
The Mistakes Of Judas

“ . . . Jesus . . . became troubled in spirit, and testified and said, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, that one of you will betray Me’” (John 13:21).

Judas’ betrayal of Jesus is surely one of the saddest narratives in all of human history. Let us ask some questions about this series of events. What brought it about? Was Judas a traitor from the beginning? Did Jesus deliberately invite a thief and a turncoat into the circle of His closest companions? Judas’ tragedy is both a mystery and a common occurrence; for it arose out of the conception, birth, and growth of evil in a man’s heart even as he lived and walked with Jesus.

The Son of God—who knows the hearts of all men—chose Judas and eleven other men to become His apostles (Luke 6:13–16). After a night of prayer, He selected these men from His disciples because, in His eyes, they possessed the qualities He needed in the men whom he would prepare to assist Him in fulfilling His mission. In His selection, Jesus did not overlook a character flaw or a diseased heart in Judas. He saw in him potential and dedication, and He knew what He was doing when He picked Him. In addition, Judas accepted his post as an ambassador of Christ with gladness, enthusiasm, and a sincere commitment. No one in the apostolic band doubted his sincerity or questioned his ability. They even trusted him to be in charge of handling the group’s funds (John 13:29).

How did Judas descend from a talented, aspiring apostle to a crafty, deceptive traitor—from a sincere, confident devotee of Christ to a conniving devil? The Scriptures suggest that he did it by moving down a road that at first only diverged somewhat from Christ but

gradually split off farther and farther from Him. The departure occurred subtly, with numerous little decisions preparing him for the ultimate, devastating betrayal. He cracked the door of his heart a little to a dark passion, later allowed the evil aspiration to enter his heart for brief visits, and finally offered the awful passion a permanent place in his spirit.

Here, then, are the signposts that are scattered along Judas’ road to ruin.

He did not check the inordinate interest in money that developed within him. He permitted the love of riches to enter him; then, slowly but surely, it did its deadly work within him. He apparently did not realize that any man who loves money—even an apostle of Christ—is in serious danger. From an early point in Jesus’ ministry, Judas had served as treasurer for the apostles. Coins must have rattled constantly in the pouch at his side. Later in Jesus’ ministry, when Mary poured an expensive ointment upon the feet of Jesus, Judas cried, in effect, “How wasteful! We should sell it and give the money to the poor!” (John 12:5). John said of him, “Now he said this, not because he was concerned about the poor, but because he was a thief, and as he had the money box, he used to pilfer what was put into it” (John 12:6). Over time, his desire for material possessions had grown until it finally took control of him. When Judas held the coins, all was well; but when the coins took hold of Judas, devastation followed. Avarice grew from a small corner within his heart to a mountain that filled his soul.

Judas never learned how to listen fully to the truth. He had the privilege of hearing Christ speak and teach, but he did not let the Lord's words captivate his heart. He heard them, yet he did not hear them. We say, "The words went in one ear and went out the other." Judas heard Jesus declare, "Truly I say to you, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 19:23). He heard Him warn, "Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions" (Luke 12:15). He listened to Him say, "For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?" (Matthew 16:26a). He most likely said, "Amen," when he heard these statements; but he did not allow them to constrain him to root out the materialistic infection that was taking over his heart. Paul spoke of those who were "always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth" (2 Timothy 3:7).

Judas did not heed Christ's warnings. Apparently, Judas was warned periodically throughout Jesus' ministry, as is illustrated by John 6:70. (See also vv. 64, 71.) At the end, when his sin had progressed and was at the point of controlling him, Jesus confronted him with it. In spite of his close association with Jesus, Judas ignored Him because of a hardened heart. He cherished his sinister ambition more than his relationship with Christ. He had gone to the Sanhedrin perhaps as early as Tuesday evening (see Matthew 26:14–16) and worked out an agreement to identify Jesus for them. He had made up his mind, and he was settled in his decision.

At the Last Supper, Jesus affirmed that one of the apostles would betray Him (John 13:21). Each one of them asked, "Lord, is it I?" When Judas looked at Jesus, asking if he would be the one, Jesus said, "You have said it yourself" (Matthew 26:25). After this exchange, Satan entered Judas' heart (John 13:27a); that is, he intensified the temptation for Judas to carry through with what he had planned to do, and he constrained him not to be deterred from his plan. Jesus said to him, "What you do, do quickly" (John 13:27b). At this point, Jesus knew that the decision had been made in Judas' mind and that the betrayal would be taking place shortly. Judas went out into the dark night to

finalize his plans to deliver Jesus over to the authorities.

A brief time later, Judas—at the head of the arresting party—approached Jesus at the gate of the garden. Jesus met this mob, identified Himself, and literally handed Himself over to them (John 18:4–8). He made it unnecessary for Judas to identify Him, but Judas chose to carry through with what he had agreed to do and stepped forward. It may well be that Jesus rebuked him before and after the betrayal kiss. Luke wrote, "And he approached Jesus to kiss Him. But Jesus said to him, 'Judas, are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?'" (Luke 22:47c, 48). According to Matthew, it was following the kiss that Jesus said to him, "Friend, do what you have come for" (Matthew 26:50a). In other words, Judas cast aside our Lord's rebukes, reprimands, and gestures of grace, and went ahead with each part of the betrayal plan. He waded through all that Jesus could do to prevent him from committing that terrible deed.

Judas did not take advantage of his golden opportunities. What would it have been like to have daily associations with Jesus, the Son of God? How could one live in this kind of fellowship and not grow into the likeness of Christ? It is difficult to comprehend that one could be in this relationship and still resist the powerful influence of Jesus' life, allowing the devil to control him. Even so, Judas went down in history as one who managed to throw away this magnificent privilege. Beyond these twelve, no member of the human race has ever had such a life with Jesus. Judas' situation simply has no parallel. He threw away the priceless life that he was able to lead as an apostle. Peter said of him, "For he was counted among us and received his share in this ministry . . . from which [he] turned aside to go to his own place" (Acts 1:17–25).

Judas did not grasp the dimensions of what was happening. He did not recognize that the greatest event in history was taking place. Jesus had told His apostles that He would "suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day" (Matthew 16:21b). At the Last Supper, Jesus gave the apostles a cup and said, "Drink from it, all of you; for this is My blood

of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:27b, 28). Perhaps Judas did not understand what Jesus was doing or did not believe that Jesus could really be arrested or convicted when he made his bargain with the Sanhedrin (Matthew 26:14–16). Throughout these events, Judas saw only silver coins, not the crimson blood of Jesus flowing for the salvation of the world. Instead of eternal life, he was thinking of earthly gain.

Judas did not seek repentance. When Judas became aware that Jesus was going to be crucified, he returned the money to the priests (Matthew 27:1–10). They refused it; but he threw it down on the temple floor, crying, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood" (v. 4a). Judas' heart broke in remorse, but he did not seek true repentance. If he had thought about it, he could have remembered Jesus' teachings concerning repentance. He could have looked back on our Lord's words about the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32), about forgiving a brother seventy times seven (Matthew 18:21, 22), and about the woman taken in adultery (John 8:1–11). He knew that Jesus exemplified perfectly the teachings that He gave; but, for some reason, Judas did not seek repentance before God.

Judas caved in because of the weight of his grief. All of us recognize that agonizing sorrow is a heavy burden to bear, but we must also realize that it must not be allowed to dominate us. Peter repented (Matthew 26:75), but Judas regretted (Matthew 27:5). Peter had godly sorrow, but Judas had the sorrow of this world (2 Corinthians 7:10). Peter's sorrow turned his feet toward Jesus, but Judas' sorrow put a rope about his neck. Peter's sorrow resulted in repentance, while Judas' sorrow ended in death.

Had Judas chosen to repent by turning to Jesus and laying His guilt before Him, assur-

edly he would have been forgiven. Furthermore, his story would have been the greatest story of repentance in the Bible. Had he truly repented, we would be telling today the story of Judas' return to the Lord, even as we tell the story of the prodigal son's going back to his father's home.

Giving in to his grief, Judas said to himself, "I must end my miserable life." As the trials of Jesus moved forward, Judas made his way to a tree, perhaps one with a branch reaching out over a cliff. With trembling hands, he threw a rope over the limb and tied the remainder of the rope to the tree's trunk. He tied a slipknot in the rope and put the loop around his neck. We can imagine him glancing back a final time toward the place where Jesus was being tried and then looking at the ground below. Closing his eyes and taking a deep breath, he jumped from the edge. The rope tightened, and Judas went to his own place—to the destiny where his decisions had brought him.

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Judas Iscariot was not chosen to be a traitor as an actor might be chosen to play a part. No, Judas chose to be a traitor. It is true that Judas fulfilled the Scriptures quoted by Jesus, but having him fulfill these Scriptures was not Jesus' motive when He chose Judas to be an apostle. Furthermore, Judas did not become a follower of Jesus with a treacherous intention already in his heart. The evil actions of Judas—like all human evil—was a result of wrong choices; they were not foreordained. God structured the events of the passion through His foreknowledge and providence for the fulfillment of His divine will, yet the betrayal itself came to pass through Judas' yielding to temptation.