

My Name Is Judas Iscariot
Matthew 27:3-10

By
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My name is Judas Iscariot. I am probably the most widely known of all the disciples of Jesus. The greatest sorrow of my life has been that I am remembered for only one act—one deed. There were many things in my life, but I am remembered in infamy for only one deed. In all of the four Gospels I am listed last among Jesus' disciples and identified as the man who betrayed Jesus.

I want to tell you my story—what happened and why. Maybe you're not interested in hearing my story. Nothing would suit me better than to crawl back into the pages of history and be left permanently alone, but the trouble is that people will not leave me alone. They keep dragging me out—some delighting in condemning me over and over again, and others seeking some way to defend me. Your rock opera "Jesus Christ Superstar," is a good example. "Poor old Judas. So long Judas" was one of its couplets. The play is wrongly named, because Jesus is not the superstar, I am. Jesus doesn't have the leading role, I do. The writers understood me better than they understood Jesus. I did try to admire Jesus, but he refused to be guided by me, and he got himself crucified and that was the end of Judas Iscariot. But I am getting ahead of my story. Let me tell it to you from the beginning, if you are willing to listen.

Who I am?

My name has been blackened for two thousand years. But there is really nothing sinister about my name. "Iscariot" simply means "son of Keriath" or "citizen of Keriath," and that means I came from Keriath, a small village south of Jerusalem in the region where the prophet Amos was born. "Judas" was a good name—a famous name—until I made it a synonym for treachery. It means—can you believe it—"praise of God." My parents rejoiced when I was born and gave thanks to God. My mother looked into my face and rejoiced. They were so happy that they named me after the most famous military leader in our history—Judas Maccabeus. So you see I made a good start. I was not born a devil or possessed of a demon. I was not born a wretched creature destined to infamy.

I was brought up in a religious home and taught to love and honor my people, my country and my God.

There is one thing more which you need to know about my early background. It will help you to see why I never quite fit into the twelve apostles. They all came from Galilee—from the north. I came from Judea—from the south. They were from the country. I was a city boy. They came from the laboring classes, I had some formal

education and I had been around. I always felt like a stranger among them. I couldn't get close to them. I didn't fit in. I felt lonely and misunderstood and unappreciated. We never did see things the same way.

Why Did I Follow Jesus?

My family gave me an illustrious name that was famous for patriotism, power, and freedom. For five centuries, and that's a long time, my people had been no better than slaves. Never since the fall of Jerusalem in the fifth century B.C. had we known a single year of independence—of freedom. Only the brief rebellion led by my namesake, Judas Maccabeus, had broken for a moment the galling yoke of slavery. When I was born, our country was an occupied country, a province of the famous Roman Empire, bled white by taxes and terrorized by foreign soldiers marching arrogantly through the streets. It was demeaning and humiliating. You had to respond with either a submissive passivity or a rebellious anger. Many who were angry, lost their lives. Rebellion offered no real hope. We didn't have a chance against the Roman army. My father, my grandfather, my great grandfather, my great, great, grandfather—my family as far back as anyone could remember suffered under this oppression.

But I didn't give up hope.

There was one mighty hope which had been nurtured in our hearts from generation to generation. A hope which had been kept alive through all the indignity and suffering of conquest and slavery. Like every faithful Jew, I looked for the coming of God's Messiah. I believed with all of my heart in the promise of the great prophets that one day out of heaven would come an invincible Divine leader to rally our stricken people, crush our enemies into the dust and restore our national independence. I thought that Jesus was that heaven-sent leader. That's what the writers of Superstar didn't understand about me. They have me trying to persuade Jesus not to pose as the Messiah, but what I was really trying to do was to persuade him to declare himself as the Messiah. I believed he was the Messiah. That is what attracted me to him, and that is why I chose to be his disciple.

Jesus was a born leader. He had charisma. You couldn't keep the crowds away from him. From all over the country they flocked to hear him preach on the hillsides. And such preaching it was! No person ever spoke as authoritatively about God. And it wasn't only what he said about God. It was the way he brought the presence and power of God right into our experience just as the prophets had promised that the Messiah would do. We had never seen anything like it before. Others had claimed to be the Messiah but they had done none of the things Jesus did. Jesus made the blind to see and the crippled walk. He cured lepers and insane people and even stopped a storm on the Sea of Galilee. Now I ask you—who else could he be but the Messiah?

All the time I kept saying to myself, "One of these days he is going to tell us plainly that he is the Messiah. One of these days the Prince disguised as a beggar is going to remove his disguise and take a sword in his hand and deliver us from oppression." I thought the day had finally come when we stopped on the road to Caesarea Philippi and he asked us who we thought he was. Peter answered for all of us, "You are the

Messiah.” Jesus didn’t exactly admit it but neither did he deny it, and that made me hope again. It was as if the great bell of freedom was about to ring. I could see it all so clearly. Jesus would be the leader of his people against the oppressor. Jerusalem would be the capital of the world! The nations, even Imperial Rome would bow in homage before us. And to think we twelve would be the first to receive appointments. What honor, what prestige, what power would come to us as cabinet ministers in the new Kingdom of Jesus. Now don’t you get me wrong, I wasn’t alone in this ambitious scheming. The others had the same thing in mind. It wasn’t me, it was James and John who asked Jesus for the places of power on his right hand and on his left hand.

All along the way Jesus had been saying some strange things, but I thought I just didn’t understand him. “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘you shall not murder’. . . . But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgement” (Matthew 5:21,22 NRSV).

“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, But I say to you, Do not resist one who is evil. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also” (Matthew 5:38,39 NRSV).

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:43,44 NRSV).

“In everything do to others as you would have them do to you” (Matthew 7:12 NRSV).

I had to shake my head when I heard such things. That didn’t sound like a conquering Messiah to me. Then, he kept talking about a cross. That didn’t make sense to any of us. A crucified Messiah was utterly impossible. He talked about the cross and then went on doing what he had done before—healing beggars and blind men, lingering with losers and wasting his time on ones and twos. It was ridiculous! With all this power over the natural and the supernatural why didn’t he sweep the Romans into the sea and restore the Kingdom of our father, David? If he can raise the dead, surely he can lead a revolution! Every young man in Palestine with red blood surging in his veins would rise up and follow him. Yet here he is fleeing like a fugitive with a handful of peasants, telling people to love one another, saying he must suffer, and babbling something about a cross. That’s no way for a Messiah to act. Then I began to suspect one of two things: (1) Either he was not the Messiah, or (2) the Messiah meant something very different to him than what any of us expected. For us it meant dominion; for him, suffering. For us it meant violence; for him, non-violence. For us it meant a sword and a crown; for him, thorns and a cross.

If I had been morally honest I would have walked out on him there and then. But he had such magnetism—such power. Yet, my whole attitude toward him did change. He sensed the change, he could read my thoughts of disappointment and disillusionment. He realized I was falling away from him, but that didn’t change his attitude toward me. I disagreed with him. I was disappointed in him. I resented him. At times I hated him.

Yet, he still loved me, looked at me with those soft patient eyes as though he was saying, "Judas, Judas..." I would never have admitted it then, but I loved him too. But I just couldn't understand him. Messiah or not, he was my friend, the best friend I ever had.

I know you have to wonder how I could be so despicable. Let me explain that after struggling with these doubts for three years my patience broke during that last week in Jerusalem. On Palm Sunday my hopes came alive again as Jesus entered the city of Jerusalem riding an ass. Every Jew knew Zechariah 9:9—"Behold your King comes to you...humble and riding on an ass." And imagine my excitement on Monday when Jesus entered the temple, strode into the temple court, kicked over the tables of the moneychangers and drove them all out like a flock of frightened geese. That was my kind of Messiah! At last he is going to move in the right direction. Two days later he was in the house of Simon the Leper when a woman came in from the street and poured precious ointment over his head. I thought to myself, "Now he will come forward as the Lord's anointed." But do you know what he did? He turned the meaning of the anointing into something entirely different. He said, "She has anointed my body for burial." Think of it! She offered him a crown, and he turned it into a tomb!

What I Did.

That's when I formed my crazy, diabolical scheme that seemed so ingenious at the time. I decided that Jesus needed a push and that I ought to give it to him. I would force his hand, put him in a position where he had no choice but to exercise his Messianic power. It could be done very simply. The religious leaders in Jerusalem were seeking to arrest him and have him executed on trumped up charges, but they had to do it quickly and quietly so the people would not start a riot. Jesus was still very popular.

If the authorities knew where Jesus was they would arrest him. I went to the priest and offered to provide the information. They gave me thirty pieces of silver, and I accepted them, why not? If Jesus were really the Messiah he would make fools of those hypocrites. If not, I will save my skin and be richer in the process.

Now don't get me wrong—I did not expect my plan to fail. After all, if a man can raise the dead he is not about to let people put him to death. In the Upper Room that Thursday evening when he said, "One of you will betray me," I wanted to shout, "You won't call it betrayal when you see what happens. You'll be grateful for what I did." Your Gospels say that a devil entered into my soul. Maybe it did—but it was a devil of bitterness, and resentment and hatred and revenge. For three years I walked with Jesus and it seemed to me in that moment that those three precious years had been wasted on the biggest loser of them all. He made a fool of me, and I hated him for it, hated him for all his soft talk, his foolish servility, and his empty promises. He couldn't be the Messiah. And if he wasn't the Messiah the sooner we got rid of him the better. So I slipped out of the Upper Room, scarcely noticed by the others, and guided the soldiers to the Garden of Gethsemane. I did not expect Jesus to be arrested. I identified him by going to him and kissing him profusely—as a disciple greets his rabbi.

And while my traitorous kiss was still hot on his cheek he looked into my eyes and said, "Friend, do what you are here to do." It cut me to the heart. As the soldiers moved toward him everything within me screamed, "Now! Now! Strike them dead now!" Even the other disciples wanted to fight it out. But he stopped them. The soldiers took him, and he went with them as meek as a lamb. My brilliant scheme had failed. My heart sank within me.

How I Reacted.

Then suddenly I was alone. Everybody turned their backs and walked away. I stood there in the garden, dazed by the dreadful thought of the terrible deed I had done—the awful events which I had set in motion. I must stop the soldiers. Jesus was not a revolutionary. He had done nothing to deserve death. He must not die. Oh, what have I done! Like a crazy man I rushed out of the garden, down the slopes of the Mount of Olives, across the Kedron Valley, through the gates into the city, up and down the streets, hoping to find someone who could help me rescue him. But it was too late. Those who hated him so much had him at last and they would never let him go. They intended to kill him no matter what. I forced my way into their council chamber just as they were taking Jesus to Pontius Pilate to be sentenced. I threw the money at their feet and screamed that I had betrayed an innocent man. They weren't even interested. "That's your problem," they said.

I was beside myself. I was so very wrong. I had misunderstood Jesus from the beginning. All of the lights were out in my life. It was total darkness. What could I do? Where could I go? How could I ever face Jesus again, or the disciples, or, most of all, myself. It was total despair. I went out and hanged myself. I couldn't see any other way. If Jesus had not been in prison I might have rushed to him and begged him to forgive me. I had nowhere to go. John was right, I went out and it was night.

Do you think I over-reacted by committing suicide? Betrayal didn't seem so bad when compared to the hypocrisy of Caiaphas, the cowardice of Pilate, the brutality of the executioners. Then I remembered—none of them had ever known Jesus. I walked with him for three years, heard his sermons and his teaching, saw his miracles, listened to his prayers. I was blind and could not see. The avarice in my heart, the jealousy, the disappointment, the desire for revenge, the pride, the arrogance—those were the real demons that blinded me. There is no sin worse than this to be with Jesus—so close to him—and completely misunderstand him. To be so selfish that I never saw the true glory of God's Messiah—not a conquering military hero, but the humble suffering Son of God, not a political deliverer but the Savior of my soul. How could I know that God was so great that he would stoop to conquer?

I say to you today, "take care," for Jesus can still be betrayed. You can betray him today. My mind began to doubt. Then I began to think thoughts of jealousy and pride and revenge. Then I began to steal from the bag. Then I betrayed him. And to think it was the crowning touch of infamy that I betrayed my Master. Not with a shout or a blow or a stab, but with a kiss. Then I realized what one of your poets expressed so well—

Still as of old
Men by themselves are priced -
For thirty pieces Judas sold
Himself, not Christ

— Hester H. Cholmondeley

One last question—what is our price? For what would we turn him in?