

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI**

“Judas and Jesus”

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“In those days Peter stood up among the brothers (the company of persons was in all about 120) and said, ‘Brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus. For he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry. (Now this man bought a field with the reward of his wickedness, and falling headlong he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out. And it became known to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that the field was called in their own language Akeldama, that is, Field of Blood.) ‘For it is written in the Book of Palms, ‘May his camp become desolate, and let there be no one to dwell in it’” (Acts 1:15-20).

Nobody can be sure why Judas sold Jesus out. It could have been the money. People do all sorts of ruinous things to themselves and others for money. And Judas already had a reputation for dipping into the cash reserves for the poor. Or, like the other disciples, maybe he was unhappy about where he stood in the pecking order or felt like the odd man out. Maybe he was reacting to some imagined slight or offense. Maybe he came to hate Jesus. After all, a lot of people do. Who knows? Whatever the reason, the whole thing soon went sour.

But when Judas saw Jesus was condemned, he had a change of heart. He brings back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests to try to undo things himself, but he cannot, nor can we. Only God can forgive the guilt of our sin. Besides the chief priests are not interested in reversing course. They like where this thing is heading. So, Judas throws the silver onto the temple floors and goes out and hangs himself (Mt. 27:3-5).

This leaves the high priests with the problem of what to do with the “blood money”, money that was connected to a violent sin. They know it shouldn’t just be put into the temple treasury. They solve the difficulty by using the money to buy “the potter’s field as a burial place for strangers” (Mt. 27:7). The potter’s field is where good clay was to be found for pottery. Blood money could be used to buy that, especially since it would be for the burials of Gentiles. As a result, it becomes known to all Jerusalem as the “Field of Blood”.

Now the text turns gruesome, and it’s still a little startling. It says, “falling headlong he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out.” How does this square with the fact he hanged himself? The most reasonable explanation is the corpse of Judas hung there for a time, untouched. For Jews corpses were unclean to begin with, and because Judas hanged himself, that added an extra measure of aversion and abhorrence to it. By the time it fell, either because of decay or someone cut it down, it caused his already decomposing and bloated corpse to rupture. Gross, right? But it’s part of Scripture, and all Scripture is God-breathed and useful. Let’s see how this Scripture is useful by comparing and contrasting the dark events surrounding the death of Judas with the death of Jesus.

First this. Peter tells us the place where Judas hanged himself became known as the Field of Blood, or in Aramaic, Akeldama. This field of blood calls to mind that greater field of blood, where God shed His blood for the salvation of the world. Interesting enough, the Bible also gives us the Aramaic for that place. It was known as the Place of the Skull, or in Aramaic, Golgotha. Maybe there are more connections to be made. And indeed, there are.

Judas’ death was a voluntary death. In despair he hanged himself. Jesus’ death was also voluntary, not out of despair but out of love for you and me. In John 10, Jesus said, “I lay down my life for the sheep . . . No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord (v. 15,18). It also brings to mind when Jesus was arrested. Peter tried to defend Jesus with a sword. Jesus told him to put it away and said, “Don’t you know I could call down twelve legions of angels?” (Mt. 26:53). He did not call on the angels because it was for this very reason that he came . . . to die on a cross for us. That is, Jesus is not a hapless victim of man’s stupidity and wickedness. This was central to the plan of salvation.

Both men were numbered. Judas was numbered with the twelve (v. 17). He had been one of the disciples. It was not some sinister outsider who betrayed Jesus. No, it was one of them, part of the tight knit group that journeyed together for three years! This is the terror of Judas. He is so much like us. Any of us could have betrayed Jesus the same way. In fact, we do, with our words, acts, and thoughts. We betray him daily, whenever we shy away from speaking His truth, His Law or His Gospel. We betray Him whenever we harm our neighbors or refuse to care for them, or whenever we behave in ways that lead the watching world to turn away from the truth of the Gospel.

Judas was numbered with the twelve, and Jesus was “numbered with the transgressors”. Not just geographically, as in hanging between two thieves. Rather, in the sense that, “he bore the sin of many” (Is. 53:12). “He was wounded for our

transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities . . . All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned – every one – to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (vv. 5-6). Judas was numbered with the twelve and Jesus was also numbered with the transgressors.

Verse 20 says Judas’ habitation was desolate (v. 20). Desolate means deserted, abandoned, cut off from any loving presence, forsaken. Jesus also cried out in desolation, “My God, My God why have you forsaken Me?” Jesus was alienated and cut off from the Father’s love. But Jesus had done nothing to forfeit the favor of God. As God’s own Son, holy, undefiled, and obedient, He was beloved of God. But because He bore our sin, there was never a more wretched sinner than Jesus on the cross. So, out of love for you and me, Jesus is forsaken of God and experiences the white-hot wrath of the Father.

Verse 25 says “Judas went to his own place” surely a euphemism for hell. It didn’t have to be this way. We know even after Judas’ betrayal he could have begged God’s forgiveness and received it, like Peter did. But he never turned to God for help. In any case, Jesus said, “It would have been better for him if he had not been born” (Mt. 26:24). And in John 17, in a prayer Jesus says, “While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe. . . None has been lost except the one doomed to destruction” (v. 12). So, when our text says, “Judas went to his own place” it’s clear what place that is.

Jesus also experienced hell. It’s not an exaggeration to say Jesus experienced the realities of hell on the cross including alienation from the Father. That’s what hell is. Darkness, isolation, torment, burning pain, agony, thirst, wrath, ridicule, mockery. All the marks of hell are there at the cross. But it’s also true that Jesus descended into hell after his death. He went to that place not to suffer more but to declare His victory over death and all evil forces.

The place where Judas is, is a site of infamy. His home is everlasting hell *apart* from the Father. The place where Jesus is, is a site of salvation. His home (and ours by grace through faith) is everlasting life *with* the Father and the Holy Spirit, and the saints and angels.

Seventh, Judas is a symbol of one person’s despair. He did not have a shred of hope left. If only he had turned to God in repentant faith because John wrote, “The blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin” (1 Jn. 1:7). Judas could have been cleansed by the blood of Jesus. And if Judas could be cleansed, so can you and me. You have done nothing that you cannot be forgiven of by Jesus. Abortion. Theft. All manner of sexual sins. Murder. Lying. When we repent, the blood of Jesus cleanses us of all sin. Judas, therefore, is a symbol of one man’s despair. Jesus is a symbol of eternal hope for all sinners.

The place where Judas is, is a site of damnation to this day. It’s for the guilty unbelievers, for those who rejected the salvation God freely offers to us. The place of Jesus’ crucifixion is also a site of damnation, but on an innocent man for our salvation.

At his trial and execution, so many knew that Jesus was innocent. Pilate said, “I find no fault in the man.” Pilate’s wife said, “Have nothing to do with this just man.” The thief on the cross said, “We are punished justly, but this man has done nothing wrong.” The centurion said, “Surely this was a righteous man!” In contrast to their voices, God the Father looked on Jesus, the bearer of all your transgressions and mine, and said “Guilty! Damnable!”

Finally, Judas hung himself from a tree. Deuteronomy 21 says “a hanged man is cursed by God” (vv. 22-23). Jesus also hung from a tree, the tree of the cross. Paul wrote, “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us – for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree’” (Gal. 3:13). Jesus was cursed for us, as the substitute for our sins. Paul wrote, “God made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21).

Of course, all this takes us back to Genesis 3, where Adam and Eve eat fruit from a tree from which they were forbidden to eat. That’s where all the sin, darkness and death were introduced. But, because of what Jesus did for us on the tree of the cross, Revelation 22 says God’s people in paradise will again have free access to the tree of life, with its twelve kinds of fruit, a different fruit for each month. Can you imagine? It’s for your healing and the healing of the nations. Its fruit is always available. It’s always in season, and it bestows immortality.

Through a tree, man brought sin into the world. God’s answer was to lay that sin on Jesus who hung from the tree of the cross. We get to eat and drink of the fruit of that tree today, in the Lord’s Supper, for forgiveness and life. Later, in paradise, we get to eat the fruit of the tree of life.

There are many similarities and differences between the circumstances of Judas’ death and the death of Jesus. They all point to God’s eternal plan of salvation, that God set in place before the foundation of the world. Our God neither slumbers nor sleeps. He’s never caught napping. He is ready with solutions before problems occur. He has willed our salvation and clearly, he means business. When Judas betrayed Jesus, to many it looked like a monkey wrench thrown into the plans and life of Jesus. It turns out to be just another cog right where it needs to be in God’s great plan of salvation for you and for me. Thanks be to God! Amen.