

People of the Passion: Judas

DAVE BAST

Every story has its players. In Matthew's story of Christ's journey to the cross, Judas is one of the players who is truly strategic; and yet, apart from the one big thing we know, we know actually very little else about him. So, what type of character is he? What should we learn from Judas today? Stay tuned.

BOB HEERSPINK

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Bob Heerspink.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast. So Bob, we are now in the season of Lent, and that is a time when Christians all around the world are beginning to focus on the climax of Jesus' life, the story of his passion, his suffering, his death; and ultimately to celebrate his resurrection at Easter; and we want to do that too, on *Groundwork*, by looking at the characters who are part of the story – the people surrounding the cross.

BOB HEERSPINK

And sometimes when we look at those characters that played out in the Lenten story, we just look at them as part of a history that happened 2,000 years ago. I think the scriptures are really challenging us when we read the Lenten story to say: Okay, how do we connect with these people? You know, we tend to think of them as so different from us, but I think we have to ask the question: How are they like us?

DAVE BAST

Well, they are all cardboard figures, or they can be, because we know the story so well, those of us who are Christians, who have been raised in this thing, or who read the Bible regularly. So we've got Judas the traitor and Peter the faulty disciple who repents, and Pilate the wishy-washy judge, and the Jewish priests and leaders – the bad guys, you know, who are driving the whole thing; but really, they are all us in a way, and we are all them; and it is very possible for us to step into those roles. In fact, in a way we do it every day.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; you know, we are talking about Judas in this program, and I think he is perhaps one of the toughest people to connect in with because we think of him as so heinous, such a terrible person; but, you know, as I prepared for this program, I thought to myself: Okay, where have I betrayed people, and who has betrayed me? You know, the brokenness of trust in my own life when I have failed to come through for someone. And then you've got Judas here, who really says, okay, at the very deepest levels of betrayal, this is what really you are doing when you betray Christ.

DAVE BAST

Yes; you know, he is a bad guy; or is he a bad guy? He did a bad thing, right; he did one of the worst things; but was it the unforgivable sin? You know, we are sometimes spooked by that concept – the unpardonable sin; but what is that, really?

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, we should look at Judas' story...

DAVE BAST

And did he do that? Yes.

BOB HEERSPINK

And what he did after he did the heinous thing.

DAVE BAST

Well, we know what he did. He betrayed Jesus for 30 pieces of silver; and Matthew tells it like it is in Chapter 26. First he tells us how the chief priests and the elders assembled at the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas, we read:

⁴and they plotted to arrest Jesus in some sly way and kill him; ⁵“but not during the festival,” they said, “or there may be a riot among the people.” And then later in Chapter 26:

¹⁴One of the twelve, the one called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests ¹⁵and asked, “What are you willing to give me if I deliver him over to you?” So they counted out for him thirty pieces of silver, ¹⁶and from then on, Judas watched for an opportunity to hand him over.

BOB HEERSPINK

You know, if you think back into the story and what life was like in the First Century, you can see the real problem the Sanhedrin had with knowing how to move against Jesus. You know, there was no television back then. Jesus' picture wasn't being shown on the big screen. Who is the guy? What does he look like? It is almost like the Sanhedrin is saying: We cannot rile the crowd too much with a daytime move against him during the Passover, but we need someone who even knows what he looks like... you hear about him, but what does he look like?

DAVE BAST

It wasn't like they could hand out an 8x10 glossy of Jesus to the police force and say: Go arrest this guy; nor was it possible for them to come simply during the day while he was teaching in the Temple, which he did every day that week, and take him then because he was still wildly popular with many in the crowd. Remember Palm Sunday when he rides in triumph and the people are acclaiming him. So, their problem was: Look, now is the time. This has gone on long enough. We've got real issues; we are going to get this guy; and yet, we have to do it somehow on the sly; so, how is that going to happen? And Judas presents them with... you know, he hands it to them on a platter.

BOB HEERSPINK

Here is Judas, who has been in the inner circle... You know, it is a reminder that you can be so close to Jesus, and yet still betray him... and he is going to sell out Jesus for the price of a Jewish slave – 30 pieces of silver – 120 days worth of work for the average workman in Palestine – that is what Jesus is worth to them; but you know, it is interesting, Jesus really pulls the trigger on this. The Sanhedrin is plotting, Judas is sold out, but Jesus really calls the time of the betrayal by what happens in the upper room.

DAVE BAST

Well, here it is, continuing from Matthew 26:

²⁰When evening came, Jesus was reclining at the table with the twelve. ²¹And while they were eating, he said, “Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me.” ²²They were very sad and began to say to him, one after the other, “Surely not I, Lord?” ²³Jesus replied, “The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me. ²⁴The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him, but woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man. It would be better for him if he had not been born.” ²⁵Then Judas, the one who would betray him, said, “Surely not I, Rabbi?” Jesus answered, “You have said so.”

BOB HEERSPINK

So there they are at table, and table fellowship...

DAVE BAST

At table, and it is the Last Supper; so Judas has just had communion, in effect, with the others.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; this is the most significant meal of Jesus' whole ministry, and it is a meal of close fellowship, and Judas is there selling out. He knows what he is going to do...

DAVE BAST

He has already taken the money.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; it is in his moneybag; he has it in his pocket; and Jesus labels him: You are the traitor. He really.... In a sense, maybe, Jesus gives him one last chance to turn away. There is some grace being shown here. It is like: I know what you are going to do, Judas; and the question is, now that I know, are you still going to do it? Well, the answer is yes.

DAVE BAST

Well, there are all kinds of questions which this raises in my mind: Why did Judas do what he did? Did he really have any choice in the matter? Why did Jesus warn him, and do it in the way that he did? But before we explore those more fully, let's take a quick break, and then we will come back.

Segment 2

BOB HEERSPINK

Welcome back to our *Groundwork* conversation. Dave, before the break, we were talking about the episode in the upper room. Jesus has labeled Judas as the betrayer, and he has this strong language that Jesus uses. I mean, he really confronts Judas. He says, "The Son of Man..." he is talking about himself; "will go just as it is written about him, but woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man. It would be better for him if he had not even been born." And with that kind of language, Jesus almost says to Judas – really is saying to Judas: It is going to happen. Does Judas have a choice?

DAVE BAST

Yes; not only it is going to happen, but that seems to imply that Judas is sort of damned from the outset. Man, that is a hard concept to wrap our minds around. Judas has no choice in the matter; he is sort of a pawn; and as a result, he is going to have this horrible fate befall him. In fact, you know, Dante, in his masterpiece, *The Divine Comedy*, shows Judas in the lowest ring of hell – the ninth circle of hell – at the very bottom, sort of frozen in the ice with Satan. He is the worst of the worst; and to us that doesn't seem... How do we reconcile this with the love of God or the mercy of God or freewill? It is interesting that there is a modern take on Judas that really plays this up. He appears in *Jesus Christ Superstar*, you know, the rock opera, and he says: My God, I am sick; I have been used, and you knew it all the time. God, I will never know why you chose me for your crime – for your foul, bloody crime – you have murdered me. So, he is saying it is really God's fault, it is not my fault.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; and you know, you go to scripture and there are lot of people who want to say Christianity is fatalistic – and not just about Judas, about everybody. We talk about God choosing us; we talk about the invincibility of grace; and it is easy to say: Well, you know, none of us have any responsibility for sin. I mean, God had it in the cards from all eternity; but you go to the Bible, and you find that that is never the message of scripture. Scripture keeps coming back and saying: Yes, it's of grace, but you're responsible. I am responsible. Judas is responsible for what he does.

DAVE BAST

It reminds me of a line I read just recently; a wag who said: Of course I believe in free will, I don't have any choice. But we have to hold two truths in tension: One is that God does plan what happens, especially the events of salvation. It is according to the divine foreknowledge of God; the Bible says that; but we also are free actors in it and we make our choices, and I think that is the message of Jesus' warning one last time to Judas. I really think that is an act of grace. I think it has that same double sort of sense. On the one hand, the fact that Jesus can say, "One of you will betray me," shows that he does know; and he is sort of in control; but on the other hand, he kind of engages Judas one last time. In fact, in John's Gospel, it is even more full. He dips a piece of bread and gives it to Judas, saying, "The one that I am giving this to is the traitor," and I don't think the disciples still quite got it, but I think Judas got it.

BOB HEERSPINK

Judas got it; and I think the point is not to discuss fatalism in Judas; the point is to say: Look, this is the end of Jesus' life. It looks like everything is out of control, and we experience the same thing. Is God really at the helm? And what Jesus is emphasizing here is nothing is going to happen apart from God's will. This is how God is going to bring about the redemption of you and me, of creation. He is going to do it in a shocking way, through weakness, through death. It looks like everything is falling apart, but there is a God in the heavens, here and in our own lives, and he really keeps everything together.

DAVE BAST

I also think it is meant to confront us with ourselves and the choices that we make. Let's be honest; we very easily and readily betray Jesus, and we do it all the time. I take the piece of bread, you know, at the communion table, and I am filled with love and trust for Jesus, but then I go out into the night and can do something... well, in a way just as bad. I can deny my Lord. I can turn against him. So, let's face that truth, too, about ourselves that Judas confronts us with; and let's not sort of hold him at arm's length and say: Ooh, bad, bad...

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, we sell out Jesus for the same reason, I think, Judas sold out Jesus, and that is for a buck – for materialistic purposes. You know, it is very interesting, I think, in Matthew's Gospel that the episode before Judas' going to the Sanhedrin is the episode of the woman at Bethany breaking the perfume, pouring it on Jesus' feet, and the disciples going crazy about the fact that all of this wealth in this perfume was wasted on Jesus. It could have been sold. And I think the one who was really uptight about it was Judas. He wanted that in his own pocket, but at that point I think he kind of goes crazy. He says: You know, Jesus is not going to become this political king that I wanted. He says that he is anointed now for his burial; and well, I have to dig out the best I can, and if I can walk away with 30 pieces of silver, so be it. You know, selling out Jesus for a buck – selling out our integrity because it is going to cost us financially – is something that I think we come back to again and again in our world today.

DAVE BAST

Yes, there are all these attempts in certain circles to rehabilitate Judas' image, and explore his motives for what he did; and of course, there is that whole God thing: It is not Judas' fault; it is God's fault. But another attempt says that, really, Judas was just trying to force Jesus' hand. He wanted Jesus to establish himself as the political Messiah. That is why he betrayed him, figuring Jesus would rise up in triumph and cut loose and slay all of his enemies.

BOB HEERSPINK

Now, you see, I don't buy that. To me, Judas came face to face with the reality of what was happening in Jesus' ministry. I think the high point for Judas was Palm Sunday. I think that is when he thought maybe something is finally going to happen. In the end, it does not happen. In the end, he, as it were, anoints himself for burial; and...

DAVE BAST

Jesus does.

BOB HEERSPINK

Jesus does...

DAVE BAST

Yes, with the incident with the woman, right.

BOB HEERSPINK

He sees this happening, and he is disillusioned. I think he is not just disillusioned, he is angry, because he does not just walk away. He is going to inflict upon Jesus pain. I think whatever discipleship was there has turned to hatred.

DAVE BAST

And if we take the New Testament at face value, it says these three things about Judas: (A) He was a disciple, a follower, at least outwardly; (B) he was a traitor; and (C) he was a thief; because John says that Judas was the treasurer of the disciples, he kept the moneybag and he used to pilfer from it. So, what is his motive? On face value, according to the Gospels, the most sordid motive of all, he did it for the money. The love of money, says the Bible, is the root of all kinds of evil.

BOB HEERSPINK

How many people don't follow Jesus because they think it is going to make them healthy, it is going to make them wealthy? It is for what they are going to get out of it; and when it doesn't happen, they walk away from Jesus; and really, that is happening here with Judas.

DAVE BAST

So let's talk about us and Judas, and what we can take away from all of this when we come back.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

Hi; welcome back to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. Along with Bob Heerspink, I am Dave Bast. So Bob, we are looking at the character of Judas and the incident of his betraying Jesus, and how Jesus warned him in the upper room ahead of time, but he nevertheless went forward and made his fateful choice. It is also interesting to me that in the context of that warning he is sort of warning his other disciples, too. You know, he says: One of you will be a traitor; and they all immediately start saying: Lord, is it I? Is it me? Am I the one?

BOB HEERSPINK

That really speaks to where their heads are at in this whole Lenten experience, doesn't it?

DAVE BAST

There is a wonderful moment in Bach's dramatization of this in the *St. Matthew Passion*. When Jesus makes that announcement, the chorus breaks in, representing the disciples, and exactly eleven times it sings: Is it I, Lord? Is it I?

BOB HEERSPINK

One for each of the eleven disciples.

DAVE BAST

Right; but Judas is the only one who doesn't ask until later he is sort of shamed into doing it; but the other interesting thing is, none of them asked: Lord, is it Judas? So there was nothing about Judas that made them think he was the one. He was one of them, and yet, he had this terrible turning away – this falling away.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, if you think about that, you know, one of the ways to keep from betrayal is to ask the question of yourself. That is what I am hearing. The real issue is to look into our own lives. I mean, that is what the disciples were already doing there in the upper room as Jesus confronts Judas; and it seems to me that is a pattern for us today.

DAVE BAST

The Apostle Paul said: Let the one who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall. Always beware of your own heart and your own capacity for betrayal – for denying the Lord. Is that, though, the unpardonable sin?

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, I don't think it is, but it might be interesting to look at the rest of the story with regard to Judas. I mean, we have a tendency to focus just on the betrayal, but there was another episode that happened with the Sanhedrin following Jesus' arrest, which shows Judas having some real second thoughts, and it is in Matthew 27. Let me read those verses:

³When Judas, who had betrayed Jesus, saw that Jesus was condemned, he was seized with remorse and returned the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders. ⁴"I have sinned," he said; "for I have betrayed innocent blood." "What is that to us," they replied; "that is your responsibility." ⁵So Judas threw the money into the Temple and left, and he went away and hanged himself.

DAVE BAST

So, isn't that repentance?

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, it says *remorse*.

DAVE BAST

Well, okay, but is that just a verbal difference without a real distinction? He also said: I have sinned and I betrayed innocent blood; so he recognizes what he has done and he confesses: I have sinned.

BOB HEERSPINK

Okay, so he is remorseful; he says: I have sinned; and he returns the money. So, he is off the hook?

DAVE BAST

You know, that money is funny. It is like it has become a hot potato. It is like it becomes, one great commentator says, it is a symbol of responsibility for the death of Jesus; and Judas doesn't want it and the priests don't want it either. They keep... yes, he goes a long way toward repentance, it seems like. He feels bad – he feels terrible – and he verbally confesses, at least to the priests. Boy, talk about religious malpractice! Look at what they say to him: What is that to us? You know, you take care of it. What kind of pastors are these? Where is their compassion to a hurting soul – a tormented soul?

BOB HEERSPINK

But, you see, there is one thing, I think, that Judas doesn't do. He doesn't go to Jesus. I mean, he comes so close, but he doesn't go to Jesus.

DAVE BAST

He doesn't go to God, either. There is no prayer here. He confesses to the priests, but not to God.

BOB HEERSPINK

We will talk about Peter later on in another program, but Peter has these same aspects going on in his response, but he goes to Jesus, and that is what I don't see Judas doing. He is going to fix it himself. He is actually going to not go to Jesus, but he is going to exact judgment on his own self. He goes and hangs

himself.

DAVE BAST

Well, I think that is probably the most significant thing. It is what he doesn't do and what he does that makes this not true repentance, but merely remorse – yes, actually, despair. It is interesting that in the early Church, and through the Middle Ages despair was thought to be the greatest of sins – despair of one's own salvation – despair of the purposes of God – despair that salvation will ultimately come to the world; and that is where Judas falls. I honestly think he could have been forgiven. He could have been restored like Peter was if he hadn't killed himself. If he had only gone back to Jesus. If he had only genuinely repented and turned to the Lord.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; now, I think it is important for us to say suicide is not the unforgivable sin, because I think sometimes the Church has said that. I don't see it that way.

DAVE BAST

Well, we have to walk a fine line here between not heaping excessive guilt on suicide, which is often undertaken in...

BOB HEERSPINK

Because some people are so far down in depression...

DAVE BAST

Yes; or they are sick or they are... yes.

BOB HEERSPINK

But this is a different case, I think, with Judas. I mean, we know from what Jesus says that it would be better for this man not to be born, which to me says there was not true repentance or a real relationship with him. He didn't come to Jesus as he went, now, into this last chapter of his life.

DAVE BAST

Well, on the other hand, with respect to suicide, I think we have to say as strongly as we can that it is an act of despair, perhaps tinged with other factors, but the one thing that we must not do – the one unforgivable sin – is to fail to turn back again to the Lord in trust, and to believe that, yes, we can be forgiven; and I think that is where Judas ultimately fell. The message for me is when I take the bread and then go out and do something that completely denies who I am and who Jesus is and our relationship, what can I do except turn back to him? Lord, where else can we go? You have the words of eternal life.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, and I think for those times when we look back on our lives and we say: I really denied Jesus. I didn't speak for him. I betrayed his confidence in me. The message has to be: Jesus went to the cross to forgive that, too; that there really is grace no matter what our betrayals of Christ are.

DAVE BAST

And finally, maybe a good exercise for you and me every day is to ask: Lord, is it I? Lord, what am I capable of? Help me, protect me, prevent me from falling, keep me close to you. That is what I take away from the lesson of Judas.

BOB HEERSPINK

Thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation, and don't forget it is listeners like you asking questions and participating that keep our topics relevant to your life. So tell us what you think about what you are hearing, and suggest topics or passages that you would like to hear about on future *Groundwork* programs. Visit us at groundworkonline.com and join the conversation.

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