

JESUS & JUDAS

Jesus and Judas were friends. Does that ever bother you? Since Jesus bet His whole mission on friendship, that *should* bother us. And it was more than that: Judas was one of the twelve. Nobody chose themselves to be among the twelve. It was Jesus' choice. And if we want Jesus' life and ministry to have any meaning – any true significance – then we cannot pretend that Jesus chose Judas because He needed someone to betray Him. Jesus chose Judas because He loved him and needed him and knew he could be really special – just like all the others. While we are on the subject, any of the twelve could have betrayed Jesus, and all of them *deserted* Jesus, which is not really very far from betrayal. In fact, you need a calorimeter to measure the difference.

Our collective memory has deleted anything that might cause us to admire or appreciate Judas. Judas fingered Jesus for the agents of the High Priest. That seems so despicable and inexcusable that any information which might show another side to Judas has been forgotten or erased. In short, we cannot know what Judas' reputation was like before that Maundy Thursday evening.

But we do know something about Jesus and His remarkable ability to see into the core and nature of those He encountered. Some of us therefore wonder why Jesus picked Judas to be one of the twelve in the first place. Was Jesus really so careless or so confused? Did He have the flu that day? Of course, if you believe it was all a “put up” job – a predestined charade with no free will operating in Judas or in Jesus – then no such questions arise. But if that's the deal, there is no meaning to the story anyway, so why waste time pondering it? And many people do *not* ponder it, as we all know.

Despite the probability that our records have been written to show Judas in the glaring light of his betrayal, there are hints that Judas had a much better reputation before that night. Such things intrigue me, and they bother me. So I hope you will let me share some of my musings with you.

Jesus and Judas died on the same day, perhaps within an hour or two of each other. What an eerie juxtaposition. Judas realized that he had been duped. He could not have realized this until Jesus had been handed over to the Roman authorities. Judas had of course

trusted the High Priest and the elders of his nation. He knew they were men of God, men of their word, men of honor. It never crossed his mind that they would lie to him, or that their motives would be so hidden, so devious, so evil. They had assured and reassured Judas that all they wanted to do was *talk* with Jesus. Things were getting tense and out of hand, they said. Passover was a dangerous time, with so many pilgrims flooding into the city and so many extra Roman soldiers brought in from Caesarea in case there was trouble. They said they just wanted to talk to Jesus and make sure he would be careful about not stirring up the crowds; he was young and did not realize how easily things could get out of hand or how easily they could turn into a bloodbath. If they could just sit down with Jesus and talk a bit, these Jewish leaders said they knew everything would be fine. And they said they actually really admired Jesus. He had done many wonderful things for the people, had healed many, and had even taught the people to be more loving and caring toward each other.

“But Judas,” they said, “you are the only one we can count on to get us into a conversation with Jesus after nightfall. We can never find him alone during the day, and at night we do not know where he goes. We cannot have a serious conversation while all the admiring crowds are standing around. That could easily cause the very riot we are trying to avoid. You have to help us. You know where he goes at night. To show our good faith, we will even give a generous contribution to his ministry. Surely thirty pieces of silver will prove our good intentions.”

Judas had been caught completely off guard. *Of course* he believed that Jesus was the Messiah. He had seen too much and experienced too much to doubt it any longer. Some things were still vague and confusing, but Judas wondered more and more when Jesus would make His big move. Perhaps this Passover was the moment they had all been waiting for. It certainly felt like *something* was coming to a head. Maybe the upcoming meeting with the chief priests and elders would get things started. They *seemed* to be open to the possibilities. They *acted* like they really admired Jesus. And Jesus had hinted more than once that Judas would have a special role to play before it was over. Jesus putting Judas in the place of honor at the Last Supper seemed a further confirmation of his special position among the twelve. It was all coming together, all very exciting – everything was looking wonderful – and with Judas in a key role.

Then it all started to go bad really fast. The escort that the priests sent with Judas, to conduct Jesus to the special meeting, did not feel right. Jesus had gone to Gethsemane, as He had done every night that week. The night was dark, and nothing was really clear. But the moment Judas identified Jesus in the dark, everything seemed wrong. It did not feel like an escort; it felt more like an arrest. The attitudes were all wrong. They took Jesus to the house of Caiaphas, which had been the plan, but the atmosphere was nothing like what they had promised. It was not a conversation. It was a trial. Accusations were flying, and quickly things turned to outright abuse. Judas was only hearing the rumors as they drifted out to those waiting outside, but he was dumbfounded. He kept trying to make things fit into what he had expected, but it was not matching.

When the priests and elders sent Jesus off to the Roman Governor – to Pilate – Judas began to realize the full extent of their real intentions. The whole reason for wanting to talk with Jesus, they had said, was so the Romans would not get involved. Now they were sending Jesus to the Roman Governor themselves on purpose. There could be only one reason. The Romans were in charge of administering the death sentence. The priests and elders wanted Jesus dead? The unthinkable – the ultimate catastrophe – was suddenly staring Judas in the face.

So Judas stormed into Caiaphas' house: "You lied! Nothing you promised or said had anything to do with your real intentions!" But they only laughed. It was too late. Everything had been set in motion – in the exact wrong direction. So Judas flung the money down in front of them and ran out. What else could he do? Nevertheless, one of the charges against Judas was suddenly ridiculous. This had nothing to do with his greed.

The record does not help us to follow Judas much further. He went out and hung himself. That's what we are told. But between leaving the house of Caiaphas and finding the rope and getting to a suitable place, what was going on in his mind? Judas was suddenly waking up to the dark side of life. It is not enough to trust God (have faith in God). We must also learn *not* to trust other things, at least not in final or absolute ways. Judas was so eager to do something wonderful that he actually trusted himself to be able to figure it all out and put it together. That is what is truly so devastating about life, isn't it? We know that at root and core, our motives are good. So why not just keep trying to do the best we can, stay in control, be in charge of our

own lives? Why ask for help or put our trust in Jesus? He will only mess it up for us. He will only take us out of the driver's seat and make us look less like the hero than we wanted to. We want Him to be proud of us; truly and deeply we want to serve Him – but *our* way, according to *our* best light. If that is not good enough for Him, then truly: to hell with it; we might as well betray Him ... crucify Him. Never would we say that in open consciousness, but the fact remains that this is what keeps happening to Jesus over and over and over again.

Can any of us learn by watching this tragedy unfolding for Judas? How could it have happened to one of Jesus' *dearest* friends – one of the twelve? And could it ever possibly happen to us, with all our good motives? Besides, when has Satan ever lied? When have people in authority ever resorted to subterfuge to get the results they wanted? When has evil ever failed to reveal its true motives and purposes? Have any of us ever awakened to suddenly realize that we have been used for Satan's purposes – that in a careless moment, we have become a tool of the dark side? Beyond that, have any of us ever failed to tell the truth?

In any case, it was too late for Judas. The damage was done. Nothing Judas could do or say could take back what he had done. He threw the money at the feet of those he had trusted: religious men sworn to keep the Law; religious men who were two-faced, lying bastards. Of course, not from *their* perspective. They were only being expedient – doing what they had to do – to make things come out the way they were convinced things needed to come out. Whenever men are in charge, doing what they know is right, God is far away ... or getting crucified.

Judas was shattered. Everything was too wrong. *He* was too wrong. And there was no way to make anything right ever again. In his own estimate, Judas had made mistakes – wrong choices – too grievous to forgive, too great for his own consciousness to endure or bear. What do you do if you cannot stand it – if you cannot tolerate or endure yourself – any longer? You can divorce a mate, but what do you do with *yourself*? “*And Judas went out and hanged himself.*” (Matthew 27:5)

Only, I cannot keep from wondering: can Judas so easily escape, thwart, or contravene the might and power of the Savior's love? So I find myself wondering about their next meeting – the next conversation between Jesus and Judas. It was perhaps only a few hours later that

they did indeed meet. I do not trust Judas, but I do trust Jesus. By everything He told us, taught us, and showed us – and shows us still, in the presence of His Holy Spirit with us – life goes on, in upcoming dimensions. The so-called “fires of Hell” do not contradict this meeting between Judas and Jesus. Clearly Judas was “in Hell,” but flame is only a symbol of the true burning of Hell. Judas was in agony for what he had done, and he had tried to stop the unbearable awareness of it by hanging himself. But Hell is not geography – it is not place. It is condition and situation.

Do we know Jesus? Jesus was determined to free and heal Judas from the Hell he was in. That is why we call Him Savior, Prince of Peace, Lord of Love. That is what we call Him, is it not?

Not that it would increase the Savior’s love, but I do continue to remember that Judas was one of the twelve. Jesus had specifically and especially chosen him. Many believe that Judas was born for damnation – born to betray Jesus because somebody had to do it. I think such a notion betrays the Gospel and Jesus and all Christian Faith far more than Judas ever did.

Judas was a top disciple. Jesus loved him as one of His best friends. Is all of Judas’ identity, experience, and purpose now lost, just because we have shifted to a different realm? In a higher realm, Judas’ agony is even greater because his awareness is greater. It is after the crucifixion, so Jesus is also in this higher realm. Jesus’ true identity is far more than Judas could ever before have imagined. The feebleness of all our creeds, theories, and theological explanations must simply shrivel up and melt away. If Judas was appalled before, what is he feeling now? If Jesus’ love and authority were impressive before, what are they now?

Nevertheless, Jesus and Judas have some unfinished business between them. I cannot keep from contemplating the conversation they needed to have with each other. It is the other end – the other side – of Good Friday.

JESUS: “What are you doing here, Judas? You were not supposed to get here until several years from now. I thought you were going to be my best emissary for carrying the message of grace and forgiveness. Having tasted it most deeply yourself, I thought I could count on you to lead all the others in knowing that there is no limit to God’s love and forgiveness and restoration.”

JUDAS: “Please, Lord, I cannot even follow what you are saying. I am so ashamed and so sorry I cannot even function. I was hoping that if I killed myself, I would never have to face you ever again.”

JESUS: “Oh Judas, after all we have done together and been through together, do you still understand so little? Come here, you big dope!” And Judas came into Jesus’ open arms, and sobbed his heart out in a hug he knew he had longed for all of his life. When he could see straight again, Jesus continued. “Judas, we do need to get some things really clear between us. We both need to know that this painful, terrible time will never come between us ever again. Even if you know now that I understand, you need to see it and say it straight out. What happened?”

JUDAS: “They tricked me, Lord. I knew they were not as close to God as you are. They do not have your kind of vision or spiritual purpose. But I trusted them to be religious, and to be serious about doing the right thing. They only wanted to talk to you. That’s what they said. They just needed a quiet conversation. They needed to know that you understood the dangers if the crowds got all stirred up. I know lots of people argued with you and disagreed with you about this or that, but it never crossed my mind they would want to do you serious harm. What motive or reason could they have for that? I have only seen you help people. It all happened so fast. I am still stunned. But Lord, what could I ever do or say now? I will never forgive myself.”

JESUS: “You do not have to forgive yourself, Judas. We never have the power to do that for ourselves. You can leave that part up to me. I will forgive you, and I do. But it will take a little while for it to really register and sink in. I know you meant me no harm. Yet the harm was huge. How do you think that kind of thing happens?”

JUDAS: “The truth is, Lord, never in my life was I wanting so much to do something really good or trying so hard to do it. I thought you would end up being really proud of me. I mean, before it all started to go really bad. I thought I was smart enough to have figured things out for myself. I was trying to serve you, without remembering to trust you. I did not need to come ask you because I was so sure I was doing something wonderful all by myself. I think that’s how such things happen. But it is devastating to realize it.”

JESUS: “You always have been really quick to pick up on things most people would not even notice. But every gift has a shadow side, doesn’t it? Satan turned your strength into a weakness. He always does that, whenever he can. So I guess it didn’t even cross your mind, at the time, that I might know what I was doing even more than the chief priests and members of the Sanhedrin did? Or that I might know things even more clearly than *you* did? So in that moment, you trusted them more than me, and you trusted yourself more than me?”

JUDAS: “Do you have to put it so clearly, Lord? *Of course* that’s the truth. How nice that I didn’t even see it until it was too late. But that *is* the truth. And I thought you would never want to see me ever again, Lord, never mind talk to me like this. How can you stand the sight of me? I said so many times that I loved you and would follow you anywhere. Now look at me. My life has turned into everything I never wanted it to be, only far, far worse. I already killed myself once; is there any way to really kill myself from here?”

JESUS: “Yes, Judas, there is. Look at me. Look into my eyes and tell me you hate me, and you never want anything more to do with me, with life, or with any part of the future. If you can say that and mean it, I will release you.”

JUDAS: “Oh Jesus, how could I ever mean that? I hate myself, not you! I still think everything good in life is connected to you. Everywhere you go, you call forth hope and love, and people even start to trust in God way beyond any of the ways they ever have before. I could never hate you. I just wanted so much to help you – to be part of what you are trying to do. And now I have so undone everything I ever wanted to live for. On top of that, I even committed suicide. Everybody knows that is one of the worst sins there is.”

JESUS: “Keep slowing down, Judas. Considering what you have been through, you are doing fine. Just keep talking with me. I will not leave you. And I want you to end up promising that you will not leave me again. That’s the only thing I am really upset about. I am not surprised that you got tricked. I know how devious people can be, especially religious people with power and authority. Making mistakes does not surprise me. But quitting, running, killing yourself – that is really hard on me because it upsets some of my best plans. You needed to hang in and wait for the forgiveness.

“The rest of the twelve are doing that right now. They all betrayed or abandoned me in their own way. And they have to live with it and wait it out until I can get back to them. As soon as I can start appearing to them, they will comprehend forgiveness and love way beyond anything any of you ever knew before. All of you were converted, and you changed a lot. But it will go much deeper now than it ever did before. The repentance and New Life will change the way they see everything. It would have been the same for you, only even more so. I picked you to be my best and most profound voice of forgiveness, grace, and love. Nobody would have been able to come up with an excuse big enough to contradict you. But you would not wait for the mercy. *Now* who am I going to get to take your place down there?”

JUDAS: “Oh Lord, I didn’t think I could feel any worse or any sorrier than I already did. But I never thought about any of it from this perspective. I blew it even worse than I realized. Truly I will never ever be able to do anything good for you ever again. I knew I had ruined everything, but now it looks even worse than before. I cannot pretend that I hate you, but I have to get out. I cannot stand this. I have to *really* die so I won’t think or feel anymore!”

JESUS: “Oh dear Judas, I hate to keep telling you how wrong you are. But you are wrongest of all about not being worth anything ever again. You are not going to be one of my messengers down on earth. You are right; it is too late for that. But if you think you are going to escape being one of my top apostles just because you hanged yourself, then you have no idea WHO I AM!

“First of all, suicide is not as great a sin as you have been taught. Not all suicides are the same, but a good many of those who commit suicide are full of remorse of some kind. Remorse is close to the kind of sorrow that leads to repentance. And repentance is the way into New Life. People down on earth don’t see that side of it because they don’t understand that life goes on up here – only stronger and better than on earth. Your suicide messed up my plans, but it certainly will not stop your destiny or purpose for very long.

“Just to give you a little hint: Do you have any idea how many people arrive here with broken lives and broken hearts – thinking they are useless, and that all real life is ruined and completely over for them? Sound familiar?”

“Well, as soon as you recover awhile and get your head and your soul back on straight again, guess who is going to be appointed apostle in charge of greeting the most hopeless and blighted newcomers to this realm? You are not finished, dear Judas. You are just getting started. All the real problems we have down on earth, we have them here too, only in a different dimension. God doesn’t just wave a magic wand and fix all of us. We have to grow into it. It would not be real otherwise – it would not last. We still need each other. We all still have our parts to play. Only, they are even more important here than they were on earth. Do not worry about getting your life back or being useful. All you have to worry about is getting really open enough to receive the mercy and forgiveness that will let you start functioning again as my friend and my apostle.”

Judas was quiet for a long time. Finally he looked up and said: “You are correct as always, Lord. I had only small glimmers of what you really meant by grace and forgiveness. It will take a while, no doubt, but I already have hope that my heart will heal and fill again. And the thought that I can become your disciple and friend again – that is far beyond anything I had even dared to imagine. I thought I was damned forever.”

JESUS: “You always were a fast study, Judas. And you already are my friend again; you just have to get used to it. By the way, damnation has never been God’s idea. Damnation is something humans add on when they don’t know what else to do with their anger. Humans think maybe they can scare themselves or each other into being good. But in the long run, it just keeps making everything worse. Fear is not where goodness comes from. And fear never turns into faith.

“Now I have to get ready to go back down there. Your destiny is up here from now on, but I am not through with the way things are playing out down on earth. It was hard enough for most people to trust me when I was a human among them. But now that they have killed me, I can no longer play that card. I have to go back as the Holy Spirit. It will still be me, but in a different form: one they can feel, sometimes see, and often hear – if they get quiet enough. But I have to be careful not to get too clear or it will interrupt their free will. Can you imagine the consternation when they realize that I am back? It’s going to be really hard for people with no sense of humor. Anyway,

I have to go on trying to form love-bonds and faith communities where my followers can get some renewal and help from each other. You of all people know how tough it can get in that broken place. And in some ways, it is now going to get tougher than ever.

“Oh yes, and I still have to figure out who can step into the place you left vacant. There is a young hotshot rabbi down there I have been thinking about. He was sometimes with a group of Pharisee hecklers who kept trying to catch me off guard and make me look bad in front of the crowds. He was angrier than most, but also a lot sharper than most. Think I’ll keep my eye on him. He could be about to make as many mistakes as you did – get as wrong and as far off course as you did. If so, repentance could bring him to as deep an awareness of forgiveness and mercy as I was counting on you to know. He could help me a lot in the formation of real and true disciple bands. I think I heard somebody call him Saul. Yeah, Saul of Tarsus. That has a ring to it. A redeemed Saul down there, and a redeemed Judas up here. I’m starting to feel much better already!”

JUDAS: “Me too, Lord. I cannot believe it, but you have done it again. I have a long way to go, I know, but I can already feel myself coming back to life. I thought I loved you and believed in you and trusted you before. But that all seems juvenile in comparison to what is welling up inside me now. What I did will never, ever be okay with me. But that is only one small part of the picture. Who you are and what you do are way beyond okay with me. So am I going to focus on me, or on you?”

JESUS: As God says, “*Behold, I set before you the way of life and the way of death.*” Or again: “*Behold, I am making all things new.*”