark show Judas’ agreement to betray Jesus as coming immediately after the rebuke at Bethany over the expensive ointment. This indicates that he perhaps acted out of resentment at being discovered and rebuked by Jesus. “His willingness to accept so small a price as thirty pieces of silver for so tremendous a transaction as the betrayal of Jesus of Nazareth would seem to demand some explanation other than the love of money” (Harrison, *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 175). According to Exodus 21:32, thirty pieces of silver was the price paid as compensation for the loss of a slave. Matthew 26:15 echoes the prophecy of Zechariah 11:12: “And they weighed out as my wages thirty shekels of silver.”

Second, he may have betrayed him because of disappointment. Many have suggested that Judas could not accept Jesus as a suffering Messiah.⁵ Until the end, he kept hoping that Jesus would arise as a military/political leader and throw off the Roman oppressors. Finally, with the cross coming into view, Judas gave up hope and decided to get what he could out of the whole aborted messianic movement.

Third, he may have done it because of fear. Still others suggest that Judas saw the end coming for Jesus; after all, he had heard the three predictions of Jesus’ impending death from the Master’s own lips (16:21-23; 17:22, 23; 20:17-19). It is only reasonable to imagine that Judas feared that he, too, might be arrested and executed along with Jesus unless he somehow distanced himself from this man who seemed determined to die. But we must remember that eleven others were faced with the same possibility and yet did not betray their Lord.

Fourth, some believe he did it because of unbelief. France suggests that perhaps Judas concluded, as did Saul of Tarsus, that Jesus was a false prophet and not the true Messiah of Israel, and that He deserved betrayal and death.⁶

Probably some truth lies in each of these suggestions. Regardless of Judas’ motive, he committed a heinous crime, and it disturbs us to think that anyone could be so perverse.

HIS METHOD

Equally disturbing to us is Judas’ chosen method for betraying Jesus: the “Judas kiss.” He chose a sign of friendship and affection as the sign of treachery and betrayal. What should have been a token of respect became a token of his repudiation of Jesus’ leadership and even friendship. His kiss is so ironic that it has become proverbial.

HIS TRAGEDY

Most of all, perhaps, we are disturbed because Judas was a disciple of Jesus. It is frightening to think of the possibility of one so close to Jesus turning so fully against Him.

Judas *was* an apostle, for Jesus had called him to that office just as sincerely and as hopefully as

⁵“The tragedy of Judas is that he refused to accept Jesus as He was, and tried to make Jesus what he wanted Him to be” (France, *Matthew*, 367).

⁶*Ibid.*, 363-64.

He had called the other men. Prior to Pentecost, Peter said concerning Judas that “he was counted among us, and received his portion in this ministry” (Acts 1:17). The apostles collectively prayed that God would reveal His choice for Judas’ successor, “to occupy this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside, to go to his own place” (Acts 1:25). Judas is consistently referred to in the Gospels as “one of the twelve,” and only occasionally is he singled out from the others (as in John 6:70: “Did I Myself not choose you, the twelve, and yet one of you is a devil?”). All of this suggests that Jesus did not, as some have suggested, call Judas to be His betrayer, to use him as some sort of pawn in the divine drama of redemption. James Stewart wrote, “Jesus called Judas for the same reason for which He called the other eleven. He saw in him a man of noble promise and boundless possibilities. . . . Judas, when he first became a disciple, was a potential man of God.”⁷ Tasker quotes Lavater, who wrote that Judas “acted like Satan, but like a Satan who had it in him to be an apostle.”⁸

That is the frightening thing, is it not? Judas chose to be the “son of perdition”! He rejected his potential as a man of God and chose instead to be “Judas.”⁹

And no one knew it except Jesus! He announced to His disciples during the Last Supper that “one of you will betray Me.” “And being

⁷James S. Stewart, *The Life and Teachings of Jesus Christ* (New York: Abingdon Press, n.d.), 166-67.

⁸Tasker, *Hasting’s Dictionary*, 908.

⁹Acknowledging that Judas was a true apostle of Christ still leaves open the question of whether he was ever truly on the Lord’s side. R. P. Martin (“Judas Iscariot,” *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary*; vol. 2 [Wheaton, Ill.:Tyndale House, 1980], 830-31) maintains that Judas was never really Christ’s man, that he never had a genuine relationship with Jesus, even though he did have a genuine share in the apostolic ministry. He notes that Judas is recorded as calling Jesus “Rabbi” but never “Lord.” He concludes that Judas was lost because he was never saved. This may be reading a bit too much into the evidence and raises the question of what is meant by a “genuine relationship with Jesus.” Harrison adds that John 13:10, 11 shows that Judas had never been spiritually “clean”: “He had not lost his cleansing. Rather, he had never known the washing of regeneration” (Harrison, *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 176-77). Actually, John’s words prove only that Judas was “unclean” at the time when Jesus washed the disciples’ feet. None of this should be construed as evidence of the impossibility of “falling from grace,” something which the New Testament clearly teaches is possible (Galatians 5:4; Hebrews 2:1, 6:1-8; James 5:19, 20; etc.).

deeply grieved, they each one began to say to Him, ‘Surely not I, Lord?’” (26:21, 22). There is not the slightest hint that the eleven suspected Judas of being the traitor. He had evidently hidden his character well, just as he had hidden his thievery. Until the very end, Jesus kept trying to redeem Judas. John 13:26-30 records that Jesus gave Judas one last opportunity to change his mind. After informing John that the one to whom He gave the morsel would become the betrayer, “He took and gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot. And after the morsel, Satan then entered into him. Jesus therefore said to him, ‘What you do, do quickly.’”¹⁰ Even when Judas left to do the deed, no one knew what he was up to—no one, that is, except Jesus, who always knows our hearts:

Now no one of those reclining at the table knew for what purpose He had said this to him. For some were supposing, because Judas had the money box, that Jesus was saying to him, “Buy the things we have need of for the feast”; or also, that he should give something to the poor. And so after receiving the morsel he went out immediately; and it was night.

CONCLUSION

It frightens us to think that a disciple can be like that—a professed follower of Jesus with evil in his heart. But it is a fitting reminder that the “Judas potential” lives within each of us! We must acknowledge our capacity for hypocrisy and unbelief, even as followers of Jesus, and ask with all sincerity, “Surely not I, Lord?” Hebrews 3:12 cautions, “Take care, brethren, lest there should be in anyone of you an evil, unbelieving heart, in falling away from the living God.”

The realization of our “Judas potential” is spiritually beneficial for three reasons:

It reminds us, first, of the power of sin and of the flesh within us, so that we do not become self-deceived about our righteousness. Paul said,

Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall (1 Corinthians 10:12).

I find then the principle that evil is present in me,

¹⁰Harrison points out that the giving of the morsel (“sop”; KJV) was a favor extended to an honored guest. It was a token of love and good will, as Jesus sought one last time to turn Judas from his evil intent (Harrison, *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 178).

the one who wishes to do good. For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man, a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind, and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members (Romans 7:21-23).

Second, it reminds us that *we* are responsible for our moral and spiritual choices.

Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body that you should obey its lusts, and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God (Romans 6:12, 13).

It also reminds us of how much we need Jesus and the salvation which He offers. We are

sinner, and without Him, we have the full potential of becoming just as evil as Judas, even though we have at one time made a profession of faith in Christ. We must rely fully on His power, or we are hopelessly lost!

Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! . . .

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death (Romans 7:24—8:2).

All of us have the “Judas potential” *None* of us have to be overcome by it. Not trusting our own strength but relying fully on the power of Christ will keep us safe.

—Tommy South

Applying Scripture to Life

A Compliment?

One day when John Bunyan had preached “with peculiar warmth and enlargement,” some of his friends came to shake hands with him after the service, and told him what a “sweet sermon” he had delivered.

He replied, “You need not remind me of that, for the devil told me of it before I was out of the pulpit.”

Life of John Bunyan

A Good Question

When Robert Owen, the notorious free-thinker, visited Alexander Campbell to arrange the preliminaries for the great debate which was to follow, they walked about the farm and came to the family burying ground.

“There is one advantage I have over the Christian,” boasted Mr. Owen. “I am not afraid to die. Most Christians have fear in death, but if some few items of my business were settled, I

should be perfectly willing to die at any moment.”

Mr. Campbell replied, “You say you have no *fear* in death; have you any *hope* in death?”

“No,” said Mr. Owen, after a solemn pause.

“Then,” answered Mr. Campbell, pointing to an ox standing nearby, “you are on a level with that brute. He has fed till he is satisfied, and stands in the shade whisking off the flies, and has neither hope nor fear in death.”

Grafton, 1897

Alexander Campbell

Identification

During times of persecution, the early Christians were forced to meet in secret, and to reveal, with caution, to strangers that they were followers of Christ. One means of doing this was the use of “the sign of the fish,” since the first letters of each Greek word in the sentence, “Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior,” spell the word for “fish.”

In alluding to this, Tertullian (AD. 160-220) said, “We little fishes were born in water like our *ichthus*, Jesus Christ, and can only be saved by continuing in water” (i.e., only by fidelity to the baptismal covenant).

Thus, the sign of the fish became both a means of identifying Christians, and was looked upon as a confession of faith in Christ. If two strangers met, and in the course of conversation, one drew the figure of a fish, the other recognizing it, knew that he was a brother Christian.

A. Neander, 1845

Memorials of Christian Life in the Early and Middle Ages

Trying Times

In one particularly trying time in his ministry, Charles Spurgeon wrote to a friend: “Friends firm. Enemies alarmed. Devil angry. Sinners saved. Christ exalted. Self not well.”

Charles Spurgeon

The Early Years