

## *Easter With Unbelief • Matthew 16:1-16*

Has anyone ever betrayed you, turned against you? Someone you've known for a long time? Someone you really loved? Someone you trusted? Someone you thought you knew and who really knew you? Then *Wham!* Out of nowhere this person turns against you. She files for divorce. He initiates a lawsuit. They become your instant enemy. You never saw it coming. It takes your breath away. You don't know if you are more hurt or angry by their betrayal.

Or, have you ever betrayed someone else? Not that you would call it betrayal. You can explain everything. It all makes perfect sense. You are the one who was offended. You never did anything wrong. That person who calls you a traitor had it coming.

You probably know the story of Judas. He is the only one of Jesus' original twelve disciples after whom we do not name our sons. We have Matthew, Peter, John, Nathaniel and Andrew but none of us has ever met a man named Judas. His name has gone down in history as a synonym for the very worst. He leveraged his close personal relationship with Jesus in order to deliver him to the police. Once arrested Jesus was tried, convicted and executed. For us it turned out amazingly well for the death of Jesus led to our eternal life and his resurrection from the dead. But for Judas it turned out to be awful, leading to his death by suicide. So Judas is the only disciple of Jesus who missed Easter.

To understand what happened we need some history, otherwise the whole story of betrayal doesn't make much sense.

The Jewish religion had a high priest who was the supreme spiritual leader and the CEO of the Temple in Jerusalem. He was chosen from the descendants of Aaron, the first high priest of Israel, and he served for life. He was somewhat like the Pope today.

In first century Jerusalem the Romans ruled. Israel was a conquered and occupied country. A puppet government was set up, but the Romans

were really in charge. And the Romans appointed the high priest. It wasn't the way it was supposed to be but the Jews really had no choice.

The Romans went through high priests faster than modern Argentina goes through presidents. During the 104 years from 37 B.C. until AD 67 there were 28 high priests. They averaged less than 3 years 9 months in office. Obviously, when the Romans were displeased with a high priest they just replaced him with someone else.

Joseph Caiaphas served as high priest from AD 18 to AD 36—a total of 18 consecutive years. He must have been very good at keeping Roman governors happy to last so long. How did he do it?

The Romans did not tolerate civil disorder. Mobs and riots could easily get out of hand. In Jerusalem there was no more potentially explosive time than the annual Passover. Jews came from across the empire to celebrate their high holy days. Many of them were political and religious zealots who were looking for a Messiah to lead them against the Roman rulers.

I don't know the population of Jerusalem in the first century but let's assume it was around 50,000—roughly the size of Eden Prairie. At Passover the population enormously expanded for about a week.

The Jewish historian Josephus writes that the Roman governor Cestius felt that Emperor Nero

just didn't understand how difficult and dangerous the Jews were. So, Cestius wrote to Nero describing the Passover festival. In the letter he explained that at the Pass-

over the Jews killed one lamb for every ten people. He ordered the high priest to count the number of lambs slaughtered at one Passover in Jerusalem. The total was 256,500 sheep. With ten people per lamb that brought the number of Passover people to 2,565,000. That is roughly the equivalent of the entire population of the Twin Cities coming and staying in Eden Prairie for a week. It's hard

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to imagine the logistics of food, lodging and sanitation for so many people in such a small area. But the Roman governor was for more worried about riots and insurrection. It would take the entire Roman army to control the mob.

This helps us to crawl into the thinking of Caiaphas. As high priest he was responsible to keep the peace and quiet during Passover. The problem was Jesus. Everyone was talking about him. He attracted and persuaded large crowds with his speeches. People said he was the Messiah. All the ingredients were in place for an insurrection.

The solution? The solution was a preventative strike against Jesus before the trouble began. It would have to be done soon, fast and secretly. The risk of a daylight capture was that the crowds might come to his aid. Matthew 26:14-16 records:

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.

Judas knew Jesus well. He knew where Jesus would be and when he would be there. He could take the police to find him in a private place under the cover of darkness. Once he was arrested the authorities could quickly dispose of Jesus and head off all the potential problems that were arising. Judas was a double agent.

And that’s exactly what happened. Judas listened carefully to Jesus’ plans. They had all been to the private garden on the Mount of Olives many times before. For the right price Judas led a small army straight to Jesus where he was arrested and taken to trial. Quick trials led to a hasty crucifixion. Crucifixion led to a rapid death. Jesus of Nazareth was no longer a threat. He was disposed of. Peace was preserved. Caiaphas could keep his job.

The story of what Judas did is well known to many of us. The reason why he did what he did has never been definitively answered. There are several possible explanations.

Maybe Judas sold Jesus for the money. We know he was paid thirty silver coins, although that is only the equivalent of about \$20 in our

money. It’s hard to imagine anyone doing something so treacherous for so little profit.

When Matthew wrote the history of Jesus’ final days before crucifixion he did something very strange. He interrupted the story with an account of Jesus visiting in the home of a man named Simon the Leper who lived in the village of Bethany just east of Jerusalem. While visiting in Simon’s house a woman came up behind Jesus and poured a container of very expensive perfume on his head. Jesus’ followers, probably including Judas, strongly objected that this was a waste of money. But Jesus didn’t respond with anger; he responded with gratitude. He was thrilled with the generosity of someone who loved him so much that she gave to him one of her most valuable possessions. Jesus promised that her story would be retold for the rest of history wherever the Gospel was taught.

Why did Matthew interrupt the Judas story with the perfume story? Perhaps it was because he wanted his readers to see the sharp contrast between those who love Jesus with generosity and those who use Jesus for greed. The woman in Bethany wanted to give something to Jesus; Judas wanted to get something out of Jesus. Matthew wanted us to see ourselves in the mirror of history. Are we more about generosity or greed when it comes to Jesus Christ?

I still find it hard to believe Judas could dump Jesus for so little cash. Although saying that implies that a higher price might have made more sense. The truth is that no price is enough to sell out Jesus. Jesus must mean more to us than any amount of money. There is no place for greed in the thinking of a true disciple of Jesus. John fills in some of the blanks in John 12:4-6:

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.

Maybe Judas did what he did for money, but a better explanation for Judas’ betrayal may be politics. Judas may well have been a member of the movement called Zealots that swore to do ev-

everything in their power to overthrow Roman rule. The Romans would have called them terrorists. The Jews would have called them patriots.

When Judas joined Jesus he saw the potential for political revolution—a new order. At last there was a real Messiah who could gather the masses, organize an army and ruin the Romans. If he mustered a huge Jewish army, Jesus could feed them all with a miraculous multiplication of a few loaves of bread and a couple of small fish. If there were battlefield casualties, Jesus could heal them. Jesus could even bring dead soldiers back to life so they could fight another day.

But too much time passed. After three years Judas was increasingly disappointed and disillusioned with Jesus' political agenda. Jesus was getting sidetracked with overly spiritual priorities. Jesus increasingly talked about going to Jerusalem to die. He sounded suicidal. Maybe it was time for Judas to quit on Jesus, cut his losses and move on to another candidate.

Judas wouldn't be the first or the last to abandon a leader because things didn't go his way. Sometimes the most loyal and faithful followers turn into the most severe critics and outright enemies. It was time for Judas to dump this Jesus who never lived up to his political potential, and betrayal was a good way to end the relationship.

Maybe there's still another explanation. Maybe it was all just a mistake—a terrible misunderstanding. Perhaps Judas actually thought he was doing a good thing. To Judas it may have seemed strange that Jesus didn't see his own political potential. Maybe Judas could do something. He could shove Jesus into a confrontation with the religious, military and political authorities. If they tried to arrest Jesus, Jesus would be forced to act. He would declare himself Messiah, rally the people and overthrow the Romans. There couldn't be a better time than Passover. He just needed a little help from Judas.

Could he really have been that foolish? Did Judas really think he was smarter than Jesus

Christ? He would not have been the first and certainly not the last to try to push Jesus into political action he did not want.

In the final analysis, we can't fully know why Judas betrayed Jesus. What we know for sure is that he did. Judas sold out the Son of God, the Savior of the world and his best friend.

The betrayal led to the trial, the trial to the cross and the cross to the grave. And then Judas was sorry. He wanted to go back and undo the treachery he had done. Judas returned to the religious leaders and gave back the thirty coins, but it was too little too late. Filled with remorse, Judas committed suicide. Talk about a tragedy. On the day Jesus Christ rose from the dead in the greatest miracle of eternity Judas was buried in a

pauper's grave outside Jerusalem. Because of his unbelief he never saw Easter. He was so near and yet so far!

What about us? Could this be our story? Whenever I read the stories in

the Bible I have a tendency to identify with the characters—their dreams, their sins, their successes and their failures. I'm David against Goliath. I'm St. Paul discouraged by critics. I'm Peter when impulsive. I'm Mary—happy with Jesus' birth and heartbroken with Jesus' suffering and death. But I just don't want to identify with Judas. He's too greedy, too selfish, too evil. I want nothing to do with him. It is too frightening to even imagine what it would be like to turn against Jesus, to turn the life of Easter into the death of eternity.

I do wonder how Judas got there—from one of Jesus' most devoted disciples to Jesus' worst enemy. There is a concept called "tipping point" that was written into a popular business book with the same name. The concept is simple: if you take very small steps in the same direction eventually you will reach a point where everything changes. We have many expressions to describe the idea in our English language: "The straw that broke the camel's back." "The frog in the kettle—raise

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the temperature slowly enough and the frog will stay in the kettle until he is cooked to death.” Maybe that’s what happened to Judas. A little unbelief was added every day until a one-time disciple became an all-time traitor.

Sixty years ago there were two popular, fast rising Christian evangelists in North America: Billy Graham and Charles Templeton. They were good friends. Graham remained faithful to Jesus. Templeton, by contrast, abandoned his Christian beliefs and wrote a book called *Farewell to God: My Reasons for Rejecting the Christian Faith*.

Journalist Lee Strobel went to visit Charles Templeton when he 83 years old and in failing health. Strobel asked him about Jesus and here’s how Charles Templeton answered:

He was the greatest human being who has ever lived. He was a moral genius. His ethical sense was unique. He was the intrinsically wisest person that I’ve ever encountered in my life or in my readings. He’s the most important thing in my life. I know it may sound strange, but I have to say I *adore* him! Everything good I know, everything decent I know, everything pure I know, I learned from Jesus. He is the most important human being who has ever existed. And if I may put it this way, *I miss Him*.

I don’t ever want to miss Jesus. Never a Judas. Never a Templeton.

Let’s believe in Jesus. Don’t even consider the possibility of quitting the race until it’s over. Don’t even think of quitting before Easter comes. Believe! Believe in Jesus and tenaciously hold onto that belief! St. Paul wrote in I Corinthians 6:14, “*By his power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us also.*”

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Leith Anderson and Wooddale Church  
6630 Shady Oak Road  
Eden Prairie MN 55344  
952-944-6300  
[www.wooddale.org](http://www.wooddale.org)  
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