BaptistWay Press® Adult Online Bible Commentary

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Studies in
The Gospel of Mark: People Responding to Jesus

Lesson Twelve
Judas: Doing the Unthinkable

Focal Text
Mark 14:10-11, 17-21, 41-50

Background
Mark 3:14-19a; 14:1-2, 10-11, 17-21, 32-50

Main Idea
Judas committed the unthinkable act of betraying Jesus, who had chosen him and with whom he had journeyed for many months.

Question to Explore
Is it I?

Study Aim
To contrast Judas’s actions to the actions of Jesus and to ask myself, “Is it I?”

Quick Read
We must learn from Judas’ example, lest we repeat it.

Commentary
The London Times once asked a number of famous authors to write on the topic, “What’s wrong with the world?” British author G. K. Chesterton’s (1874-1936) answer was the shortest essay submitted: “Dear Sirs, I am. Sincerely yours, G. K. Chesterton.”
It’s been noted that the closer we get to God, the further away we realize we are. Self-sufficiency is spiritual suicide. We should examine our relationship with Jesus every day, seeking to know whether we are pleasing or grieving him. If each of Jesus’ apostles could abandon him in his greatest hour of need, I can abandon him as well. So can you.

If any one act defines a person, it’s usually not a good one. Name one act that defines John F. Kennedy; name one that defines Lee Harvey Oswald. So it is with Judas Iscariot. His place in the apostolic rosters shows his enduring legacy:

- “Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him” (Matthew 10:4).
- “. . . and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him” (Mark 3:19).
- “Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor” (Luke 6:16).

Years ago a wise mentor warned me that there is no sin I cannot commit. Anything Judas could do, I have the potential to do. And so do you.

Judas didn’t start out to become the most notorious name in Christian history. “Judas” was a common name in the first century, but has been vilified since. Do you know anyone by this name? Judas didn’t begin to follow Jesus in the hope that he would one day betray him, hang himself, and be known to all of history as the traitor.

Think of Christians whose sin has been made public in recent years. None of them started out to end that way. Neither do we begin this day intending it to end in sin and failure. But it can. So let’s learn how Judas became Judas, so we can be sure the same thing doesn’t happen to us.

**Why did Judas betray Jesus? (14:10-11)**

Our text begins: “Then Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve, went to the chief priests to betray Jesus to them” (Mark 14:10). What do we know about him?

**Meet Judas**

The name “Judas Iscariot” is a transliteration of the Greek *Ioudas Iskariotes*. It means *Judas, man of Kerioth*.

His given name was “Judas.” This is Greek for *Judah*, one of the sons of Jacob and the name of the largest tribe in the southern part of Israel. “Judas” was a popular and honorable name for many centuries. Judas Maccabeus was the famous and venerated leader of the Jewish rebellion that led to Hebrew independence (166-163 B.C.; see 1 Maccabees 2:4). But all of that changed with the tragic story of Judas Iscariot.

The Gospels use his second name to distinguish him from one of Jesus’ brothers: “aren’t his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas?” (Matt. 13:55; see Mark 6:3). The second
name also distinguishes him from another apostle named Judas: “Then Judas (not Judas Iscariot) said, ‘But, Lord, why do you intend to show yourself to us and not to the world?’” (John 14:22; see Luke 6:16). This person is usually identified with the disciple named Thaddeus in Matthew 10:3 and Mark 3:18.

Judas’s second name indicates that he was a native of Kerioth or Karioth. We’re not sure where Kerioth was located, although it was probably south of Judea and may be identified with the ruins of el-Kujreitein, located about ten miles south of the city of Hebron, some twenty-five to thirty miles southeast of Jerusalem.

Two other explanations have been suggested as well. One is that the term is a nickname, a word that can be translated as red-headed or ruddy-haired. This approach may explain Judas’s depiction in early religious art as red-haired. Another suggestion is that the word should be connected to the sicarii or cloak-hidden daggers used by the Zealots in their insurgency against Rome. If this is the correct explanation, Judas would have been a Zealot, as was “Simon the Zealot” (Luke 6:15). Note that he is often listed next to “Simon the Zealot” (as in Matt. 10:4).

Judas is twice called the “son of Simon” (John 13:2, 26) and once the “son of Simon Iscariot” (John 6:71). But it is interesting that he was not distinguished from the other disciple named Judas by the typical Jewish manner that linked him to his father (this was known as the patronymic name). Otherwise he would have been known as Judas bar-Simon (as Peter was known as Simon bar-Jonah, Matt. 16:17). There was something significant to his connection with the Judean town of Kerioth, as we’ll see shortly.

Judas is not mentioned in the Gospels prior to his selection as an apostle (Matt. 10:4; Mark 3:19; Luke 6:16). It is possible that he heard John the Baptist preach at Bethany, for he was from the general area and would have been interested in John’s movement. But it is more likely that he first joined Jesus’ movement when Jesus and his disciples toured Judea early in his ministry: “Jesus and his disciples went out into the Judean countryside, where he spent some time with them, and baptized” (John 3:22). *The Gospel of the Twelve Apostles* (an early second-century document mentioned by such early church fathers as Jerome, Ambrose, and Origen) says that he became a disciple at the same time as Peter, Andrew, James, and John (Matt. 4:18-22). The Gospels tell us nothing else about Judas Iscariot except facts related directly to his betrayal of Jesus.

We know that Judas was treasurer for Jesus’ band of disciples: “Since Judas had charge of the money, some thought Jesus was telling him to buy what was needed for the Feast, or to give something to the poor” (John 13:29). Unfortunately, Judas abused this responsibility, as a passage we consulted in lesson eleven demonstrates:

> Six days before the Passover, Jesus arrived at Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. Here a dinner was given in Jesus’ honor.
Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus’ feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, “Why wasn’t this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year’s wages.” He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it.

“Leave her alone,” Jesus replied. “It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me” (John 12:1-8).

It may be that financial greed motivated Judas’s continued membership in Jesus’ apostolic band, especially if he came to believe that Jesus would not be the military Messiah he wanted. (Note that Jerome, a church leader in the fourth and fifth centuries, thought “Iscariot” to be connected with the name Issachar, which means gain or reward.) But Judas’s greed and its resulting wealth also shows that he did not betray Jesus for money, for thirty pieces of silver was a small sum (see Matt. 27:3).

When Judas went to the authorities with his offer, “they were delighted to hear this and promised to give him money. So he watched for an opportunity to hand him over” (Mark 14:11). “Delighted” translates echaresan, meaning to rejoice, to take pleasure. He “watched” (ezetei, meaning sought, looked earnestly for) an “opportunity” (eukairos, or favorable time) to “hand him over” (paradoi, or deliver, betray).

Motives for his betrayal
Why did one of Jesus’ apostles make such a tragic decision? Six options have been suggested.

Option #1: Jesus enlisted Judas to betray him. One of the absurd suggestions made over the centuries is that Jesus intended to die as a martyr and asked Judas to help make the arrangements. Proponents of this view claim that Jesus wanted to die so he could liberate his soul from its physical prison. This is the thesis of the Gospel of Judas, which caused a stir a few years ago and represents the ancient heresy of Gnosticism.

A comparable notion is that Jesus enlisted Judas’s help in his martyrdom and atonement for our sins. Thus he told him to act “quickly” (John 13:27); Judas’s kiss in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matt. 26:49-50) was thus a sign of affection and farewell.
Yet another version suggests that Jesus wanted to be protected by Caiaphas from the Romans, or that he had seen the error of his ways and wanted to be arrested. Still another variation on this theme is that Judas tried to arrange for Jesus to be placed in protective custody by Caiaphas and then returned the ransom to pay for his release.

However, Jesus’ repeated warnings to Judas, and Jesus’ description of Judas as a “devil” (John 6:70) make clear the animosity Jesus saw in Judas’s motives. And Jesus’ repeated declarations that he would be killed by the Romans shows that he did not seek protection from them.

*Option #2: Judas was a coward.* Perhaps Judas acted purely to save himself. He joined Jesus’ movement when it was growing in popularity, and he betrayed his Lord when his own life became threatened. Seeing the coming clash with the authorities, he acted to protect himself. Since he was from the Judean region, he needed legal and political protection from the authorities if he wished to return to his home. The Galilean disciples could flee to their homes in Capernaum and elsewhere without much danger, but he could not.

However, Judas had many opportunities to leave Jesus before he came into Jerusalem and faced the authorities. Judas had done nothing illegal himself. He risked much by staying with the disciples while arranging to betray Jesus; if Peter and the others had discovered his plot, they would have done what was necessary to stop him. And it is hard to reconcile personal safety with Judas’s later remorse and suicide (Matt. 27:4-5).

*Option #3: Judas acted out of greed.* Perhaps Judas joined Jesus’ band for financial motive, and he betrayed him for the same reason. The argument runs as follows.

Judas became the treasurer of the disciples and embezzled from them: “he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it” (John 12:6). It is surprising that he would have this function, given Matthew’s obvious expertise as a tax-collector and financial manager. Perhaps Judas joined Jesus’ movement out of financial motive and worked his way into this role. Since it would have been difficult to hide personal wealth from the other disciples, he may have given the money he stole to the Zealots, his family, or some other cause.

Judas likely shared the disciples’ early belief that Jesus would be a political Messiah and that they would inherit thrones of reward with him (see Acts 1:6: “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”). When Judas came eventually to understand that Jesus would not fulfill this role, he had no further financial motive for following him.

Judas became disillusioned with the way Jesus was handling himself and his ministry, specifically the finances involved with his work, as we have seen. So he went to the
authorities to make what profit he could. He later came to regret his action, returning the money and committing suicide (Matt. 27:3-5).

However, I find several problems with this theory. Jesus called Judas a “devil” early in Jesus’ ministry (John 6:70). If this description relates to Judas’s financial activities, Judas was then able to continue his embezzlement for a long period of time. This seems unlikely, given the intimate nature of the group. Something more than financial sins must have been at work.

It is hard to see how Judas could have profited personally from his embezzlement, given the lack of privacy among Jesus’ band of disciples. It is possible that he somehow got the money to his family to support them during his time with Jesus. But it is also possible that he was supporting the Zealots. If this is true, Judas’ motives would be less financial and more political.

If Judas was following Jesus merely for money, he could easily have left the disciples’ band when he became disillusioned with Jesus’ refusal to become a military Messiah. He would not have been the first: “many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him” (John 6:66). Judas risked his life by staying with Peter and the other disciples while looking for a way to betray Jesus. The money he made was insignificant. Profit could not have been his only motive.

And Judas’s role in betraying Jesus to the authorities was critical. They had been seeking a way to arrest Jesus without stirring the crowds: “the chief priests and the teachers of the law were looking for some way to get rid of Jesus, for they were afraid of the people” (Luke 22:2). Judas gave them just such an opportunity. If money were his motive, it seems likely that he would have been able to negotiate a much larger ransom than thirty pieces of silver, and unlikely that he would have returned it in remorse.

Option #4: Judas acted out of patriotism. It is possible to see Judas as a patriot who sought the liberation of his people from Rome. He viewed Jesus as the political Messiah who would overthrow the cursed Empire. He may have been a Zealot (if “Iscariot” is to be identified with the sicarii, as discussed earlier; see Matt. 10:4). And so he took part in Jesus’ movement in order to free his people.

This is a possible, even likely explanation for Judas’s decision to join Jesus’ band of disciples. Perhaps this motive played a part in his later decision to betray Jesus. If so, we can think of four ways it would explain his actions.

First, he became disillusioned with Jesus and gave up on him. He came finally to understand that Jesus would not act as a political Messiah, and so he betrayed him to the authorities in anger and frustration. But Jesus called him a “devil” early in their time together (John 6:70), well before it became apparent that Jesus would not act as a
political Messiah. And how would betraying Jesus further Judas’s political motive? Why would he take such a personal risk? And why would he later feel such remorse that he committed suicide?

Second, Judas betrayed Jesus to force his hand, believing that now Jesus would have to show his power and overthrow the authorities. But why would he then admit that he had betrayed “innocent blood” (Matt. 27:4)?

Third, Jesus came to agree with the authorities’ assessment of Jesus as a threat to the nation, and so he collaborated with them to end Jesus’ movement. According to this line of thinking, Judas came to be repulsed by Jesus’ claim to be Messiah and even more by Jesus’ assertion that he was the Son of God. He saw Jesus as a danger to the nation, especially given his predictions that the temple would be destroyed (Mark 13:1-2).

So, as the only non-Galilean among the Twelve, he worked with the Jerusalem Sanhedrin as a secret agent and infiltrator. Jesus had already been proclaimed a blasphemer and false prophet, so that “the chief priests and Pharisees had given orders that if anyone found out where Jesus was, he should report it so that they might arrest him” (John 11:57). Now Judas acted in obedience to their authority. But what would cause him later to see Jesus as “innocent”? Nothing about Jesus had changed from Judas’s betrayal to Jesus’ legal sentence.

Fourth, Jesus betrayed Jesus to the Jewish authorities in order to protect him from the Romans so he could continue his work, waiting for the day when he was ready to liberate the people from the Empire. Of course, Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin had sought Jesus’ death since the raising of Lazarus (John 11:53: “from that day on they plotted to take his life”). And Jesus warned the disciples repeatedly that he would die in Jerusalem. So Judas should not have been surprised when Caiaphas turned Jesus over to be executed.

While Judas may have joined Jesus’ movement to help liberate Israel from Rome, it is hard to see his betrayal of his Master as furthering this objective. And it is unlikely that he would have risked himself simply out of revenge and disillusionment.

Option #5: Judas was used by Satan. It is a clear fact of the Gospels that Judas was a tool of Satan in betraying and executing Jesus. Judas was a “devil” (John 6:70) early in his time with Jesus. Satanic influence led directly to his decision to cooperate with the authorities:

Now the Feast of Unleavened Bread, called the Passover, was approaching, and the chief priests and the teachers of the law were looking for some way to get rid of Jesus, for they were afraid of the people. Then Satan entered Judas, called Iscariot, one of the Twelve. And Judas went to the chief priests and the officers of the temple guard and discussed with them how he might betray Jesus. They were
delighted and agreed to give him money. He consented, and watched for an opportunity to hand Jesus over to them when no crowd was present (Luke 22:1-6, italics added for emphasis).

As a result, at their Passover meal together, “The evening meal was being served, and the devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot, son of Simon, to betray Jesus” (John 13:2). Later, “as soon as Judas took the bread [from Jesus], Satan entered into him” (John 13:27) and he left to betray his Master. Thus Judas became one “doomed to destruction” (John 17:12); the same Greek word translated “destruction” is translated “destruction” in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 to describe the “man of lawlessness” to come. In this way Judas fulfilled Jesus’ description of him as a “devil” (John 6:70).

While there is no question that Satan used Judas, this fact alone may not be sufficient to explain Judas’s motives in betraying Jesus. This is not the place for a discussion of Satanic possession, but most theologians believe that the enemy can possess only what is first yielded to him. We can view Judas in the same way we see the Gadarene demoniac, a man who was forced by demons to act against his own will and self-interest (Mark 5:1-5). But Judas’s remorse after betraying Jesus (Matt. 27:3) indicates his own involvement in Jesus’ condemnation, even though his decisions were clearly used by the enemy as well.

The Satanic element is not enough to explain fully his motives. But it does illumine them, as I will suggest shortly.

Option #6: Judas betrayed Jesus out of pride. Let’s review the options so far and their problems:

- Judas did not betray Jesus out of cowardice, for he could much more easily have left the disciples’ band rather than risk their retribution or arrest by the authorities.
- Judas did not act out of greed, for the thirty pieces of silver he received were not sufficient to warrant the risks he took.
- He did not act out of patriotism to force Jesus’ Messianic hand, for the Lord had made clear his intention to die in Jerusalem.
- He did not act in agreement with the authorities’ rejection of Jesus; he later admitted that he had betrayed “innocent blood” (Matt. 27:4), although nothing about Jesus’ legal status had changed from his arrest to his condemnation.
- He did not act out of disillusionment, for the risks to himself would have been too great and nothing in the text indicates such a spirit or motive.
- He was certainly used by Satan, but he cooperated in Jesus’ betrayal, as his later remorse indicates.

It seems to me that if an answer is to be found in Scripture, it is connected to the role of Satan in Judas’s actions. The devil obviously used Judas as his tool, and in fact “entered”
him for this specific purpose: “Satan entered Judas, called Iscariot, one of the Twelve. And Judas went to the chief priests and the officers of the temple guard and discussed with them how he might betray Jesus” (Luke 22:3-4). But what human event precipitated Judas’s decision to go to the authorities? What factor opened the door to Satan’s entry into Judas’s life?

Judas made his decision after being rebuked by Jesus over the anointing in Bethany. When Judas objected to this extravagance, Jesus replied sternly and publicly: “Leave her alone. It was intended that she should save his perfume for the day of my burial” (John 12:7). With this immediate result: “Then one of the Twelve—the one called Judas Iscariot—went to the chief priests and asked, “What are you willing to give me if I hand him over to you?” So they counted out for him thirty silver coins. From then on Judas watched for an opportunity to hand him over” (Matt. 26:14-16).

Seeing Judas as motivated by pride makes sense of his recorded activities as part of Jesus’ band of disciples. He would have joined Jesus’ movement to gain a prominent role in the Messianic Kingdom he expected the Lord to inaugurate. He would have found a way to take over the significant office of treasurer, the only functional office in Jesus’ group of followers. He would have felt justified in taking from that money as he saw fit. He would have felt justified in rebuking both Jesus and the woman who anointed him at Bethany.

And pride is one of the most disastrous ways we open ourselves to Satanic influence. Pride motivated the Fall in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:5). Pride was the chief strategy used by Satan against Jesus in the wilderness, as Satan tempted Jesus to display his miraculous powers for his own benefit and to seek the glory of the world. Pride was the motive in Peter’s heart when he rebuked Jesus under Satanic influence (Matt. 16:22-23). It is still true that “pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall” (Proverbs 16:18). Later, after Judas witnessed firsthand the results of his prideful betrayal of his Lord, he fell into deep remorse and committed suicide. Given the Jewish rejection of suicide as an infringement on God’s rights, it is extremely unlikely that Judas thought his action would placate God or lead to his forgiveness. His suicide should be judged the final act of a man crushed by remorse for what he had done. His pride could not allow him to face his failure or its shameful consequences.

In lesson eleven we studied the story of a woman whose sacrifice would cause her to be known to history for her faith (Mark 14:1-10). Judas’s betrayal would cause him to be just as infamous for his sin.

The bottom line is that Scripture does not tell us precisely why Judas betrayed Jesus. I believe this is so we can each see ourselves in his story. If Judas could betray his Lord, so
can I. While my motives may be different from his, their outcome would be the same. What would cause you to deny or betray Jesus today?

**Why did Jesus allow Judas to betray him? (14:17-21)**

Whatever Judas’s motivations for betraying Jesus, it is clear that our Lord allowed his apostle to do so. Our text continues: “When evening came, Jesus arrived with the Twelve” (Mark 14:17). John supplies some of the background:

It was just before the Passover Feast. Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love. The evening meal was being served, and the devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot, son of Simon, to betray Jesus (John 13:1-2).

Mark picks up the story: “While they were reclining at the table eating, he said, ‘I tell you the truth, one of you will betray me—one who is eating with me’” (Mark 14:18). In Jesus’ culture, eating with someone was one of the most significant signs of friendship. To betray someone with whom a person had just eaten was a heinous breach of integrity. This is the context for David’s complaint, “Even my close friend, whom I trusted, he who shared my bread, has lifted up his heel against me” (Psalm 41:9).

Guests reclined on low couches, resting on the left elbow while using the right hand to eat and drink. The individual couches usually held three people. John was on Jesus’ right, for he was “reclining next to him” (John 13:23). The other favored position was at the host’s left. Apparently Judas was at this place, for Jesus gave the bread directly to him (John 13:26).

With Jesus’ disclosure in Mark 14:18, “they were saddened, and one by one they said to him, ‘Surely not I?’” (Mark 14:19). “Saddened” translates λυπεῖσθαι, meaning to be vexed, sorrowful. Mark’s record preserves their question so we can ask it of ourselves. If Jesus’ closest friends would deny or betray him, so can we.

Jesus replied: “It is one of the Twelve, one who dips bread into the bowl with me” (14:20). He placed some of the bitter herbs of the Passover meal between two pieces of unleavened bread, dipped it in the charosheth paste (made of apples, dates, and nuts), and gave it to him.

John tells us what happened next:

“’It is the one to whom I will give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish.’ Then, dipping the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas Iscariot, son of Simon. As soon as Judas took the bread, Satan entered into him. ‘What you are about to
do, do quickly,” Jesus told him, but no one at the meal understood why Jesus said this to him. Since Judas had charge of the money, some thought Jesus was telling him to buy what was needed for the Feast, or to give something to the poor. As soon as Judas had taken the bread, he went out. And it was night (John 13:26-30).

Mark gives us Jesus’ response: “The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born” (Mark 14:21). “Go” translates hypagei, meaning to depart, leave, die. “As it is written about him” probably refers to the graphic descriptions in Isaiah 53 of the crucifixion.

Clearly, Jesus knew what Judas was about to do. Why did he allow his disciple to take this sinful step? Why was it necessary that he die to pay for our sins, as we often say? Could God not forgive us without requiring the death of his Son? If you were to run into my car in the parking lot, I could forgive you without requiring that someone die to pay your debt to me. Why was Jesus’ death needed?

Here is the logic of atonement. First, Scripture declares that we are all sinners: “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). Second, the Bible describes the penalty for this sin: “the wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23). Ezekiel 18:20 is clear: “The soul who sins is the one who will die.” Why? Because God is perfect (Matt. 5:48), dwelling in a perfect paradise. One sin is enough to corrupt heaven, and so one sin is enough to keep us from his presence. To be barred from God’s presence is to die—physically and spiritually.

Third, God wants us to be restored to relationship with himself: “he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). However, he is also “holy, holy, holy” (Isaiah 6:3; Revelation 4:8). His holiness requires that the debt owed by our sins be paid. He cannot ignore my sin and remain holy.

Fourth, God accepts the substitution of a perfect sacrifice for an imperfect sinner (Exodus 12:5). If I die for my sins, I cannot die for yours as well. The money I spend to pay my debt cannot also pay yours. The sacrifice must owe no debt in order to pay ours.

Fifth, Jesus uniquely lived a sinless life (Hebrews 4:15). Thus, Jesus is the only one whose death could pay our debt and secure our forgiveness and salvation. When last did you thank Jesus for such grace?

**How did Judas betray Jesus? (14:41-50)**

The authorities had been seeking Jesus’ death for a long time (see John 11:45-53). But they had a problem: how could they arrest Jesus without provoking a public outcry, given Jesus’ popularity with the people? Judas was crucial in resolving this dilemma.
Jesus has shared the Last Supper with his friends (Mark 14:22-26), predicted their betrayal of their Lord (14:27-31), and prayed three times in Gethsemane (14:32-40). Our narrative continues: “Returning the third time, he said to them, ‘Are you still sleeping and resting? Enough! The hour has come. Look, the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners’” (14:41). “Enough” translates apechei, which can also be rendered, it is settled.

John gives us Judas’s role in what was transpiring:

When he had finished praying, Jesus left with his disciples and crossed the Kidron Valley. On the other side there was an olive grove, and he and his disciples went into it. Now Judas, who betrayed him, knew the place, because Jesus had often met there with his disciples. So Judas came to the grove, guiding a detachment of soldiers and some officials from the chief priests and Pharisees (John 18:1-3).

They were meeting in a private garden on the western slopes of the Mount of Olives. From this vantage point, Jesus would have seen the soldiers as they marched through Jerusalem’s eastern gate, torches in hand, down the Kidron Valley and up to the Garden of Gethsemane. Their procession would have taken forty-five minutes to an hour. Jesus saw them coming and had every opportunity to flee. Instead, he waited for their arrival. As they drew near, he told his disciples, “Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!” (Mark 14:42).

With his usual vivid immediacy, Mark continues: “Just as he was speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, appeared. With him was a crowd armed with swords and clubs, sent from the chief priests, the teachers of the law, and the elders” (14:43). The “crowd” (ochlos, or mass, horde) was favorable toward Jesus throughout Mark’s Gospel, but from this point forward they are always hostile to our Lord (see 15:8, 11, 15). They were accompanied by Roman soldiers (John 18:3) as well as temple police, elders, and chief priests (Luke 22:52).

John gives us more details: “Jesus, knowing all that was going to happen to him, went out and asked them, ‘Who is it you want?’ ‘Jesus of Nazareth,’ they replied. ‘I am he,’ Jesus said. (And Judas the traitor was standing there with them.)” (John 18:4-5). Mark continues: “Now the betrayer had arranged a signal with them: ‘The one I kiss is the man; arrest him and lead him away under guard.’ Going at once to Jesus, Judas said, ‘Rabbi!’ and kissed him” (Mark 14:44-45).

Passover always occurs at full moon, and so the soldiers would have been able to see Jesus well. However, Judas arranged this sign in case the soldiers confused Jesus for his disciples. Without it, Jesus could easily have escaped. “Kissed” (14:45) means to kiss fondly. Luke adds that “Jesus asked him, ‘Judas are you betraying the Son of Man with a
kiss?’” (Luke 22:48). At this moment, “the men seized Jesus and arrested him” (Mark 14:46).

Immediately, “one of those standing near drew his sword and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear” (14:47). John 18:10 identifies Peter as this disciple, and “Malchus” as the servant’s name. (The latter identification has led to speculation that Malchus later became a Christian or was otherwise important to John’s readers.) Jesus ordered Peter to put away his sword (John 18:11); Luke 22:51 adds that Jesus “touched the man’s ear and healed him.”

Then Jesus turned to the arresting authorities: “‘Am I leading a rebellion,’ said Jesus, ‘that you have come out with swords and clubs to capture me? Every day I was with you, teaching in the temple courts, and you did not arrest me. But the Scriptures must be fulfilled” (Mark 14:48-49). These “Scriptures” likely included Isaiah 53 and Zechariah 13:7, “Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered, and I will turn my hand against the little ones.”

Fulfilling this prediction, “then everyone deserted him and fled” (Mark 14:50). Jesus had earlier warned them that “you will all fall away” (14:27), quoting Zechariah 13:7. There were no exceptions. From John, “the disciple whom Jesus loved” (John 21:20), to the most anonymous of the apostles, all left their Lord to his fate. If they could deny or betray Jesus, who of us could not commit the same sin?

**Conclusion**

Scripture gives us the rest of Judas’ story:

When Judas, who had betrayed him, saw that Jesus was condemned, he was seized with remorse and returned the thirty silver coins to the chief priests and the elders. “I have sinned,” he said, “for I have betrayed innocent blood.” “What is that to us?” they replied. “That’s your responsibility.” So Judas threw the money into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself (Matt. 27:3-5).

They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers. In those days Peter stood up among the believers (a group numbering about a hundred and twenty) and said, “Brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through the mouth of David concerning Judas, who served as guide for those who arrested Jesus—he was one of our number and shared in this ministry.” (With the reward he got for his wickedness, Judas bought a field; there he fell headlong, his body burst open and all his intestines spilled out. Everyone in Jerusalem heard about this, so they called that field in their language Akeldama, that is, Field of Blood.) “For,” said Peter, “it is written in the book of Psalms, “‘May his place be
deserted; let there be no one to dwell in it,’ and, ‘May another take his place of leadership.’” . . . Then they prayed, “Lord, you know everyone’s heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen to take over this apostolic ministry, which Judas left to go where he belongs.” Then they cast lots, and the lot fell to Matthias; so he was added to the eleven apostles (Acts 1:14-20, 24-25).

There is no contradiction between these accounts. Judas hanged himself (Matt. 27:5), and then his corpse fell into the field he purchased and burst open (Acts 1:18).

Note that “Judas” is a form of Judah, which means Yahweh leads. “Simon” (Sandy) was not always “Peter” (Rock). But Judas was seldom his name. At the end, he was its opposite.

Judas appears last in every list of the apostles. Every time we find his name, we are reminded that he was a traitor. Yet he was trusted enough by the disciples to serve as their treasurer; in the Upper Room, none suspected him of the treason he would soon commit. How does a person descend from apostolic godliness to historic failure? How could we follow his example?

One: We presume that position guarantees relationship. Judas was chosen one of the Twelve, and he may have assumed that his soul was therefore safe. The fact that Satan “entered Judas” (Luke 22:3) shows that he did not belong to the Spirit. But he may not have known how far from God he was. It is easy to assume that church position and attendance at Bible Study guarantees our spiritual health. But it does not.

Two: We try to do God’s work in our own ways, for our own purposes. If in fact Judas betrayed Jesus to force his Messianic hand or to protect him from the Romans, he clearly violated his Lord’s intention regarding his cross and resurrection (see Matt. 16:21). We begin to slip down the slope to ruin when we start doing right things in wrong ways.

Three: We begin to commit small, unnoticed sins. Judas stole from the common treasury, but not so much that others noticed. Satan turns the lights down slowly, so our eyes adjust until the room is nearly dark. No one ever intends to fail. Sin always takes us further than we wanted to go, keeps us longer than we wanted to stay, and costs us more than we wanted to pay.

Four: We act without accountability. Judas told his plan to no one. He went to the authorities alone, and led them to Jesus alone. More sin is committed in the dark than in the light.

Five: When our sins find us, we give up. Rather than confessing his sin to Jesus and begging his forgiveness, Judas ended his own life. It is always too soon to give up on God’s grace.

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