

Blood Money and a Field of Blood

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Preacher: Paul Barker

- [0 : 00] You may like to have open again the Bibles at page 809 to Matthew chapter 27. As I said at the beginning, this is part of our sermon series leading up to Good Friday and Easter.
- So let's pray as we come to God's Word. Heavenly Father, we thank you that you speak so clearly to reveal your character and purposes for this universe.
- Speak to us now, we pray from your Word. Write it on our hearts that we may believe it, live it and love it for the glory of Jesus. Amen.
- Whether it's Philby or in the schoolyard, nobody likes a traitor. They are the worst of the worst. We can cope with an enemy who maintains their stance for the enemy's side, but the traitor is scum.
- No baby these days gets called Judas. I doubt that you'd find Judas in the baby name books that you can buy these days. Even in the New Testament, there's the letter of, no, not Judas.
- [1 : 13] That was his name, but it's the letter of Jude. Because people don't like the name Judas. You Judas is a term of disdain and contempt.
- You Judas is a term that you'd use for a traitor. For somebody who's treacherous. Double-handed. Devious. Behind your back.
- And what's more for this one? He betrayed him with a kiss. How low can you get? Well, I guess Judas is the one person we can be sure we will not meet in heaven.
- Because we're told it. Remember those verses of a few weeks ago. Woe to the one by whom I am betrayed, Jesus said. It would be better for that man never to have been born.
- We may not know for sure of anyone else. But Judas, we know, will not be there. The son of perdition, he's called in John's Gospel.
- [2 : 15] The one who betrayed the very Son of God. The only perfect person who's lived. Certainly it seems greed was part of his motivation.
- Maybe the dominant one. He was the treasurer of Jesus' disciples. Perhaps even a thief. John 12 alludes to his greed and his objection to Mary who poured that expensive ointment on Jesus may be a reflection of money signs ringing in his eyes.
- Others speculate, and this is just speculation, that he was frustrated with Jesus' lack of action. Frustrated that the Romans weren't overthrown. And maybe thought that betrayal would force Jesus' hand.
- But we can't be sure. Greed certainly. Other motives, we're not so sure. But in the end, it doesn't really matter. Judas is the traitor to beat all traitors.
- The archetypal traitor. And he's remembered, at least in allusion, every time we celebrate the Lord's Supper, on the night that Jesus was betrayed, he took bread.
- [3 : 26] As a result of the betrayal, of course, Jesus in Gethsemane, in the garden, as we've seen in the last couple of weeks, was arrested. Taken to the Jewish high priest's house, late at night and into the early hours of the morning.

And there, as we saw last week, they found false witnesses, or at least people who misremembered what Jesus had said about destroying the temple.

And so they charged him with blasphemy, which in Jewish law is a capital offense. But under the Roman rule of these days, the Jews could not take out that or carry out that execution.

And so they prepared to hand him over to the Roman authorities. Chapter 27 begins that when morning came. We know that this trial has gone through the night.

Maybe there's been a brief break. As soon as it's daylight, we know that people got up very early in those days to work. And Pilate, it seems, the Roman governor would often be up very early.

[4 : 33] All the chief priests and the elders of the people conferred together against Jesus in order to bring about his death. Notice again the emphasis on their purpose.

In order to bring about his death. Not in order for justice to be done, but in order to bring about his death. Something we saw last week or the week before as well, where they sought false testimony.

That is, people who would say something so that they could get Jesus accused and crucified. They bound him, led him away and handed him over to Pilate, the governor.

Their normal enemy. But now, my enemy's enemy is my friend. Strange bedfellows, as Shakespeare calls it. And so they hand him over to the Roman authority.

The one that despises the Jews. And yet now they manipulate for their own purposes as well. You would have thought that Judas might have been pleased with this.

[5 : 36] After all, in betraying Jesus, in handing him over to the authorities, surely he could have little doubt that Jesus' death was their object. We've been told a number of times in the Gospels, in earlier days, they plotted to kill Jesus.

Jesus has predicted his death on more than one occasion. So for Judas, surely, in betraying Jesus, he's not anticipating, surely, real justice. He knows that Jesus' death will be the result of that.

If anyone had evidence that could convict Jesus, Judas could have. As the treasurer, perhaps one of the inner circle of the Twelve.

Certainly, as we saw a few weeks ago, one who sat very close to Jesus at the Last Supper. He's been with Jesus three years. In shared facilities, basically.

In those days, people lived much more communally than we do. He would have seen Jesus acting in public and in private. He would have seen the integrity of Jesus.

[6 : 41] Not just a public persona. And yet he's got nothing. He says nothing, it seems. He hands him over.

Judas doesn't speak up. He doesn't give false evidence against Jesus that we're told anyway. That would have partly saved his face. He's got nothing to say because he knows that Jesus is innocent.

And that's what he makes, he says in verse 4. I've sinned by betraying innocent blood.

That is, Judas' motives are wrong motives. Certainly greed. Maybe other things. He knows that Jesus is innocent. And now, tragically, he realizes what he's done.

When Judas, Jesus' betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he repented and brought back the 30 pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders.

[7 : 50] He said, I have sinned by betraying innocent blood. In part, that's an act of courage. Most of us, when we make mistakes, would try and cover them over, hide away, hoping no one would spot them or find us.

But Judas goes to the authorities, to the ones who are hell-bent on putting Jesus to death. And he says, I've betrayed innocent blood.

That is, the implication of what Judas is actually saying there is, you've got this judgment wrong. This is injustice, not justice. This is a false trial, not a true one.

He is innocent. Ironically, Judas declares the truth. He exposes the guilt of the Jewish leaders at this point. But where does this leave Judas?

We're told in verse 3 that he repented. And then in verse 5, he hurls down the pieces of silver in the temple.

[9 : 04] It's a strong word that's used. It's not just that he dropped them there or placed them down. It's the idea of some anger of actually hurling 30 pieces of silver across the temple precinct floor, the treasury part of the temple probably, one of the outer courts.

You can imagine on a stone or marble floor, these coins rolling around and clattering around early in the morning. Fairly dramatic sort of act of Judas.

The writer of Proverbs says that treasures gained by wickedness do not profit. Judas is experiencing that. And he goes and hangs himself.

As verse 5 goes on to say, he departed and he went and hanged himself. Simple verbs, bluntly said, a tragic consequence.

Many people believe that suicide is the unforgivable sin. Judas, we know, is under God's, or Jesus' condemnation, under his woe.

[10 : 22] Woe to him, it would be better that he was never born. But that's a particular case. And not just because Judas ends up suiciding. Certainly in some traditional church teaching, suicide is regarded as an unforgivable sin.

Something that goes beyond the possibilities of God's mercy or forgiveness. Denounced in traditional church law. And some church practices in history about who, if someone's a suicide, whether or not they can be buried or where.

reflects that sort of view. I don't think it's the right view. We shouldn't build a case of suicide simply on the example of Judas.

His is a particular case. When I was studying at Ridley College more than 20 years ago, one of my fellow students in part of our small group suicided in the mid-year break.

She was probably about 30 and she jumped off Westgate Bridge and her body was washed up a week later in Rye. I remember going to her funeral and the word suicide was not mentioned and it was as though it never happened.

[11 : 44] But on the other hand, there were some other students who couldn't cope that you could have a funeral. That this was in fact an unforgivable sin.

This was a person who suffered from a bipolar manic depressive illness and it stopped her medication. In cases like that, it seems to me that the illness is qualitatively the same as a cancer or some other illness.

She died from her illness. She didn't take her medication. Not everyone, perhaps, who suicides suffers from mental illness. For many, it's a cry for help.

Someone in despair. And maybe in God's mercy, he hears their cry even as they take their life.

I say this because many of us face pastoral issues of suicide. Many of us will have known people who've taken their own life or threatened to or tried to.

[12 : 56] Maybe there are some here who've thought about it for themselves. But I don't in any way want to encourage that, of course. But we shouldn't regard this as an unforgivable sin, that they die cut off from God necessarily.

Who knows their hearts but God alone. But to come back to Judas. Judas recognises he's unable to undo the consequences of his betrayal.

Jesus is condemned and handed over to the Roman authorities to die. Perhaps his initial act of courage and the rejection of that by the Jewish leaders, what is this to us?

We don't want your money. Means Judas clams up. Silent again. He realises he deserves death. The tragedy for Judas here it seems to me is that he doesn't know how to deal with guilt.

He recognises he's guilty. Whether for greed or other motives he's betrayed an innocent person. The only innocent person. The son of God no less.

[14 : 18] Betrayed by Judas. And he sees now in the quick trial through the night as Jesus condemned and handed over to Roman authorities to die.

The full awfulness of his action or the consequences of his action. We're told in verse 3 in our translation that Judas repented.

But sadly it's probably not the best translation. It's not the standard word for repent. And it raises then about two responses that are often mixed up in our thinking.

What we might call remorse and repentance. Judas' response is the response of worldly remorse or worldly grief.

That is it's self-pitying. It looks in on itself. Woe is me for what I've done. The terrible thing that I've done. The grief that is burdening upon me. Woe is me.

[15 : 23] It's not an attitude that actually deals with guilt in a constructive all right way. But simply sinks or drowns under it. Gets crushed by it.

Judas' bewailing is not particularly because of Jesus' outcome to die. But rather his own plagues fears of guilt.

That is Judas is introspective. He's not looking at God and he's not looking at Jesus fundamentally in all of this. He recognises he is guilty and stands condemned under that guilt.

Maybe tossing the coins back is a sort of little way of trying to make amends. Oh well I'll hand the coins back so it's not really my greed. but he can't undo Jesus' sentence.

And in despair under his guilt his worldly grief leads him to death. He hangs himself. But in contrast godly grief is very different.

[16 : 34] Godly grief seeks to make amends. Godly grief turns to God and not in on oneself. Godly grief is motivated not primarily by self-pity but rather about honouring God and turning to God to deal with guilt.

Yes, godly grief bewails sin and its consequences. Worldly grief is more focused with one's own guilt feelings.

Godly grief seeks God's forgiveness. Worldly grief remains ensnared by guilt. Godly grief seeks a new start under God.

A slate wiped clean by the mercy of God, undeserved. Worldly grief hides in despair. Godly grief produces death.

For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation and brings no regret. But worldly grief produces death.

[17 : 49] Godly grief produces repentance. Not mere remorse. Not mere feeling woe is me, I'm sorry that I did this, how I've mucked up. But goes further than that.

Repentance is turning away. It can't undo the consequences but it turns to God and turns away from that way of life of sin. Seeking God's forgiveness, a fresh start, a new direction.

That's salvation. It brings no regret. Not because you forget what you've done or you can undo it, but because God has forgiven and wiped the slate clean.

Worldly grief doesn't turn to God like that. Worldly grief wallows in self-pity and produces death. You see, Judas' problem in the end is not really suicide, that's the symptom of his problem.

It's not really the betrayal either, terrible though that was, but lack of repentance, lack of true repentance. sins. He was stuck in worldly grief and not godly grief.

[19 : 02] And worldly grief or remorse is tragic. Godly grief is in the end glorious as it turns to a merciful and forgiving God.

They're the warnings to us here, the warnings to us about the suicide of Jesus. There's certainly a warning to beware of greed.

Not that we might want 30 pieces of silver to betray Jesus, but the pursuit of greed is in the end an idolatry that for Christians is a betrayal of Jesus, just like for Judas.

And we live in such a greedy world, in such a greedy economy and society, that the temptations to greed surround us and bombard us all the time.

We're in danger of being like Judas, of betraying Jesus by the pursuit of the idols of greed and wealth. What does it profit a person to gain the whole world and yet forfeit his soul?

[20 : 11] And Judas is the tragic example of one who did that. The other warning for us is to take repentance seriously, that the confession of our sin before almighty God is not about, oh God, I'm sorry I've done this again.

It's not about our own feelings of sorrow and self pity and remorse, but to actually go the further step and repent, to turn around, to change our life, to ask for God's forgiveness, to wipe the slate clean, to have the courage to live for God.

Our grief at our sin is insufficient if it does not lead us to repentance. And very often I think we come up as far as thinking, oh I'm sorry I've done this, I shouldn't have done this, I feel really bad about doing this.

And that's it. But that's godly grief. It produces death. death, not salvation. It still lives with regrets rather than without.

The chief priests, taking the pieces of silver, said it is not lawful to put them into the treasury since they're blood money.

[21 : 40] They're blinded by their sin. Their values and priorities are distorted. We don't want this money, it's blood money. Of course it's blood money. But they're the ones putting Jesus to death wrongly with false witnesses and false charges.

Their double standards expose the blindness of sin. That when we pursue a path of sin, as the Bible teaches us so many times in the Old and the New Testament, we get blinded to the standards of God and we become lovers of evil rather than lovers of good.

Their wrongdoing distorts their perceptions. We don't want this money, it's blood money. But they're rubbing their hands as Jesus is handed to Pilate.

their decision is in verse 7. After conferring together, they used the money, the coins, to buy the potter's field as a place to bury foreigners.

Unclean money used to buy an unclean place to bury unclean people. For this reason, that field has been called the field of blood.

[23 : 05] Akil Dharma is officially the name to this day. Most likely, this field is in what is called the Hinnom Valley. It's a little valley, it runs down the west side of the old city of Jerusalem and then turns around the south and joins from the east, the Kidron Valley.

So Jerusalem's old city is in effect surrounded on three sides, west, east, south, with valleys. One that comes down and turns, that's the Hinnom and the Kidron that Jesus has crossed to the Mount of Olives on the east side.

The Hinnom Valley is where people were buried. There are tombs there to this day, the date from the time of Jesus. You can walk through the valley and look in some of these now, of course, empty tombs cut into the valley.

But as well as that, it was the place of garbage refuse. And so people would hurl out their garbage there. And in effect, the Hinnom Valley would be the rubbish pile that would just smolder and burn.

And you'd put rubbish on top and it would just keep burning underneath. It's from the Hinnom Valley that you end up with the name Gehenna and hence the idea of the fires of hell.

[24 : 16] It's in this place probably that this field is bought. And that's where Judas goes. What Matthew tells us, some suggest, is in contradiction to the end of Judas as we're told it by Luke in the first chapter of Acts.

In Acts chapter 1, Judas buys the field. Maybe Luke is just summarising there that in effect the money that Judas had bought the field. It need not be particularly contradictory.

In Acts 1, we're told that Judas falls and his bowels all sort of come out and flow out. But that could, of course, be after hanging. So the two aren't necessarily contradictory. Perhaps the biggest puzzle is in the quote that finishes this section.

Verse 9, Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah. And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of the one on whom a price had been set, on whom some of the people of Israel had set a price, and they gave them for the potter's field, as the Lord commanded me.

The trouble is that the quote is not from the book of Jeremiah. It's from Zechariah, another prophet of the Old Testament. In Zechariah chapter 11, those words are found, and the context there is of the rejection of God's shepherd, who's valued only at the price of a slave, the thirty pieces.

[25 : 45] So the prophecy there in Zechariah 11 is being fulfilled in a sense. The buying of this field with the money that's regarded for the rejection of God's shepherd, a prophecy fulfilled by the actions of Judas.

But did Matthew get it wrong? I suspect that he's actually pulling two things together. For Jeremiah chapter 19 doesn't contain those words, but contains other parts that are fulfilled in these actions of Judas.

In Jeremiah 19 we read that God said to Jeremiah, go and buy a potter's earthenware jug. Take with you some of the elders of the people and some of the senior priests, and go out to the valley of the son of Hinnom at the entry to the potsherd gate, and proclaim there the words that I tell you.

You shall say, hear the word of the Lord, O kings of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel. I'm going to bring such disaster upon this place that the ears of everyone who hears of it will tingle, because the people have forsaken me and have profaned this place by making offerings in it to other gods whom neither they nor their ancestors nor the kings of Judah have known, and because they've filled this place with the blood of the innocent.

It's a section that rejects the idolatry and apostasy of the people of God in Jerusalem. In particular, their leaders at the time when Babylon is about to destroy Jerusalem, and it threatens God's punishment for those actions.

[27 : 32] I think Matthew's brought the two ideas together, as often happens in the New Testament. From Jeremiah, from Zechariah, ideas in one, words in the other, and they're fulfilled in the actions of Judas.

As we've seen several times in recent weeks in this series, the Old Testament is full of the prophecy of these events leading up to and including Jesus' death.

This is predetermined by God. It's not just a tragic turn of events orchestrated by Judas, but God's sovereign hand through these evil acts leading to and bringing about salvation through Jesus Christ.

We're not sure exactly when Judas suicided. At one level, it looks a little bit unlikely that early in the morning, they're going to take his money, go and buy a field.

Judas will go to that field, hang himself, and die, all before Jesus is crucified. It could happen. But certainly the way Matthew has placed it is to draw out the contrast between Judas and Jesus.

[28 : 45] Two deaths, both hanging in different ways, one presumably with a noose, the other hanging nailed to a cross.

Both tragic. Judas takes his own life. Jesus' life is taken from him. Judas is guilty, deserving death.

But Jesus is innocent, as Judas himself acknowledges, as the prophecy of Jeremiah and Zechariah acknowledge. For Judas, he dies because the wages of sin is death.

And ironically, Jesus is the same. But the difference is, they weren't his sins. Judas dies for his own.

Jesus dies for ours. As we see the death of Judas, there but for the grace of God go we.

[29 : 53] Maybe not meaning specifically the suicide, but certainly it's condemnation. Other than for the grace of God in the death of Jesus, we too would die accursed like Judas.

I am the guilty one, yet I go free because of Jesus' death. The tragedy of Judas is that he did not know where to find forgiveness.

He did not come to repent. He did not turn to a merciful and forgiving God. It's tragic because the death of Jesus is sufficient for the sins of the world, including Judas's.

Oh yes, woe to him who betrays the Son of Man. It would be better if he was not born. True. But the depth of the mercy of Jesus could have met Judas's sin.

But he wallowed in worldly grief and did not turn to God with godly grief. Let us not fail to find grace in our time of need, knowing that the Lord wants all to come to repentance.

[31 : 21] Amen.