

## **PASSION PERSONALITIES: JUDAS ISCARIOT MATTHEW 27:1-5; JOHN 13:21-30**

Could you ever have done what Judas Iscariot did? Yeheil Dinur, a Jew, was sentenced to Auschwitz, the infamous concentration camp in Nazi-occupied Poland during World War 2. He was sent there by Adolph Eichmann himself who led the Nazi effort to exterminate European Jews. Somehow Dinur survived and immigrated to Israel after the war. Years later Israeli intelligence found and captured Adolph Eichmann who was living and working under a false identity in Argentina. He was brought to Israel for trial and Yeheil Dinur was one of the witnesses called to testify against Eichmann. When the time came, he lifted his eyes and looked straight into the eyes of Adolph Eichmann, whom he had not seen in 18 years. Suddenly, Yehiel Dinur started sobbing uncontrollably. He fainted and fell on the floor of the courtroom. Some time later he was interviewed and asked about his reaction, "Was it hatred or fear? Was it the horror of your memories of Auschwitz?" Dinur shook his head, "None of it. I was afraid for myself. I saw I had the capability to do that. This was not some godlike authority in uniform who sentenced us to Auschwitz. Eichmann was an ordinary man – and suddenly I realized that I was just like him."

Judas Iscariot's betrayal of Jesus is often depicted as one of the greatest crimes in human history. A Vacation Bible School teacher was giving a lesson about Judas' betrayal of Jesus. After the lesson, she went over some review questions and asked, "Who betrayed Jesus for 30 pieces of silver?" Without hesitating, 7 year old Kenny, replied, "I know! It was Judas the Scariest!" I don't know if Judas himself was scary, but his story is very scary. He's one of several personalities who turn up prominently in that one week period of time referred to as the Passion of Jesus – from what we now call Palm Sunday to what we call Easter Sunday. For me personally, Judas is more tragic than frightening. He's a warning to me about what can go wrong in my own life spiritually rather than some kind of monster with whom I can't identify at all. I believe Judas must have shown considered spiritual potential for Jesus to have selected him to be one of the twelve disciples. But something went terribly wrong somewhere. I see at least three warnings from the life of Judas. Here's the first one.

### **YOU CAN EXCHANGE THE JESUS YOU WANT FOR THE JESUS WHO IS.**

Each of us is tempted to worship, follow and serve a God that we make up in our own minds rather than the God who actually is. The Bible says we were made in God's image. But the fact is we like to make God in our own image. This is what happened to Judas. Why did he betray Jesus? Some suggest his primary motivation was money. After all, he did get thirty pieces of silver from the Jewish leaders for betraying Jesus' location to them at an opportune time. The Bible does say he had a problem with greed. But I don't think money was Judas' primary motivation. Let's look at Matthew 27:1-5. Why was Judas surprised that Jesus was condemned to death? Didn't he know that was going to happen?

And if money was the main issue, why does he try to return it and then express remorse for his actions?

Based on that scripture, I don't think Judas ever intended for Jesus to die. Scholars suggest that Judas was an ultra-nationalist, a zealot, who wanted above all else to see the Romans driven out of Israel. Many Jews thought that the Messiah would be a kind of political savior – someone who would kick out the hated Romans, get rid of the corrupt Jewish leadership and restore the nation of Israel to glory and triumph in the eyes of the world. Judas wanted to put Jesus into a position where He would take action. He wanted to force Jesus' hand. He wanted Jesus to get beyond all those stories about the Kingdom of God and actually bring it into existence with Judas and the other eleven disciples leading the charge. But when Jesus was condemned to death and led away to be crucified, Judas – in what must have been this terrible, ghastly moment of bitter realization – came face to face with the incredible evil he'd committed. The knowledge of it crushed him. He went out and committed suicide.

What did Judas do? He refused to accept Jesus for who He was and tried to make Him into the kind of savior that Judas wanted. People still try and do that today. I've lived long enough now to have seen attempts to turn Jesus into a Marxist or a socialist revolutionary. There were those in the 1960s who wanted to make Him into a kind of anti-establishment, free love hippie. Others try and put Jesus into a business suit and convince you that He was really the first conservative Republican and that He was all about capitalism and the free market. The fact is that every human being tends to do this with Jesus. Very easily, you can exchange the Jesus you want for the Jesus who is.

Patrick Morley, a Christian businessman by background, has written some great books for men. About ten years after he became a Christian, he came to the realization that while he had indeed received Jesus as his Savior, money and things were still Patrick Morley's god. That's what drove him. That's what he cared about. That's what he desired above all else. He discovered that he wanted God to bless what he had already decided to do rather than going to God and humbly asking His direction and leading for every important decision about his life. He writes, "God was more or less a cosmic genie to help me fulfill my dreams.... I was reading my Bible for comfort, but Forbes for direction.... Don't misunderstand. I was a 'good' man. I was leading a moral life. But that only deceived me into thinking I was following the God of the Bible when in reality I was following the God of my imagination."

It's very easy to think of Jesus as my big brother, my advisor, my counselor, my mentor instead of as the Lord of my life. Have you ever been disappointed with Jesus? That's because He didn't meet some expectation you had. I've felt that way many times and it's then that I realize I'm not so unlike Judas. When I get disappointed with Jesus, it's because I've exchanged the Jesus I want for the Jesus who is. It's a Jesus that doesn't exist, a Jesus of my own making and my

own imagination. But the fact is that Jesus has no interest in being anyone other than who He is. Just like Judas, you and I can never force Jesus' hand. It's not Jesus who must adapt to me; I must adapt or change to Jesus. Jesus doesn't exist to promote my plan for life: I exist to promote His plan for life. I see another warning from Judas' life and story.

## **YOU CAN UNDERESTIMATE THE POWER OF TEMPTATION.**

Judas' story is a terrible warning about what temptation can do to you. For instance, you can underestimate the devil's ability to tempt you. The devil knows your areas of weakness better than you do. He rarely wastes his time attacking you where you're strong. Instead, he concentrates his efforts on your weak areas. For example, Judas had a problem with honesty, personal integrity and greed. The Bible says this about him, "Not that he cared for the poor—he was a thief, and since he was in charge of the disciples' money, he often stole some for himself." (John 12:6 NLT) I still don't think money was Judas' primary motivation in betraying Jesus, but greed was clearly there in the mix. It sweetened the pot.

That's why it's very important that you get brutally honest with yourself about your weaknesses. You need to be able to answer these questions, "Where am I weak? Where are the 'chinks in my armor'?" The Bible warns us against underestimating the devil's ability. Why? "...so that Satan will not outsmart us. For we are familiar with his evil schemes." (2 Corinthians 2:11 NLT) The fact is that most Jesus followers are abysmally ignorant of his evil schemes. We just don't have a clue what he's up to half the time! Just like he did for Judas, the devil has a custom-designed, individually specific, tailor made plan to destroy you spiritually. I'm not suggesting you fear Satan. You should only fear God. But don't ever underestimate his tactics or his ability to do you great harm spiritually.

President Teddy Roosevelt once owned this feisty little dog that was always getting into fights with other dogs and always losing. Once, after watching this dog pick a fight and get his usual thrashing, a friend said to Roosevelt, "That dog of yours isn't much a fighter, is he?" To which the President replied, "On the contrary, he's a very good fighter, but he's a bad judge of dogs. He always underestimates his adversaries."

You see in Judas the devil's ultimate goal for every human being. It's that chilling, powerful image of a man's lifeless body slowly swaying from a rope attached from his neck to a tree branch. Now, the Bible says, "Don't blame God when you are tempted! God cannot be tempted by evil, and he doesn't use evil to tempt others. We are tempted by our own desires that drag us off and trap us. Our desires make us sin, and when sin is finished with us, it leaves us dead." (James 1:13-15 CEV) There's the devil's strategy fully explained. Find your weakness. Tempt you at your point of weakness. Use your weakness to hurt God in some way. When he's successfully tempted you, he will then throw you away just like he did Judas. What he did to Judas, Satan wants to do to you.

Then again, you can underestimate the power of God to deliver you from temptation. That's the other side of the coin. Over the years, I've heard or read some interpretations of Judas' actions that turn him into some kind of helpless pawn. Somebody had to fulfill the Old Testament! God needed a fall guy and so He forced Judas into the role of betrayer. That's absurd and unworthy of God. Interestingly, I think the Bible itself suggests that God gave Judas the opportunity to escape the devil's temptation the very night he ended up betraying Jesus. Let's read John 13: 21-30.

Picture the scene with me. Jesus and the disciples were arranged around a U-shaped table with Jesus at the center of the bottom of the U. They didn't use chairs for this meal. Instead, you reclined on your left side at a low table and supported yourself with your left elbow so that you ate with your right hand. Your legs were angled off behind you. As a result, your head was very close to the head of the person sitting on your left. When Jesus tells His disciples that one of them is going to betray Him, Peter asks another unnamed disciple – probably John – to ask Jesus who this is. John was probably sitting or reclining on Jesus' immediate right since the Bible says, "Leaning back against Jesus, he asked him, 'Lord, who is it?'" (John 13:25 NIV) Jesus tells John that it's the person to whom He's going to give a piece of His own bread. Jesus then hands this piece of bread to Judas. Now, that suggests that Judas was sitting next to Jesus on His immediate left. Jesus reaches over and gives a piece of His bread to Judas.

Why's all that important? For two reasons. One, if Judas was indeed sitting on Jesus' immediate left, he had the most honored seat at the table. When a host wanted to honor one of his dinner guests back then, he would seat that person next to him on his left. I suggest that right up to the very end, Jesus was trying to win Judas and woo Judas. Two, when Jesus gave Judas a piece of His own bread it was an important gesture. When someone offered you a piece of His own bread from His own plate back then and you took it, it was like giving a pledge of personal loyalty. If you took the bread, it was like saying, "We belong to each other. I'm there for you. I've got your back." But despite the honor and the opportunity to reaffirm His loyalty to Jesus, Judas hardened his heart. He rejected Jesus' last minute offer of escape. The Bible says, "When Judas had eaten the bread, Satan entered into him. Then Jesus told him, 'Hurry and do what you're going to do.'" (John 13:27 NLT) Jesus' knew His offer of escape had been rejected. That's got to be one of the saddest scenes in all of the Bible.

Don't blame God when you give in to temptation. The human heart is like a door with only one handle and it's on the inside. You choose to open that door when temptation comes knocking or you choose to keep it closed. At key moments in his life, Judas opened the door of his life to the devil and that's all the opportunity he needed to destroy Judas. You still have a choice. Jesus offered Judas a way out and He offers you a way out as well. The Bible says, "If you think you are standing strong, be careful not to fall. The temptations in your life are no different

from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will not allow the temptation to be more than you can stand. When you are tempted, he will show you a way out so that you can endure.” (1 Corinthians 10:12-13 NLT)

Do you remember Scott O’Grady? He’s the American fighter pilot who evaded capture for days in the Bosnian conflict of the late 1990s. When a rescue helicopter finally landed in a clearing near where O’Grady was hiding, he didn’t relax there in the brush and wait for the helicopter pilot to come out and get him. Not on your life! He shook off his fatigue, fought through the bushes, drew his weapon and with every ounce of energy he had, he ran to the escape provided to him. Remember that when it comes to temptation. Just because God promises a way out doesn’t mean you have no role in your own rescue. God always provides a way of escape, but you will need to contribute some personal effort.

You can also underestimate God’s power to forgive you when you give in to temptation. Would God have forgiven Judas? God forgave a man who stole another man’s wife and arranged for his murder. That was David in the Old Testament. God forgave Peter when he denied even knowing Jesus three times on the same night Judas betrayed Jesus. I do believe that God would have forgiven Judas of this terrible sin, if Judas had sincerely repented and asked for forgiveness. But that apparently never happened. Perhaps the devil had convinced Judas that he was beyond forgiveness. Clearly, Judas preferred his own despair to God’s grace. He took his own life. Don’t ever let the devil get to you like that! If you give into temptation and commit sin – be it a minor sin or a major sin – don’t despair. Instead, throw yourself upon God’s mercy and grace. God is big enough, merciful enough and gracious enough to forgive you, restore you and put you back into His service. The Bible says, “...where sin increased, grace increased all the more.” (Romans 5:20 NIV) Here’s a final warning.

### **YOU CAN EXPERIENCE JESUS AT A LEVEL LESS THAN SAVIOR.**

For three years, Judas Iscariot lived with Jesus every day. He left everything to follow Jesus. He did all sorts of “disciple stuff” like the other eleven – going out to do ministry, healing people and exorcising demons. He watched Jesus heal people and work miracles. He heard Jesus preach and teach. He experienced Jesus’ love for others and for Judas himself. Judas saw and experienced all of that day after day. But he never came to know Jesus as his Savior. That blows my mind! How could any person be in constant contact with Jesus and not be changed by His example or His teaching? Because you need more than an example. You need more than a teacher. You need to be born again spiritually by the Holy Spirit. You need your spirit invaded by the Holy Spirit. Only then are you able to respond to Jesus with love and obedience.

Many people both inside and outside the church experience Jesus in some way, shape or form. But for too many, it’s an experience of Jesus that is less than Savior. You can experience Jesus as a great moral teacher. You can

experience Jesus as a profound thinker. You can experience Jesus as compassion for others personified. But, just like Judas, you can fail to ever experience Him as your Savior. Coming to church is a very good thing to do, but that's not experiencing Jesus as your Savior. Striving to be a good, moral person is a very good thing to do, but that's not experiencing Jesus as your Savior. Helping others in need is a very good thing to do, but that's not experiencing Jesus as your Savior. Increasing your knowledge of the Bible is a very good thing to do, but that's not experiencing Jesus as your Savior either. You need to have a radically different kind of relationship with God. You need a Savior.

Back in May 2002, Leonardo Diaz, a Colombian hiker, decided to do some serious mountain climbing with friends. Their goal was to reach the summit of Nevado del Ruiz, a volcano in the Andes. But on the second day of their climb, a major blizzard hit the group as they were climbing. Diaz lost sight of his friends and got separated from them. He started to run out of food rations and suffer from the bitter cold. He thought about his cell phone in his backpack, but all of his prepaid minutes had expired. With no way to signal for help, Leonardo Diaz came face to face with the inevitable. He was going to die on that mountain.

As he lay there in the snow, preparing to die, his cell phone rang! He answered it and found out it was someone from his phone company – at that time, Bell South - wanting to know if Diaz was interested in purchasing more minutes! That routine sales call saved Leonardo Diaz' life. He told the saleswoman he was lost in the Andes, but he was able to describe his general location. He asked that his family be notified so a rescue team could be sent. The Bell South operators recognized that hypothermia was setting in so they called Diaz very 30 minutes to keep him awake and increase his chances of survival. Seven hours later, rescuers arrived. Most of us think of that kind of call as a major nuisance, but on that day it saved Leonardo Diaz' life.

Jesus makes calls into people's lives all the time. It can be in a Sunday morning message, a book you read or a conversation with a friend. It can come through a major disappointment or a tragedy in life. People often react to Jesus' call as though He were an unwanted telemarketer. The Holy Spirit's gentle tug on your heart can be rejected as a nuisance. What changes your reaction? Why do you now rush to answer that call when earlier you didn't even bother to answer? The experience of overwhelming need. The prospect of spiritual and eternal death staring you in the face. The realization that you are in desperate need of a Savior. Jesus came into this world to be your Savior. Go ahead... answer His call!