

ONE TO BETRAY

John 13:18-30

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The Scripture will be fulfilled, “He who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me.” I am telling you this now, before it takes place, that when it does take place you may believe that I am he (Jn. 13:18-19).

When the Samaritan woman spoke of her faith in Jesus as the Savior, she based her claim on his legitimacy as a prophet: “Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?” (Jn. 4:29). She probably had in mind God’s promise to Moses to send a prophet like him in the future (Dt. 18:18). In this she was right, and she reminds us that Jesus as Messiah not only offers the perfect priestly sacrifice for sin and perfectly fulfills the kingship of the Davidic throne, but he also comes as the true and final prophet who declares God to the world. This is a strong theme in John’s Gospel, right from the opening words that said of Jesus, “In the beginning was the Word” (Jn. 1:1).

Fulfilled prophecy plays an important part in validating the God of the Bible. This is what the Lord declares in Isaiah: “Who is like me? Let him proclaim it. Let him declare and set it before me, since I appointed an ancient people... Have I not told you from of old and declared it? And you are my witnesses! Is there a God besides me?” (Isa. 44:7-8). This is a serious claim, in which the Bible presents evidence offered by no other religion. All through the Bible we have specific prophecies that have come true – prophecies about God’s people Israel, about pagan empires, about major historical events, and especially about the promised Savior, Jesus Christ – and our ability to validate the fulfillment of what Scripture foretold demonstrates that the God of the Bible is the true and sovereign God.

JESUS' PROPHETIC LAMENT

John 13:18-19 presents Jesus both as a prophet who foretells and as the One whose life is foretold in the Bible's prophecies. In the preceding passage, when Jesus washed the disciples' feet, he told them, "You are clean." He then added, "but not every one of you" (Jn. 13:10). The verses that continue deal with the one who was not one of the true disciples and thus was not clean: Judas Iscariot. Jesus continues: "I am not referring to all of you; I know those I have chosen. But this is to fulfill the scripture: 'He who shares my bread has lifted up his heel against me.' I am telling you now before it happens, so that when it does happen you will believe that I am he" (Jn. 13:18-19). The point of Jesus' prophecy was to prove himself to his true disciples by specifically foretelling what was about to take place. Gordon Keddie explains:

Jesus knew how much Judas' duplicity would shake the faith of the other eleven disciples. Perhaps they might think that Judas had outwitted Jesus. They needed to be assured that this was the outworking of God's plan and that that Jesus was fully aware of what was about to transpire. That is why he tells them 'before it comes'.¹

Jesus not only stakes his reputation on his own prophecy, but he also points out that these events were already predicted in the Scriptures. Specifically, he cites Psalm 41:9, which states, "Even my close friend in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted his heel against me."

This was a psalm attributed to King David, in which David calls upon God for deliverance from a great personal betrayal. The most likely setting is the revolt of his son Absalom, which so surprised David that he was driven out of Jerusalem in the most desperate circumstances. But what David finds most painful is the betrayal of close and trusted friends who shared his very table. Most prominent among these was his counselor Ahithophel, who advised Absalom in his war against David. When David learned of this he feared greatly because of the wisdom of Ahithophel's schemes, and he prayed, "O LORD, please turn the counsel of Ahithophel into foolishness" (2 Sam. 15:31). God answered David's prayer, for even though Ahithophel counseled

¹ Gordon J. Keddie, *A Study Commentary on John*, 2 vols. (location: Evangelical Press,), 2:24-25.

Absalom wisely, the rebel prince disregarded his advice. The parallel between Ahithophel and Judas is made particularly strong in that when Ahithophel realized what Absalom was doing, he went home, put his affairs in order, and hanged himself (2 Sam. 17:23), just as Judas hanged himself after betraying Jesus.

What is particularly noteworthy in Jesus' citation of David's psalm is the anguish that he experienced over so personal a betrayal as that of Judas. I have found that there are few bitter pills to rival that of a close friend or loved one who uses that position to betray. I am not talking about someone who merely does not do what we wish or who disappoints us in some way or another. Rather, I am referring to one who intentionally uses a relationship of trust and intimacy to act falsely and maliciously. It can be a spouse who cheats or otherwise betrays. It can be a trusted business associate who embezzles. It can be a child who mocks parental love or a parent who abuses it. These are among life's most bitter blows, precisely because of the relationship and trust that are violated.

The danger in such occasions is that we may turn to bitterness and malice, but Jesus did not do that with Judas. Yet it is clear that our Lord suffered emotionally at the betrayal. Jesus prophetically lamented, "He who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me" (Jn. 13:18). And John says, "Jesus was troubled in his spirit" (Jn. 13:21). Therefore, when we are abandoned by loved ones or betrayed because of our Christian convictions, we may take solace in the fellowship we have with our Lord, who was even more wickedly betrayed. The same disciple who expressed alarm that a jar of alabaster worth three hundred denarii was being wasted now sold his Master, the Lord of glory, for the slave price of thirty silver pieces! George Herbert attempted to capture Jesus' feelings in a poem:

Mine own Apostle, who the bag did beare,
Though he had all I had did not forbear
To sell me also, and to put me there:
Was ever grief like mine?²

² Cited in D.A. Carson, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 476.

JESUS AND THE DISCIPLES

It was with this troubled spirit that Jesus announced the betrayal to the disciples: “Truly, truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me” (Jn. 13:21). The effect of this announcement places three relationships in bold relief. The first of them is the relationship of Jesus and his disciples. John recounts: “The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he spoke. One of his disciples, whom Jesus loved, was reclining at table close to Jesus, so Simon Peter motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking. So that disciple, leaning back against Jesus, asked, “Lord, who is it?”” (Jn. 13:22-25).

Notice, first, that the fellowship of the disciples centered on their mutual relationship with Jesus. This is why they responded with such immediate alarm at the idea that one of them should betray Jesus. The same is true today, that the lynch-pin of any Christian fellowship is the relationship of the individuals to Jesus. This is what makes a church – not the quality of the preaching, not the music ministry, not the value of its programs – but the relationship of the body to its head, Jesus Christ. What binds any Christian fellowship is a shared commitment to Jesus, to the teachings of his Word, and to his mission in the world. It is when other agendas intrude that fellowship and unity are broken. Thus the thought of one of them betraying Jesus caused the disciples to look at one another with uncertainty.

This account also gives us insight into the dynamics of the original band of twelve disciples. One of them was personally close to Jesus, and he “was reclining at table close to Jesus” (Jn. 13:23). The others do not seem to resent Jesus’ strong emotional connection with this disciple “whom Jesus loved”; Peter, at least seems to accept it without concern. They were all loved by Jesus in their own way and all had a place in his fellowship.

The question naturally arises as to the identity of this “beloved disciple.” The overwhelming consensus is that it is none other than the apostle John himself. It had to be one of the Twelve, since only they were present, and it makes sense that John would avoid naming himself in his own Gospel as one especially loved by Jesus. John was unquestionably the youngest of the disciples, perhaps only a teenager at the time, and the relationship of John and Peter to Jesus is

highlighted again later in this Gospel. Finally, at the end of the Gospel, John says of the disciple loved by Jesus: “This is the disciple who is bearing witness about these things, and who has written these things” (Jn. 21:24). So we may confidently regard the “beloved disciple” as the author of the Gospel, John the apostle.

Peter’s relationship with Jesus appears somewhat differently. He almost always emerges as the acting leader of the group. Peter is bold and full of action, sometimes in faith and sometimes in folly, and Jesus devotes a great deal of attention to shaping his faith and character. Here, Peter breaks the ice by asking the beloved disciple to make use of his closeness to Jesus to gain some clarification: “Simon Peter motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking” (Jn. 13:24). This does not mean that Peter had a formal supremacy, as is claimed by the Roman Catholic Church. This passage is cited as proving Peter’s supremacy, but in reality it shows the opposite: Peter is seen relying on John’s intercession with the Lord to gain information unavailable to himself.

John sets a good example, showing that those who draw near to the Lord’s heart are best able to gain his truth. Therefore, it is John who speaks for the others, and from his place next to Jesus he asks, “Lord, who is it?” (Jn. 13:25). This might be taken in a number of ways, but Matthew’s Gospel give us the true sense: “They were very sorrowful and began to say to him one after another, ‘Is it I, Lord?’”

This is the proper attitude that every Christian should take whenever there are trials or turmoil in the church. By our worldly nature, we are prone to focus our attention on what others will do. “How will the others handle themselves, Lord?” we ask. “Who is going to be the troublemaker who spoils it for everyone?” Instead, our focus should be on ourselves and our own spiritual attitude. “Lord, might I be one who will hinder your work? Is my attitude improper, my devotion to you compromised, or my focus on the wrong things?” It is virtually certain that those who inquire of the Lord about their own hearts will not be the ones to bring trouble.

Luke tells us that Jesus spoke of the betrayal again. But this time “they began to question one another, which of them it could be who was going to do this” (Lk. 22:23). Now, the disciples returned to their sinful ways, looking for others to blame and accuse. What was

the inevitable result? “A dispute also arose among them, as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest” (Lk. 22:24). Whenever this happens it is disastrous to a church, and on this occasion it was the prelude to the scattering of the disciples after Jesus’ arrest.

JESUS, SATAN, AND JUDAS

The worst response came from Judas himself. Matthew 26:25 records that he said, “Is it I, Rabbi?” Judas knew very well that he was the one, and it was his hypocritical deceit that was destined to break the fellowship of the disciples, however temporarily. In John’s Gospel, Jesus unmasked Judas in answer to John’s question. “Jesus answered, ‘It is he to whom I will give this morsel of bread when I have dipped it.’ So when he had dipped the morsel, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot” (Jn. 13:26).

A couple of things stand out in this second relationship, between Jesus and Judas. First, it is clear that Judas was seated close to Jesus. At an Oriental banquet of this kind, the table was likely set up in the form of a U, with the host at the head of the central table and those in positions of honor at his side. John was clearly at Jesus’ right hand, since the literal reading of verse 23 states that he was leaning on Jesus’ breast. We should understand that, quite in contrast to Leonardo Da Vinci’s famous portrait of *The Last Supper*, the disciples were not seated on chairs but were reclining on mats around a low table. Everyone’s head was leaning into the chest of the neighbor on his left. This means that John was on Jesus’ right and suggests that Judas was seated at Jesus’ left, which was the place of honor. So, knowing full well that Judas had already plotted to betray him, Jesus seated him in a place of prominence and favor.

Secondly, in that culture for the host to take food off his own plate and offer it to a guest with his own hands was an expression of high favor. Jesus was thus offering his personal blessing to Judas. A similar example is found in Ruth 2:14, where Boaz says to Ruth: “Come here and eat some bread and dip your morsel in the wine.”

These two features tell us that even at this late hour, knowing exactly what was in Judas’s heart, Jesus was still exercising every opportunity for the redemption of his betrayer. Painful as it was for

Jesus to be betrayed by one who ate from his own table, he did not give himself over to bitterness but continually sought the spiritual blessing of the one who abused his trust. This provides a model for how we should respond in Christian grace to those who betray us.

The great tragedy is that while Judas took the morsel from Jesus, he continued to close his heart even to this last offer of mercy and grace. John writes: “After he had taken the morsel, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, ‘What you are going to do, do quickly’” (Jn. 13:27).

This is the third relationship revealed: between Satan and Judas. John is not saying that Satan only came to Judas now, for earlier in the chapter John stated that “the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon’s son, to betray him” (Jn. 13:2). Long beforehand, Judas had revealed Satan’s influence on his life, for instance, by using his position in charge of the disciples’ money to steal from Jesus (Jn. 12:6). James Boice writes: “Judas, I am convinced, was not just a mistaken individual. He was a deceiver, a devil, a hypocrite *par excellence*. Judas lived with the others and pretended that he was one with them, while deep in his heart he was rebelling against everything that Jesus Christ had taught.”³

Judas shows us much about how the devil works in anyone’s life. J. C. Ryle comments: “First he suggests: then he commands. First he knocks at the door and asks permission to come in: then, once admitted, he takes complete possession, and rules the whole inward man like a tyrant.”⁴ James 4:7 provides us the remedy: “Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you” (Ja. 4:7). These two go together: we must submit ourselves to God’s authority and grace. Then, as we resist the impulses of sin and unbelief, Satan will flee in search of more convenient targets.

This shows us that even while in thrall to the devil, Judas was responsible for his actions. Matthew 26:24 records Jesus saying, “Woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born.” Even those who may point to Satan’s power over their lives are responsible for

³ James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 4:1028.

⁴ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1999), 3:34.

their sins and will be judged if they do not turn to Christ, for Satan gained power over them as a result of their openness to his influence.

As we consider the interplay between Jesus, Satan, and Judas, we must not fail to notice the sovereignty that Jesus exercises throughout. We see this in verse 29, where, realizing that Judas's last chance had passed, Jesus said to him, "What you are going to do, do quickly." So Judas departed even to betray Jesus at Jesus' command. Our Lord was not caught unawares by Judas' betrayal. Jesus did not fall into Judas's or Satan's trap. Instead, Jesus was obeying and even orchestrating events according to the foreordained will of God the Father. This reminds us that when we see Satan triumphing in the world today, and sometimes even in the church, we should not be shaken from our reliance on the Lord. When our own lives begin to resemble that of Job, that man most tormented by the devil, it is not because God's sovereign grace has been overturned. Rather, the cross of Jesus shows that even in apparent foolishness, God is wiser than the devil and men, and in apparent weakness, Paul writes, "the weakness of God is stronger than men" (1 Cor. 1:24-25).

Satan's greatest triumph ended in his ultimate defeat. God, in his infinite wisdom, made the worst thing that ever happened on earth the best thing that ever happened for sinful men. This is the right way to understand Jesus' statement in John 13:20: "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever receives the one I send receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me." If we stand for Christ, we stand with Christ, and with Christ stands God the almighty Heavenly Father. The Savior who triumphed through his own cross will lead us to salvation through whatever crosses he calls or permits us to bear.

LESSONS TAUGHT BY JUDAS

This last encounter between Jesus and Judas prior to the actual betrayal teaches us a number of important lessons. The first is the absolute necessity of the new birth as the sovereign act of God's grace. Judas shows that even the best Christian example simply cannot save. He had the example of Jesus close at hand for three years, yet his heart remained cold. Even the most powerful teaching of the gospel, such as Judas often heard from the very lips of Jesus, cannot result in faith unless God himself first opens the heart.

“No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him,” Jesus had said (Jn. 6:44). Therefore, we must never try to manipulate or manufacture conversions by worldly means. And even our witness of God’s Word, which God has commanded us to give, must be accompanied by prayers for God’s sovereign grace, apart from which even one who spent three years with Jesus could not be saved.

Second, we note how difficult it is accurately to assess the state of anyone else’s soul. Even when Jesus sent Judas out, the other disciples remained confused: “Some thought that, because Judas had the moneybag, Jesus was telling him, ‘Buy what we need for the feast,’ or that he should give something to the poor” (Jn. 13:29). Until Judas actually betrayed Jesus, the other disciples do not seem to have suspected him. This shows the problem of those who seek to ensure a wholly regenerate church: it is so difficult to know who really is born again. Therefore, we accept others as Christians based on a credible profession of faith in Christ. If some depart from us or turn to the way of the devil, we should not be dismayed, even though it grieves us greatly, since we can expect some false professors like Judas. Ultimately, the only proof of the new birth is continuance in the faith until the end.

Third, Judas proves the danger of toying with sin. The betrayal was not the start but the result of his dabbling with the devil. We do not know where it began, but we can easily imagine how. Ryle explains:

Trifling with the first thoughts of sin – making light of evil ideas when first offered to our hearts – allowing Satan to talk to us, and flatter us, and put bad notions into our hearts and minds – all this may seem a small matter to many. It is precisely at this point that the road to ruin often begins. He that allows Satan to sow wicked thoughts will soon find within his heart a crop of wicked habits. Happy is he who really believes that there is a devil, and, believing, watches and prays daily that he may be kept from his temptations.⁵

INTO THE NIGHT

Lastly, Jesus’ handling of his own betrayer shows his great patience and mercy as the Savior of sinners. Look at how Jesus bore with Judas even to the dreadful end of the hardened unbelief

⁵ Ibid., 3:35.

that claimed Judas's soul. Jesus still continues patiently to reach out to sinners. Seeing this in Judas's case urges us to respond to him while his offer of grace remains for us. Judas little realized that he was orchestrating not merely Jesus' death but also his own. Likewise, all who reject the grace offered in Christ's gospel – the gospel which extends forgiveness and saving power received through faith alone – are consigning themselves to condemnation. If they persist in unbelief, the last opportunity for salvation will come and be gone, as it was for Judas, that most woeful of all who were ever born.

Surely, this is the implication of John's final statement in this passage. He tells us that "after receiving the morsel of bread, [Judas] immediately went out." John then concludes, "And it was night" (Jn. 13:30). So it is for all who turn away from Jesus, rejecting his offer of grace from God through his own blood, shed in payment for our sins. In his first chapter, John said, "In him was life, and the life was the light of men" (Jn. 1:4). It is because Jesus is the true light that anyone who turns from him enters into eternal night. "To refuse the light means to choose the darkness where no light will ever shine again."⁶

The good news is that for all who still hear the gospel of Jesus, the night has not yet come eternally. Jesus still extends the bread of life from his own table to the most unworthy sinners. He calls to everyone: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (Jn. 8:12).

⁶ Bruce Milne, *The Message of John: Here Is Your King!* (Downers Grove, Ill: Inter-Varsity, 1993), 204.