

Historical Jesus 14: Last Supper

Judas Iscariot

Why did Judas betray Jesus? Although it is hard to understand why Judas turned Jesus over to the authorities, the Gospels do not leave us without guidance. When Jesus reclined at a dinner in Bethany, Mary anointed his feet with a pound of expensive ointment (John 12:1-8). As the pungent fragrance filled the house, Judas protested, "Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?" Considering that a single denarius was the wage for a full day's labor, Mary's gift must have appeared extravagantly wasteful.⁷⁶ John adds some more information about what motivated Judas' outburst: "He said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief, and having charge of the moneybag he used to help himself to what was put into it."

Jesus defended Mary, arguing that her generous and tender act related to the day of his burial—a day quickly approaching. Still, if greed had motivated Judas, it does not explain betrayal to the point of death. After all, it was not likely that Jesus' death would enrich Judas. We learn a further detail from the last supper when we read that the devil had put it into Judas' heart to betray the Messiah (John 13:2; Luke 22:3). This was no mere misunderstanding or prank; Satan got involved and inspired Judas to his heinous crime. It was during the last supper of Jesus with his disciples that Judas finally went off and told the authorities where and when to capture Jesus away from the crowds.

The First Communion

At the beginning of the last supper, Jesus instituted the first communion. He passed around a cup of wine and a piece of bread to divide among them. At this time, they did not grasp the meaning of his death, but looking back on it, they must have gotten great understanding of this meaningful act. Here is the wording from Luke:

Luke 22:17-20

17 And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he said, "Take this, and divide it among yourselves. 18 For I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." 19 And he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." 20 And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood."

Who's the Greatest?

Next Jesus warned his betrayer with words that must have made Judas extremely uncomfortable: "The hand of him who betrays me is with me on the table. For the Son of Man goes as it has been determined, but woe to that man by whom he is betrayed!" (Luke 22:21-22). This precipitated a dispute among them over who was the greatest. Apparently, their

⁷⁶ Matthew 20:2: "After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard."

discussion about who among them was the worst somehow turned into a discussion about the opposite. Not only did they fail to encourage and comfort Jesus, but instead they fought over who was the best. Jesus settled the issue by turning power on its head. Here is what he said.

Luke 22:25-27

25 And he said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors. 26 But not so with you. Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. 27 For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves.

True power is found in coming under and lifting up, not dominating from the top down. Next he illustrated his point in an unforgettable way.

Washing Their Feet

Washing someone else's feet is not a pleasant task in any culture. In Israel it was a task for the lowest servant in the household, and yet Jesus offered to do it for his disciples. Wearing only a towel, he knelt before each of his disciples and washed their feet in a basin of water. Peter—ever the impulsive one—protested such a role reversal, but Jesus insisted. If Peter wouldn't let him wash his feet, then he would have no part of him. Then Jesus said the following:

John 13:12-17

12..."Do you understand what I have done to you? 13 You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. 14 If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. 15 For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. 16 Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. 17 If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.

Just after this impeccable example of humility and service, Satan entered into Judas, and Jesus told him, "What you are going to do, do quickly," though no one at the table understood what Jesus was talking about. Once Judas left the house, Jesus knew the wheels of his arrest and execution were in motion. In just a few short hours, Judas would lead the authorities to arrest him. As a result, Jesus talks about his glorification (John 13:31-32). F. F. Bruce explains:

[T]he Son of Man's suffering becomes the first stage in his receiving of glory and can indeed be spoken of absolutely as his being glorified...If Judas's mind has been made up, the Lord's mind has also been made up. He has accepted the suffering and death which lie ahead, and therefore he can refer to the passion [suffering] and the glory in the past tense; they are as good as accomplished. 'The Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him.'⁷⁷

⁷⁷ F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel & Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), pp. 264, 293.

Upper Room Discourse

After foretelling his betrayal, Jesus begins in earnest to prepare his closest followers for continuing on once he's gone. This is the longest block of teaching in the Gospel of John (including roughly chapters 13 to 17). Of course, I'm not able in the time allowed to explain all of it in detail, so here are some brief summaries:

- A New Commandment (13:34-38)
 - o They must love others as Jesus loved them ; by this will all know that they are Jesus' disciples
- Jesus: the Only Way to the Father (14:1-7)
 - o He's going away and coming back again to receive them to himself and be with them
- Seeing Jesus Is Seeing the Father (14:8-14)
 - o Because Jesus does the works of God and speaks His words, they should believe that he is in the Father and the Father is in him
- The Helper Is Coming (14:15-31)
 - o They won't be orphaned because through the spirit, the Father and His Son will make their home with them
- The Vine Illustration (15:1-17)
 - o Abide in the vine (Jesus) and in this way produce fruit (obedience)
- The World Will Hate Them (15:18-16:4)
 - o The world is going to persecute them just like they persecuted Jesus
- It's to Their Advantage That He Goes (16:5-11)
 - o Jesus' departure is necessary before the helper can come who/which will convict the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment⁷⁸
- The Spirit of Truth Will Guide Them (16:12-15)
 - o Jesus cannot say everything now, but the helper will relay the truth from Jesus
- Sorrow Will Turn to Joy (16:16-22)
 - o After a little while, they won't see him anymore and will experience sorrow, but when they see him again, they will rejoice
- Ask in His Name to Receive (16:23-28)
 - o They will ask the Father in his name, since he is now leaving the world and going to the Father
- They May Scatter but Should Take Heart (16:29-33)
 - o An hour is coming when they will all leave him, but Jesus has said everything ahead of time so that they can have peace and take heart; after all, he has overcome the world

The Prayer

Next, Jesus lifted his eyes to heaven and prayed for an entire chapter (John 17). This is by far the longest of his recorded prayers. It's our best opportunity to listen in to how Jesus spoke to his Father and what sorts of petitions he asked for. Jesus begins the prayer with a sense of

⁷⁸ The word translated "helper" also means an "advocate." Thus, the spirit is the prosecuting attorney, holding the world responsible for their crimes.

accomplishment. He's coming to the end of his ministry. He's done the job God gave him to do. He's glorified God on earth and now asks God to glorify him in return. He has shown his disciples God's character, giving them God's words. As a result, those whom the Father gave him have come to believe that God sent him.

He's now about to go to the Father and prays that his followers be one as he is one with the Father. Jesus has guarded and protected them, losing none except the one the Scripture predicted. He knows that the disciples are going to face a hostile world. He does not pray that God would take them out of the world, but that he would keep them from the evil one and sanctify them in His truth. As God sent Christ, he sends them.

Then, Jesus prays for us. He says, "I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (John 17:20-21). Jesus then repeats his concern for unity so that, once again, the world would know that God sent him and loved him. Next, he prays that those whom God gave him would be able to see his glory with him. Although the world does not know God, these know. Jesus ends his prayer with, "I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them" (John 17:26).

After praying these words, Jesus went across the brook Kidron to a garden where he prayed some more before his betrayer came at the head of a posse of armed men to arrest him. Next time, we will consider the dramatic events that met him in his last hours.