

The Pact to Betray Jesus
Matthew 26:14-16
Gerry Andersen
Valley Bible Church Adult Sunday School

The account of the pact that Judas made to betray Jesus to the chief priests in Matthew 26:14-16 is found also in Mark 14:1-11, and in Luke 22:3-6. Mark's account is even briefer than Matthew's, omitting details, and Luke's Gospel is a little longer. However, both of these other synoptic Gospels add meaningful details to this story.

Only Matthew included the story of the anointing of Jesus with perfume before the account of the agreement between Judas and the chief priests to betray Jesus. Mark and Luke continued the chronological ordering of the events of the Wednesday of Christ's final week, while Matthew inserted the anointing of Jesus in order to emphasize the worship of our Lord in contrast to His betrayal by Judas and His arrest by the chief priests. Beginning in verse 14, Matthew returned to the narrative of the betrayal of Jesus.

The identification of the betrayer (26:14)

Judas had only been mentioned once before in Matthew's Gospel, where he is found at the end of the list of Christ's twelve disciples in Matthew 10:2-4. In fact, in every list of the twelve disciples (cf. Mark 3:16-19; Luke 6:13-16), Judas is listed last, with the clarifier that he was *"the one who betrayed Him."* The New Testament only speaks of Judas in the context of his betrayal of Jesus.

Matthew identifies Judas by his surname, Iscariot. The meaning of *"Iscariot"* is unknown, but often surnames refer to a place where a person is from. Some have identified him with a village in southern Judea, which if true, would mean that Judas Iscariot was the only disciple that we know of from a place outside of the region of Galilee. A surname was necessary because Judas was a common name, and another disciple held that name, Judas, the son of James (Luke 6:16).

In Matthew's list of the twelve, he used the term *"apostles"* when introducing each disciple, *"Now the names of the twelve apostles are these:"* (Matthew 10:2). This obviously does not mean that Judas was an apostle in the sense that he was part of the foundation of the church. The term *"apostle"* means "sent one" and Judas was sent out along with the other eleven immediately after the list of the twelve, *"These twelve Jesus sent out after instructing them"* (Matthew 10:5).

That Judas was described as *“one of the twelve”* is significant because it shows the degree of this evil deed. One who held a position within the Lord’s inner circle, and who enjoyed the great privilege of being with Him through His entire public ministry, would be the means by which His enemies would be able to seize Him. How one with such access to Christ was able to perform such a traitorous deed is a testimony to the fallenness of mankind.

Luke 22:3 describes this evil betrayal as involving the devil, *“And Satan entered into Judas who was called Iscariot, belonging to the number of the twelve.”* John 13:2 corroborates this, *“the devil having already put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon, to betray Him.”* This did not absolve him of the responsibility for his sin, as he himself admitted in Matthew 27:4, *“I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.”* This was a process of Judas choosing to yield to the devil’s temptation, *“So when He had dipped the morsel, He took and *gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot. After the morsel, Satan then entered into him. Therefore Jesus said to him, ‘What you do, do quickly’”* (John 13:26-27). Judas chose to allow the devil to enter his heart to betray the Lord.

Why did Jesus choose Judas as one of the twelve disciples? This was certainly not a mistake by the Lord, for He knew beforehand what He was doing when He chose Judas. *“Jesus knew from the beginning who they were who did not believe, and who it was that would betray Him”* (John 6:64). Since Jesus knew what He was doing, He had a purpose for His choice.

Certainly Jesus chose Judas primarily to fulfill the prophecy of Psalm 41:9, *“Even my close friend in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted up his heel against me.”* Jesus specifically told His disciples this in John 13:18, *“I do not speak of all of you. I know the ones I have chosen; but it is that the Scripture may be fulfilled, ‘HE WHO EATS MY BREAD HAS LIFTED UP HIS HEEL AGAINST ME.’”* *“Brethren, the Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit foretold by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus”* (Acts 1:16). Therefore, Jesus made a choice to fulfill the words of the Old Testament prophets.

Beyond the sovereign plan of God to deliver the world from sin through the death of the Savior, there are also secondary lessons that come from the choice of Judas. The gravity of the sinfulness of man is on display when such a close associate betrays the Lord of all. Specifically, the attraction of Judas toward money demonstrated *“the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs”* (1 Timothy 6:10).

The Lord used such a profound evil deed to accomplish the greatest good, to emphasize the truth of the words of Joseph in Genesis 50:20, *“As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive.”* Just as the brothers of Joseph plotted his harm by selling him into slavery, resulting in Joseph being in a position to deliver Israel from starvation in a time of famine, even more, God used the betrayal of Judas to deliver mankind from their sin through the death and resurrection of Christ.

The initiation of the betrayal (26:15)

Matthew 26:15 describes Judas as being the one who went to the chief priests with the offer to betray Jesus. He went to the chief priests because they were the official religious leaders of the Jews, who controlled the temple and had the power to condemn Him according to their religious system. Whether Judas knew that they were plotting against Jesus (cf. Matthew 26:3-5) is not stated but He certainly was aware of the predictions that Christ made that *“the Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn Him to death”* (Matthew 20:18; cf. 16:21). Also, he would have observed their challenges to His authority (cf. Matthew 21:23).

As was fitting for his greedy heart, Judas sought money from the chief priests, asking *“What are you willing to give me to betray Him to you?”* The very prediction that Judas heard Jesus make, that *“the Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests,”* would actually end up being accomplished by him!

Matthew is the only Gospel that records the price that the chief priests agreed to pay Judas for betraying Jesus, thirty pieces of silver. These pieces of silver are literally silver coins, most likely referring to thirty shekels. This would be consistent with the fulfillment of Zechariah 11:12-13, *“So they weighed out thirty shekels of silver as my wages. Then the LORD said to me, ‘Throw it to the potter, that magnificent price at which I was valued by them.’ So I took the thirty shekels of silver and threw them to the potter in the house of the LORD.”* Thus the thirty shekels was the value of Zechariah’s labor in 11:12-13. Furthermore, Exodus 21:32 tells us that thirty shekels of silver was the value of a slave, *“If the ox gores a male or female slave, the owner shall give his or her master thirty shekels of silver, and the ox shall be stoned.”* Most scholars consider one shekel to be worth four denarii, and therefore, the value of this betrayal was about four months of work by a laborer. This approximation fits with what a plot of land would be worth, as the money was eventually used to buy the potter’s field (Matthew 27:6-10).

Taken together, the significance of the thirty pieces of silver is the fulfillment of Zechariah 11:12-13, which is sarcastically called *“a magnificent price”* in Zechariah 11:13. The thirty shekels being the price of a slave, considers Jesus to be worth the value of a slave that was accidentally killed. Also, this price stands in contrast to the very costly perfume, which Mary used to anoint Jesus with in Matthew 26:7, valued at *“over three hundred denarii”* (cf. Mark 14:5; John 12:5). Therefore, there is an apparent contempt for Jesus by assigning Him the value of a slave that was accidentally killed.

Luke 22:4-5 provides a little more background regarding the process of this transaction, *“And he went away and discussed with the chief priests and officers how he might betray Him to them. They were glad and agreed to give him money.”* This then implies that there was some degree of formality, and possibly negotiation, between Judas and the chief priests as the *“officers”* were the temple guard that maintained the security of the temple and protected the chief priests. This formal negotiation is also implied by the words *“weighted out thirty pieces of silver,”* which shows that this proposed betrayal for money was obviously met with hearty approval by these religious leaders.

The intention to betray (26:16)

Once the agreement was reached between the chief priests and Judas, *“From then on he began looking for a good opportunity to betray Jesus.”* Clearly, Judas didn't need to wait long to find a good opportunity, since the arrest would occur on the night of the following day, in the garden of Gethsemane. He became as eager as the chief priests to take advantage of the circumstance for his own benefit.

That the chief priests needed Judas to find a good opportunity to betray Jesus tells us more about the nature of the betrayal. This is supported by Luke 22:5, *“they were glad and agreed to give him money.”* So then these leaders considered that Judas' offer was worth money, which leads to the logical question of what Judas was actually providing to them.

Jesus was quite popular and the chief priests could have arrested Jesus without Judas if they were so inclined. Jesus Himself made this point after He had been detained in Matthew 26:55-56, *“Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest Me as you would against a robber? Every day I used to sit in the temple teaching and you did not seize Me. But all this has taken place to fulfill the Scriptures of the prophets.”* He had been available to them and yet they waited until Judas gave them the perfect opportunity.

Certainly, Jesus was correct as the leaders could have seized Him when He was teaching the crowds in the temple. However, they had already concluded that it would be unwise for them to do so, as Matthew 26:4-5 tells us that *“they plotted together to seize Jesus by stealth and kill Him. But they were saying, ‘Not during the festival, otherwise a riot might occur among the people.’”* The chief priests did not want to seize Him publicly because they feared what the people might do when such a popular figure was arrested by them. This is why they needed to *“seize Jesus by stealth.”*

But the problem with seizing Jesus by stealth was that while He was easy to locate and identify while He was teaching, this would be more difficult when He was no longer in public. Keep in mind that they not only had to locate Him away from the crowds, but there were no pictures of Jesus. According to the Old Testament, the Messiah would not stand out by His remarkable appearance, *“He has no stately form or majesty that we should look upon Him, nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him”* (Isaiah 53:2). This may be a part of the reason that at times Jesus was able to elude people who sought to kill Him (cf. Luke 4:30; John 8:59).

As a result, Judas’ role was necessary in order for the chief priests to carry out their desired end. Judas was particularly needed because the chief priests themselves were not present to arrest Him, since they sent a large number of Roman soldiers with their temple guard, *“Judas then, having received the Roman cohort and officers from the chief priests and the Pharisees, came there with lanterns and torches and weapons”* (John 18:3).

Because it was dark on the evening of Thursday, the Roman soldiers and the temple guards would have had an even harder time identifying Jesus, even with lanterns and torches. This is why Judas arranged for a specific sign to help them know who to seize, *“Now he who was betraying Him gave them a sign, saying, ‘Whomever I kiss, He is the one; seize Him’* (Matthew 26:48).

This shows the degree of conspiracy against Jesus, for Judas would have had to not only arrange for how he would identify Jesus, but he also came with this cohort of Roman soldiers and temple officers that the chief priests had arranged to arrest Jesus. Since John 18:3 tells us that the Pharisees were also involved in sending the Roman cohort and officers of the temple, this would have required coordination between these sects of Jewish leadership to organize this large crowd to join Judas in this arrest. A Roman cohort was officially 600 soldiers, although at times it referred to a subset of the entire cohort. But nevertheless, this was a large force that was marshalled to arrest Jesus.

Conclusion

The chief priests were undoubtedly surprised at their good fortune to have one of Jesus' own disciples approach them with the offer to betray Him. While they desired *"to seize Jesus by stealth and kill Him,"* and had resigned themselves to waiting until after the Feast of Unleavened Bread to do so, they could not pass up this opportunity that Judas afforded them. As we will see as the events of Jesus' arrest unfold, this betrayal would give them the path to avoid their fear of a riot developing among the people.

Judas' offer gave the chief priests the confidence that Jesus was possibly not as popular as they feared since one of His own disciples was against Him. Furthermore, Judas afforded them the opportunity to seize Jesus at night, in a way that would dodge any uprising among the crowd, since there would be no crowd gathered. Judas would give them access to Jesus at a time and place that was not public. Luke's Gospel includes this point by adding to the words that Matthew's Gospel included, *"he began seeking a good opportunity to betray Him to them apart from the crowd"* (Luke 22:6). This would occur in the hours to come when Jesus went to the Garden of Gethsemane.

Since the price of the betrayal of Jesus was only thirty silver coins, it stands in stark contrast to the value of the perfume that was used to honor Jesus in Matthew 26:7. It is noteworthy that it was Judas who was so indignant regarding the supposed waste of the ointment, while he himself viewed the thirty coins as not a waste (John 12:4-5). Judas obviously had an evil financial value system. People who criticize others for their spending choices while indulging themselves follow in his footsteps.

Furthermore, while it is right to focus our attention on Judas' accepting the silver coins to betray Jesus, we ought not overlook where these coins came from. The chief priests did not collect them from their own resources. These coins came from the temple treasury. This is seen when Judas gives them the coins back, the chief priests said, *"It is not lawful to put them into the temple treasury, since it is the price of blood"* (Matthew 27:6). One way these coins ended up in the temple treasury was through the work of those buying, selling and exchanging money at the temple, whom Jesus harshly condemned (Matthew 21:12-13). So these religious leaders who manipulated the temple worship for monetary gain, turned around to use that gain for Judas to betray the Messiah. Such use of money that was given for the purpose of God, to be used for such evil, is further evidence of the sinfulness of the religious leaders that Jesus opposed.