

The Story of Judas

1. Are you seated comfortably? You're going to want a comfortable space because this story is quite uncomfortable. The story of Judas Iscariot causes a lot of problems...but also helps us deal with those problems.
2. The bare bones of the story are well known. While there are some minor differences among the Gospels when it comes to the names of the apostles, all of them name Judas as one of the original twelve.
3. Sometime during the three or more years he spent with Jesus, something turned inside of Judas and, eventually, he betrayed Jesus with a kiss. Later, full of remorse, he killed himself.
4. End of story? Not quite. Whole libraries have been written about Judas and the issues his life and death create for believers. Some writers have claimed that no man named Judas ever existed; that he was made up so that people could have a reason to hate Jews. That, of course, ignores the fact that almost all of the characters in the Gospels were Jews, including Jesus. Still, some scholars want to blame Christianity for antisemitism and will go to very strange lengths to twist the stories their way.
5. Judas was a real person in a real place at a real time. When it comes to his person and story, there are so many issues at play that are not apparent to someone just reading the Gospels. For one, what does "Iscariot" mean? His first name is easy: "God is thanked." His last name...not so much.
6. Rather than list all the competing ideas, let me just give you the top ones. Some believe it means "the man from Kerioth." Another very popular take is that it is a corruption of the word "sicarius" meaning "dagger." That makes a lot of sense to me. Some of Jesus's apostles were known as Zealots, a movement that believed they needed to cleanse Israel of Romans and those who collaborated with them. They carried long knives (or short swords) under their robes and struck out of nowhere.

7. We know that at least one of Jesus's apostles was carrying a sword the night he was betrayed. That was definitely against Roman law so it would not have been a casual decision to be armed. The sicarii of today break the law for drug cartels and other crime bosses. Back then, they broke it because they believed God called them to be warriors...but silent and secret.
8. So, what went wrong with Judas? Early on, he was actively engaged in the ministry. Jesus sent out "the twelve" and gave them power over unclean spirits, commissioning them to preach and to heal. Later, in the Book of John, we see that Jesus sensed some disease or disappointment among the apostles. After quite a few disciples left him, he turned to his apostles and asked if they would also leave him. Simon Peter spoke for the twelve when he said "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." Jesus then let them know that Peter wasn't speaking for them all; at least one of them was not happy.
9. Something happened between that first event and the last. At one time, Jesus said that all twelve of them would reign on thrones in His kingdom (Matthew 19:28). How did Judas fall so far?
10. Let me dispense of a few answers to that question. John Calvin and those who still follow his doctrines today, say that Judas had no choice. Prophecy stated clearly that Jesus would suffer and die, therefore someone had to betray him. If Judas hadn't betrayed him, then the entire plan of salvation would collapse!
11. This has caused many, many people to reject Christianity as unfair and nonsensical. If Jesus had to die and Judas had to betray him, it wasn't Judas's fault so God is unfair...
12. Except...no. The Hebrew scriptures absolutely DID say that the Messiah would suffer and die but they do not specifically say that he would be betrayed and that that betrayal would lead directly to his death. The passages that describe the coming Messiah as the "suffering servant" are well known to us – Isaiah 52-53 and Psalm 22. All of that could take place without Judas.

13. Also, God does not foreordain all things for all people in all times. He absolutely DOES foreordain some things, but He gives us wide latitude to accept Him or reject Him. We have a good measure of free will even if it is not absolute. I completely reject Calvinism, aka predestinationism, aka Reformed Theology. It turns us all into pawns who have zero input on whether or not we are saved or walk with Jesus on earth.
14. So, if God didn't force Judas to turn against Jesus, the question arises: how COULD Judas turn against Jesus? Didn't he see the miracles?
15. In the Gospels, some information is given to us but not much. In Matthew, Judas accepts 30 pieces of silver so...was it a monetary motive? Money has been the motive for the bulk of murders over the years so that is possible. We know that he held the money for the group and that he had dipped into it for his own purposes. Embezzlement, earning money or taking it by false statements or quiet theft has led more than one person further on down the road to perdition.
16. Jesus saw it coming. On the night he was betrayed, he even let those closest to him know about it. He handed Judas the sop and then told him to do what he had decided to do quickly.
17. To me, I see Judas being disappointed with Jesus. We know that many were. Many wanted another Judas Maccabeus, someone who would overthrow the Romans and reestablish the throne of David in Jerusalem forever. Jesus repeatedly said his kingdom was not of this world. Any Zealots would have been very upset at this and gone to look for another Messiah.
18. In fact, there were MANY such Messiahs. Anyone can read the works of Josephus online for free (though they are wordy) as he speaks of one after another stepping up and leading rebellions against Rome only to die violently. Philip Jenkins' amazing book, "Crucible of Faith" details quite a few who came before and after Jesus who claimed to be the Messiah everybody was waiting for and wanted: a sword bearing leader of an army of righteousness.

19. This is the time where we need to pull back and ask ourselves: are we disappointed in Jesus? The Jehovah's Witnesses speak of the Great Disappointment when their prophecies failed in the 1970s (though that history is being scrubbed). The Seventh Day Adventists and other end-times groups had their big disappointments, too. Quite a few churches and self appointed prophets were disappointed by the last presidential election in the US. Atheist magazines were loving it.
20. Are you disappointed with the results of prayer? With your life? With a situation in your life? Do you blame God? I'm of the firm opinion that God welcomes your engagement with Him. Wrestle Him all you want and He will not give up on you. Refuse to engage and just walk away...and you take the path Judas took.
21. What would have happened if Judas had taken Jesus aside and asked questions, argued about the plan, and kept engaging Jesus? I don't think the betrayal would have occurred at all...but it might have. Some of us insist that God run the universe the way we want it run and, if He doesn't follow our wishes, we walk away.
22. Judas, of course, didn't just walk away. He decided to burn the house down as he left it. He may have thought he was doing the right thing. He may have thought he was doing the wrong thing but for the right reasons (the strange parable of the husbandmen in Matthew 21, Mark 12, Luke 20). It seems at least possible that the high priest who handed Jesus over to be crucified believed he might actually BE the Messiah...but that God would forgive them because He had to...they were the chosen people.
23. But you cannot force the hand of God. Go ahead and wrestle Him – for we are spiritual Israel and the word “Israel” means “they who wrestle with God.” But never walk away. Never disengage.
24. The end of Judas was first, regret and, then, death. Early Christians taught that it was the suicide that was Judas's worse sin as betrayal can be forgiven but suicide could not. I disagree with them on this. Suicide is too complicated an issue to tackle today but in no way do I believe it is an automatic condemnation. More on that another day.

25. Matthew says that Judas hung himself. Acts says he fell and his body split open. I won't go into the mechanics of hanging but I will say this is not necessarily a contradiction; both of these can happen to the same body.
26. When it comes down to it, Judas and Peter both betrayed Jesus (and the rest ran away). The only difference is that Peter came back. Peter was there when Jesus was resurrected. He was still Peter, impulsive, too quick to speak and too slow to think sometimes...but he stayed there, close to Jesus. He didn't quit.
27. We face the same choice: walk away, betray, or stay the course even when we disagree with God.
28. When I was a kid, we sang the old song "Trust and Obey for there's no other way to be happy in Jesus but to trust and obey." I had no idea how hard that would be...but I cannot but echo what Peter said: to whom should we go? Like Mrs. Noah...this is the only option and it will, in fact, save us. Stay the course.