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JUDAS

Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray him to them. When they heard it, they were greatly pleased, and promised to give him money.

So he began to look for an opportunity to betray him.

MARK 14:10-11

TUESDAY MIDNIGHT

Judas escaped into the darkness, choosing his path as carefully as he could in the moonlight. He flinched at every breeze, sure the others had noticed his absence and discerned his intent. They would try to stop him. None of them would believe Jesus had lost faith.

The signs were there, if anyone was paying attention. That no one *was* paying attention was exactly why Judas fled toward Jerusalem under cover of darkness. They would say *he* had lost faith. But Judas, son of Simon, had not lost faith. He knew beyond question that Jesus was the promised Messiah. This was the rock on which he had built his hopes. He would not lose faith—even if Jesus himself had.

SUNDAY

The week had been tumultuous, to say the least, overstuffed with harbingers of the approaching Day, if—like Judas—one were inclined to read signs and portents into events. *Not that one has to be a magician*, Judas reflected. *Subtlety has never been Jesus'*

strength, and he has abandoned all pretense on the road to Jerusalem.

On the day he knew Pilate would march into Jerusalem from the west, Jesus entered from the east. The Roman parade was all cavalry and soldiers, banners and imperial standards, a show of power to remind the pilgrims celebrating the Passover that Caesar was no pharaoh tossed so easily into the sea. Jesus' parade was all Galilean peasants waving palm branches and singing triumphal hymns. Pilate entered on a white stallion; Jesus rode a donkey. If Rome took note at all, it saw no threat. But the Galileans and Judeans all knew the words of Zechariah: "Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey." In one fell swoop, Jesus galvanized his Galilean supporters, declared his messiahship to Jerusalem, and mocked Rome. Judas had always marveled at Jesus' brilliance, but that parade was a masterstroke.

Following along behind Jesus, clapping and singing with the crowds, Judas marched into history. Only a few days earlier, the Twelve had argued who would be granted to sit at Jesus' right and left. The Sons of Thunder had actually *requested* it. But as they followed their king into the Holy City, the argument seemed trite to Judas. They all marched behind their messiah. *A thousand years from now, he thought, our descendants will tell stories of their great-great-great-grandfathers who marched into Jerusalem and into glory, who defeated Rome and established the kingdom of heaven on earth. And who would be named among us? Me!*

Perhaps delirium has blinded the other disciples to the signs, Judas thought. He noted how quiet Jesus was in the midst of the celebration. When they visited the temple that day, Jesus had looked around the Court of the Gentiles, carefully taking inventory of the layout. His silence on the road back to Bethany

that night had been uncharacteristic. The others laughed and joked, unable to see through the haze of anticipated glory. But Judas saw.

MONDAY

The fig tree caught them all off guard. Jesus seemed inexplicably irritated that he hadn't found any figs. After he cursed the tree, Andrew approached him. "Lord, what's wrong? You know it's not the season for figs."

Jesus sighed heavily. "Yes, Andrew. But some things should always be in season." The Twelve were used to cryptic responses from him, so they nodded and exchanged the usual hapless looks. They assumed—rightly, as it turned out—that Jesus would explain it to them later.

As they crested the Mount of Olives, they paused, as they did each time, to marvel at the temple. Judas's heart quickened at the sight of the temple sitting atop Mount Zion, glowing in the sunlight. From that vantage point, it was obvious the beautiful, enormous structure was the very footstool of the Lord.

They descended to Jerusalem through the East Gate at the foot of the Temple Mount then entered the Court of the Gentiles, already packed with pilgrims preparing for the Passover. Jerusalem, a huge city on any day, was never so full as at Passover, and the temple was the hub of the Passover activity. Thousands pressed within the walls, changing Roman denarii for Jewish coins, buying and selling animals.

One moment, Judas was lost in the sights, sounds, and smells of the crowd. The next, he heard shouting, and after scanning the throngs of people, found Jesus turning over tables and quoting prophets. He shook open cages to release doves, untied and whipped lambs, swept piles of carefully stacked coins from

tables into the crowds of pilgrims. The merchants were shouting as well, some attempting to argue with him, others calling for the temple guard.

Several priests pushed through the crowd, and no sooner had they broken through to confront Jesus than he stopped and turned to them. He shouted, “It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer,’ but you are making it a den of robbers.”

Jesus refused to allow the merchants to gather their animals, though several tried to pry their coins from the hands of pilgrims who had scooped them up. The priests whispered among themselves and finally sent for instructions from their superiors. Word spread quickly throughout the temple complex that the rabbi from the Galilee was there.

Before anyone could figure out what to do with Jesus, the Court of the Gentiles was flooded with the blind and lame. As he always did, Jesus began healing. Men who had been unable to enter the temple for years were brought to him and healed. They immediately ran to the priests to be declared clean. An air of celebration began to spread throughout the courtyard as more and more people found healing. Someone—probably Philip or Bartholomew—began singing the same messianic psalms they had sung as they entered the city.

It was hard not to get swept up in the euphoria. The Messiah had ridden into Jerusalem, and there he was, in the Lord’s own house, acting out the Jubilee year. Judas felt swept along in the riptide of history in the making. No one seemed to note the fear in the eyes of the merchants and the priests. No one saw the leaders of the Pharisees and the Herodians whispering together at the edges of the courtyard. No one except Judas—and Jesus, of course, who saw everything.

TUESDAY

The next morning, on their way into the city, they noticed the fig tree withered and dead, its leaves a crown of death spread on the ground. The Twelve began whispering to one another as they noticed it, but it was Peter who spoke up. “Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered.”

Jesus slowed and turned to them. Only once before—when Jesus had learned that his cousin John had been executed—had Judas seen such weariness in his rabbi’s face. He looked as though he were Samson carrying the gates of Gaza up Hebron, but without Samson’s great strength.

“You must have faith in God.” He looked down toward the temple sitting atop Mount Zion. “Believe me, if you say to this mountain, ‘Be raised up and thrown into the sea,’ and you do not doubt for one moment, but believe that what you say will happen, it will be done for you.” He turned back to the Twelve. “Prayer, children. Prayer. Whatever you ask in prayer, believe and it will be yours.”

As they descended toward Jerusalem, Judas reflected on his rabbi’s opaque, troubling words. *Why would anyone want to cast Zion into the sea? Babylon destroyed Solomon’s Temple but cannot destroy Mount Zion. Even Rome cannot destroy Zion.* A scrap of song leaped into Judas’s mind, and it seemed particularly appropriate in that historic week.

Judas elbowed Peter, walking next to him, and muttered just loud enough for Peter to hear, “God is our refuge and strength.”

Peter smiled, and a song erupted from his lips, characteristically booming and off-key:

A very present help in trouble.

Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,

though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult.

Peter's mirth spread, and soon the rest of the Twelve joined in. But Judas quickly trailed off. *Does no one else notice that Jesus is not singing with us?*

They returned to the temple, and Judas was not surprised to see they were awaited; several prominent Pharisees huddled at the edge of the courtyard. When they saw Jesus, they began speaking hurriedly together. Judas saw them conspiring with another group of men he recognized as Herodians. Only days before, seeing those two groups conspiring would have filled Judas with righteous pity. The enemy of their enemy makes them friends, but what hope have the enemies of the Messiah? Today, however, Judas couldn't ignore the subtle shadow of dread cast by Jesus' increasingly strange behavior.

Judas was so focused on the conspirators he didn't see the envoy emerge from the temple. But as the murmuring around him swelled, he turned to see the crowd parting and a large group of priests and scribes coming directly toward Jesus and the Twelve. It seemed as though everyone but the high priest Caiaphas himself was marching toward them. Jesus' eyes were hard, and the weariness from earlier was gone or at least hidden from view.

One of the chief priests stepped forward. "Hear now, you troublemaker. You may not just march in here and disrupt the Passover proceedings."

Jesus smiled thinly. "I see you received my message." He looked around the courtyard. "I also see you have yet to drive the thieves out from my father's house."

“Yes, yes. You’re a prophet. We’re all *deeply* impressed, I assure you.” The priest’s sarcasm was thick, and several of his company chuckled their agreement. “Tell me, *prophet*, by whose authority are you doing these things? Who gave you the authority to walk in here and start tossing tables?”

Judas recognized the trap. If Jesus claimed divine authority there before the leaders of the temple, they could have him arrested. Judas cursed himself as a fool. *We should have been prepared for this. This might be the moment Jesus declares himself! And we did not bring swords; we did not coordinate with the men who came down from Galilee with us.*

Before Judas could do more than panic, Jesus said to the chief priest, “Answer a question for me, and I will answer yours. Was John’s baptism of heaven, or was it only a human invention?”

The chief priest frowned, and after thinking for a moment, he turned to consult his friends. Judas noted suddenly that many in the Court of the Gentiles were watching this showdown, and he had no doubt many of them had received John’s baptism. Judas marveled again at Jesus’ quick reply. If they denied John was a true prophet, they would lose credibility with the crowd. But if they admitted John was of heaven, Jesus could ask why they had refused his call to repentance. Either way, they weakened their position as leaders of the temple.

Finally the priest turned again to Jesus, “We don’t know.”

Jesus smiled. “You couldn’t discern the truth of John’s ministry? No wonder you struggle with mine.”

Judas watched their faces turn red. Several pulled on their beards and whispered angrily to one another. But none dared challenge him publicly again. Jesus began to teach the crowds, telling his signature parables, but this time painting the religious leaders in Jerusalem as dangerous, corrupt, and ungodly. It wasn’t

long before half the courtyard was listening to him—including many of the scribes and priests, as well as some Sadducees, Pharisees, and Herodians. Again and again, they asked him questions, posing as friendly, but each question was a carefully laid trap that sought to discredit him. Again and again, Jesus danced among their traps and left them ensnared instead.

By the midday meal, no one dared ask him any questions, and when the crowd began to drift away, Jesus dismissed them all. He led the Twelve out of the temple, through the Sheep Gate. Judas lost himself in the columns, towers, and stone. “Look, Rabbi! These stones are so large! Have you ever worked with anything so impressive? Surely the craftsmanship is unequaled. No wonder this temple is the envy of the world. Truly a fitting house for the Lord!”

Jesus turned back and scanned the temple gate, taking in the whole complex with his carpenter’s gaze. His shoulders sagged, and he said, “Do you see these great buildings? Not one of these magnificent stones will be left standing upon its brother. Every single rock and beam will be utterly destroyed.”

Then he turned and continued out of the city. None of them spoke. What could they say? Judas’s mind raced. *This temple has stood as long as Solomon’s and after Herod’s renovations was grander by far—more than five hundred years since Babylon destroyed the Holy City. True, Rome is more powerful than Babylon ever had been, but isn’t that why the Messiah has come now? To conquer God’s enemies? To preserve God’s people? To defend God’s house?*

Doubt grew like a weed in Judas’s mind as he recalled Jesus’ words by the fig tree. “If you say to this mountain, ‘Be raised up and thrown into the sea,’ it will be done for you.”

Once they were free of the city, Andrew asked Jesus what he had meant by his prophecy. But Jesus’ reply clarified nothing. He

promised not conquest and victory but persecution, arrest, and betrayal. He foretold a desolating sacrilege, the enemies of God standing in the holy of holies as Pompeii had a century before. He promised suffering on a scale not known since Noah and the unmaking of creation. As they were passing the fig tree yet again, he gestured to it. “You know when this tree blooms, summer is here. So too, keep watch for these signs. The end of the world is at hand. Some among you will live to see it.”

They said nothing else on the way back to Bethany, but Jesus’ final words echoed over and over in Judas’s mind. *Keep watch.* Judas was watching, and what he saw was a man being crushed by the weight of his own mission. Jesus was cracking. He was supposed to challenge Rome—as he had when he rode into the city. But he had spent the past two days enraging the Jewish leaders, turning many in the city against him. And he was calling for the destruction of the temple, for the unmaking of creation.

As he followed his rabbi, his messiah, Judas thought of wind and waves obeying Jesus’ command. Of unclean spirits fleeing at a word. Of countless eyes opened and tongues loosened. Of the dead raised.

But in the slump of Jesus’ shoulders, Judas saw no power. He saw doubt—or worse: defeat.

TUESDAY NIGHT

That night, a man named Simon hosted a feast in their honor. Jesus had cured him of leprosy at the temple the previous day, and Simon spared no expense for the meal. He proved to be an excellent host. The cushions on which they reclined were comfortable; the slaves were attentive and unobtrusive as they washed feet and served the food, which was well prepared. Judas gathered that before his illness, Simon had been a man of some prominence

in Jerusalem, perhaps a Pharisee. But even though a temple priest had declared him clean after the healing, Judas saw none of Jerusalem's religious elite present for the feast. *Not surprising after the confrontation today.* A heavy foreboding lay just beneath all the talk and laughter around the table.

Suddenly the smell of death filled Judas's nostrils. He nearly gagged as the air became thick with nard. Unbidden, images flooded his mind: Preparing his mother's body for burial. The wailing of the mourners as they laid his grandfather in the family tomb. The baby brother who died before he could walk.

Judas looked back to see a woman he didn't recognize cradling a jar of nard in her hands and pouring it carefully over Jesus' feet. At first he thought she must be a slave, but she was not dressed as a slave. He noted the size and craftsmanship of the jar. *That nard must be worth at least a year's wages.*

Those at the table began to simmer with confusion and disgust. Suddenly the whole area smelled like a funeral procession, the potent nard overwhelming the fragrance of the lamb and sauces. Judas could see he was not the only person who had lost his appetite, but none of them was sure what to do. Even Simon looked to Jesus, seated at his right in the place of honor.

But Jesus' eyes were closed in silent meditation. He sat back from the table and allowed the woman to pour the nard over his head as well. As she rubbed the oil into his hair, Jesus opened his eyes, and they were damp. The tension Judas had seen in his rabbi's shoulders seemed to fall away, and for a moment Jesus looked like nothing more than a baby cradled in his mother's lap. He looked peaceful for the first time since they had arrived in Judea.

Judas felt fury rising in his chest. With tensions as high as they were, her display was in poor taste, even for a rabbi who routinely

flouted gender propriety. He leaped to his feet. “Rabbi, what is the meaning of this?” The voices of some of the other Twelve joined his protest.

Jesus closed his eyes again and spoke, his voice weary. “Leave her alone, Judas. She has performed a great kindness for me.”

Peter objected, “But, Lord! Such a waste! We could’ve sold that nard for at least three hundred denarii!”

Someone else chimed in. “Think of all the poor we could help with so much money!”

Jesus seemed not to have heard them for several long moments. Finally he sighed, “You will always have the poor with you. You can show them kindness whenever you wish. But you will not always have me.”

Judas was stunned. *You will not always have me?*

Jesus continued. “She has prepared my body for burial. In the years to come, wherever the good news is proclaimed—anywhere in the world—what she has just done will be celebrated as an act of great faithfulness.”

He turned to the woman and thanked her, then reclined once more at the table to resume eating. After casting furtive glances at each other, Simon and the Twelve began to pick at their food. Slowly conversation returned, though more strained than ever.

Judas, however, said nothing. He found he could not eat with the cloying smell of death emanating so strongly from Jesus.

TUESDAY MIDNIGHT

The way down the Mount of Olives had been harrowing in the moonlight, but Judas now stood before the East Gate. An extra coin to the guard ensured his message reached the high priest’s house, and he didn’t have to wait long to be admitted into the city. As Judas entered the city, he reflected on the toll he had seen

Jerusalem take on Jesus. The crowds. The priests. The merchants in the temple. *But of course the city is mired in sin! Why else must the Messiah come?*

Jesus' words at the meal echoed in Judas ear. "She has prepared my body for burial."

Judas arrived outside Caiaphas's house and called out. A bleary-eyed slave answered, and Judas said, "I am Judas, son of Simon, called Iscariot by Jesus of Nazareth. Tell your master I bring the solution to his problem." The slave grumbled but retreated into the house. Soon Judas heard the sounds of the household coming to life.

He nearly fled back into the darkness, but the smell of the nard seemed to cling to him. The weariness in Jesus' eyes haunted him. Jesus' words, "You will not always have me," had chased him to the city, and now they held him there. Judas thought Jesus had lost faith in himself. *But I have not, cannot, lose faith in Jesus.*

Before the dinner with Jesus had ended, Judas had made his decision. If Jesus would not act, Judas would force his hand. If Jesus would not enact heaven's kingdom on earth, Judas would.

Finally Judas was shown into a private chamber where Caiaphas sat with several other men whom Judas recognized from the temple courtyard earlier in the day. He had clearly interrupted important business. Without waiting to be announced, Judas spoke. "I have come to deliver Jesus of Nazareth, who some call the Messiah, into your hands."

Several of the men whispered to one another in shock, but Caiaphas's eyes narrowed, appraising this stranger. "And why should we believe you, son of Simon? You are a known follower of the Nazarene." Caiaphas's tone revealed his contempt for Jesus' humble origins.

"Listen to the shape of my words, noble Caiaphas," Judas said. "I grew up near Hebron. My people have known the rule of the

Herodians and the power of Rome. It is true that in recent years I have been following Jesus. You have seen with your own eyes his power to work miracles. You have witnessed firsthand the power in his words.” Judas saw one of the scribes frown at this barb and knew he must tread carefully. “But as the Passover drew near, we noticed a change in Jesus. I believe he aspires to be the Messiah some think him to be.”

Judas concealed his lie as a tare among grains of truth. “I am the only man from among the Twelve who has lived outside Galilee. These are simple men with simple ideas about the kingdom of heaven. They do not understand as we do in the South the power of Rome, of the delicate balance we must strike to remain faithful to God in the shadow of Caesar. A messianic revolt can only end in disaster for our people. Jesus must be stopped.”

Caiaphas snorted. “Your words are honey, Iscariot. How do we know this is not a trap? Perhaps you wish to embarrass us, to give credibility to your messiah.” His final word dripped with disdain.

Judas shrugged. “So don’t let him choose the confrontation. My master does not share his plans with us, but I fear for the day of Passover. What better day for the Messiah to reveal himself?”

And then Judas sprang his trap. “You must stop him. Tomorrow night. We will eat the Passover meal in the city. I can deliver him to you afterward, when we are returning to Bethany. Send the Temple Guard. You can take him outside the city, at night, away from the crowds. You have seen his followers. We are no army; most of us have held only the dull, rusted swords of our fathers. We are no match for the Temple Guard.”

Then Judas smiled. “Unless Jesus truly is the Messiah, in which case it hardly matters whether you take him tomorrow night or wait for him to announce himself.”

Several of the priests spat or pulled at their beards, but Caiaphas said nothing. He held up his hand to silence his fellows. “Why would you betray your master, Iscariot?”

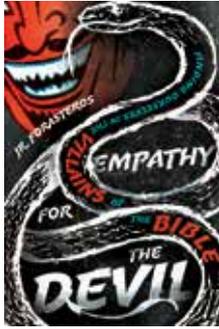
“I have seen Jesus do much good. He gives hope to the poor. He heals the sick. He frees those oppressed by unclean spirits. And he calls us all to love God more. I would not see this end.” Then Judas lied easily, because it was no lie at all. “I love my master with all my heart. I wish to save him from himself.”

Caiaphas grunted. “Such devotion is admirable. Leave us, son of Simon. You will have your answer shortly.”

Judas followed the slave back to the courtyard of Caiaphas’s house, his heart pounding in his chest. Caiaphas was true to his word. One of the scribes came to Judas, gripped his arm, and whispered into his ear, “Come to us tomorrow night. You will be richly rewarded for your efforts.” Then he retreated inside as quickly as he had come.

Judas barely remembered returning to Bethany, and long after he sneaked back to his pallet, he lay awake, head filled with visions of glory. *Tomorrow night, the enemies of the Messiah will strike. By Friday, the whole of Jerusalem will see Jesus exalted as God’s anointed. And who will be at his right side? Who else but the man who did not lose faith, even when Jesus himself did? Who else but the man who had the courage to follow Jesus’ mission all the way to the end?*

When Judas finally fell asleep, only the words of the scribe rang in his ears. “You will be richly rewarded for your efforts.”



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