

The enigma of Judas Iscariot (2)

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HAVING CONSIDERED Judas as a thief and as the betrayer of Jesus, we now consider his sad end and draw some lessons from his life and death.

The death of Judas

There are two accounts of the death of Judas, one in Matthew 27 and the other in Acts 1, and we shall seek to reconcile them.

When Judas had time for reflection and saw that Jesus was condemned, he returned to the priests, confessed his crime, and hurled down the money, which they refused to take (Mt. 27:3-5). It may be that Judas at this point recognised that there was to be no restoration for him, that he was “the son of perdition” (Jno. 17:12), and so he “departed, and went and hanged himself” (Mt. 27:5). Peter’s account in Acts 1 says: “Now this man purchased a field with the reward of iniquity; and falling headlong, he burst asunder in the midst, and all his bowels gushed out” (v. 18). The field he possessed was not purchased with the thirty pieces of silver mentioned in Matthew 27:6, but with the proceeds of theft (Jno. 12:6). The field was purchased prior to the crucifixion.

When he got to his field, Judas placed a rope, hung from the limb of a tree, about his neck, and, leaning forward, he put all the weight of his body upon his neck. The tree he had selected was on a cliff overlooking the valley of Hinnom. The limb of the tree broke, causing him to fall headlong over the precipice into the valley below. He fell in such a way that his intestines were ruptured and exposed.

In the very possession Judas had secured for his future benefit, he came to his end.

In contrast with his Master, who “poured out his soul unto death” (Isa. 53:12) and whose shed blood led to joy and life, the fatality of Judas resulted in ignominy, shame and death.

Acts 1 goes on to say: “And it was known unto all the dwellers at Jerusalem; insomuch as that field is called in their proper tongue, *Aceldama*, that is to say, The field of blood” (v. 19). (*Aceldama* is Aramaic, suggesting that this was the normal language of the people.) The Greek phrase translated “The field of blood” here is *chōrion haimatos*, “the place of blood”.

In Matthew 27:6-8 we read of the silver pieces which Judas threw down in the temple: “And the chief priests took the silver pieces . . . and bought with them the potter’s field, to bury strangers in. Wherefore that field was called, The field of blood, unto this day”. The Greek here is *agros haimatos*, “The field of blood”. The field was so called because it was purchased with blood money; with the death of Judas it was again on the market, and it was purchased by the priests as a cemetery for Gentiles. Thus the name had a double meaning: the priests bought the field with blood money, and it witnessed the shedding of the blood of its owner, Judas.

Judas’s lost inheritance

According to Acts 1:25, “Judas by transgression fell”. The word “transgression” literally means ‘a turning aside’. In committing a transgression he was following the example of Adam (1 Tim. 2:14) and like Adam he received what he worked for (1 Cor. 15:22); the place he selected for his own present possession and immediate reward was the grave!

Peter quotes from the Psalms regarding Judas: “Let his habitation be desolate, and let no man dwell therein: and his bishoprick let another take” (Acts 1:20; cf. Ps. 69:25; 109:8). Inheritance of an individual’s land was conferred by Divine right (Num. 33:54). The land was to remain waste; the action of Judas had removed this Divine privilege of inheritance. The field became a cemetery housing the dead instead of providing life.

Together with the other eleven disciples, Judas could have had the “place” promised by the Lord Jesus (Jno. 14:2,3), and he could have attained to a glorious inheritance in the Kingdom. Instead, Judas found for himself another “place” entirely (Acts 1:25), the grave and eternal condemnation, because he ‘turned aside’. Judas had not only betrayed his Lord and Master, but in so doing he showed that in his heart he had turned aside from the way of the Truth rather than remain steadfastly loyal and faithful to the one who would be his Saviour.

The word “bishoprick” is *episkopē*, the title given to an overseer. Judas had the opportunity to reach the great responsibilities of administra-

tion over a tribe of Israel (Mt. 19:28), but destroyed his opportunity, and lost his future. His office was therefore to be given to another, Matthias, of whom little is known. Thus the full complement of the twelve was now restored, and the work of the ministry could now continue.

Foretold in the Psalms

The terrible words of Psalm 109 had fallen on Judas; as we have seen, verses 8 and 9 give the details of the Almighty's punishment upon one who had seen the glory of the Father in Jesus, yet had sold him for the paltry sum of the price of a slave. The words of verse 16 speak of why this punishment came upon him: "Because that he remembered not to shew mercy, but persecuted the poor and needy man, that he might even slay the broken in heart".

David had also spoken before concerning Judas in Psalm 41: "Yea, mine own familiar friend, in whom I trusted, which did eat of my bread, hath lifted up his heel against me" (v. 9); and this is cited by Jesus of Judas in John 13:18. David's own experiences at the hands of his betrayers typified the circumstances that would affect Christ.

The whole sordid situation is depicted in Psalm 64, which speaks of the cowardly conceived plot against Jesus, the secret counsel of the wicked, the bitter words shot like arrows, the diligent search to trap Jesus, and the snare of the false witnesses, the depths to which they were prepared to go. See, for example, John 11:45-57 for the fulfilment.

Lessons from Judas

Judas was frustrated by his failure to obtain the immediate realisation of his hopes and ambitions. He, in common with the other apostles, sought an immediate kingdom of glory (Lk. 19:11). With his approaching death, Jesus "took unto him the twelve, and said unto them, Behold, we go up to Jerusalem, and all things that are written by the prophets concerning the Son of man shall be accomplished" (18:31; cf. Mt. 16:21). He went on to speak of the rejection and suffering that lay ahead of him, but it is reported by Luke: "And they *understood none of these things*: and this saying was *hid* from them, neither knew they the things which were spoken" (v. 34).

Judas had pinned his hopes on instant glory; he lacked the faith to see beyond the immediate

future, and this disappointment caused him to turn from Christ. Propelled by a desire for self-preservation, he sensed the growing opposition to Christ (Jno. 11:8,57) and realised that this brought danger to those following the Lord as well (12:10). Contrast this with the attitude of Thomas, who thought it better to die with Christ than to live without him (11:16).

Judas, when he saw the results of his betrayal, "repented himself" (Mt. 27:3). He made ineffectual struggles to escape by attempting to return the reward to the Pharisees, and when they would not receive it he cast it down at their feet and left it (v. 5). A restitution of the silver did not undo the wrong; it was restored in the wrong spirit, a desire for relief rather than hatred of sin.

He confessed to the wrong party, or rather to those who should have been secondary, and who could not grant forgiveness. He never asked or sought Divine forgiveness.

Judas determined his own spiritual destiny. He only ever addressed Jesus as 'Master' or 'Rabbi', never as 'Lord'. Did Judas know that he was the son of perdition? And did he realise this because he had lifted his hand and tongue against Yahweh's anointed? Or was the remorse of Judas in keeping with the rest of his character, in that it was not real repentance, but sorrow at the outcome of his schemes? It contrasts with that of Peter. Judas proved his repentance to be false by immediately committing another sin, suicide. Peter proved his service to be true by serving the Lord faithfully.

Judas is a perpetual warning to each of us, and we pray to the Father that we shall not follow his ways:

"But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and raiment let us be therewith content. But they that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows. But thou, O man of God, flee these things; and follow after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness. Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, whereunto thou art also called, and hast professed a good profession before many witnesses" (1 Tim. 6:6-12).

Judas alone of the apostles had his name blotted out from the book of life. Indeed, "it had been good for that man if he had not been born" (Mt. 26:24).

The enigma of Judas

Judas, the man who became traitor, has been called the supreme enigma because it is hard to see how anyone who was so close to Jesus, who saw so many miracles and heard so much of the Master's teaching, could ever betray him into the hands of his enemies. The discipleship of Judas teaches us that, sadly, it is possible to be associated with the Lord, to hear his gracious words, to work in the extension of the Truth, and yet to turn from him and deny the basic principles of the Divine purpose.

Judas is the saddest case of all those who came in contact with Jesus during his ministry. All have sinned grievously, and Judas sinned greatly. Simon Peter denied his Lord under sudden impulse when caught in the toils of circumstances, but Judas sinned with deliberate and calculated treachery. Pilate sinned against Roman law according to his own confession, but he palliated his conscience by laying the blame upon the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin accepted their share of the guilt for the death of Jesus (Jno. 19:7). The populace enthusiastically exclaimed, "His blood be on us, and on our children" (Mt. 27:25), thereby portioning universal guilt upon the nation.

Judas was promised a throne (19:28), a Divine appointment and inheritance, but acted inappropriately and relinquished his inheritance and Divine dispensation. Judas refused the opportunity of repentance (Jno. 13:14,15). Though a promise of life is offered to all believers (1 Jno. 2:25), it will only be realised by those who remain faithful to their calling and endure to the end.

Men may carefully hide their true motives from their brethren, but they cannot hide them from God. The eleven had learned this lesson, and were prepared to leave the decision of election to Yahweh, and to Him alone. The disciples had become deeply aware of the need for the Father's guidance, so they leaned entirely upon His direction and judgement. Absolute trust in Yahweh, and reliance upon Him, is an indispensable element for our lives in the Truth.

(Concluded)

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In closing these thoughts on Judas we call to mind that the greatest tragedy of the ages carried with it the treachery of this unhappy man, and the falterings of Simon Peter, two of the leading apostles. They all deserted for a while and fled like sheep without a shepherd, as Jesus said they would. But Peter sinned, sincerely repented, and came back and made good. But Judas . . . never asked forgiveness. Did he realise that because he had lifted up his hand and tongue against the Lord's anointed, there could be no forgiveness for him? Or was the remorse of Judas in keeping with all the rest of his character, in that it was not real repentance, but only sorrow at the outcome of his schemes? After the actual condemnation of Jesus, Judas began to see himself in his true light. The blur of anger and resentment subsided enough for him to see his own portrait, and his reviving conscience whipped him like a scorpion's sting. "He had betrayed innocent blood". In our heart we still think that Judas never thought that Jesus would allow himself to be crucified. How many times had he seen Jesus withdrawn from grasping hands that would have slain him? What Judas, along with the other disciples, did not realise in those days, was that the "hour" of Jesus had not come. What a terrible shock it was to him when he realised that he, Judas, had hastened that "hour"! We are all caught in the web of circumstances, and at times we seem the victims of destiny that we cannot control. The drastic lesson arising from a consideration of Judas is the point that we make our spiritual destinies ourselves.

Arthur Hall, *The Twelve—The Lord's Men*, pp. 47-8.