

Betrayal and Denial

The Spirit of Christ in the Psalmist speaks of how at the time of his greatest need, Messiah's closest companions deserted him:

“reproach hath broken my heart; and I am full of heaviness: and I looked for some to take pity, ***but there was none, and for comforters, but I found none ...***” (Psa. 69:20).

The shepherd being smitten, the sheep were scattered (Zech. 13:7; Mat. 26:31) every one to his place. There was no man who would stand by the Master during either his trial, or the imposition of the death-sentence that was passed upon him. Humanly speaking, he was alone in his darkest hour.

Our reading for the day, in Mark chapter 14 brings us to consider two of Messiah's disciples in terms of their relationship with him and his sufferings – and neither of them are presented in a good light. One actively betrayed our Master, taking the lead in securing his death, whereas the other distanced himself from the Messiah, denying that he had any connection with him. As one writer expressed it:

“Simon Peter denied his Lord under sudden impulse when caught in the toils of circumstances, but Judas sinned with deliberate and calculated treachery” (The Testimony, April 2004).

It is one of the features of Scripture, that the narrative records the failures of men and women, as well as their successes. By presenting the negative as well as the positive, we are given a proportionate picture, into which we can place ourselves. If the Scriptures only recorded the good points of the men and women it describes, we would find ourselves at a loss, feeling greatly inferior, and perhaps concluding that to live a life in Christ is too hard, too difficult, being constantly aware of our own personal failures. But the record is well balanced in it's approach, detailing the failures and shortcomings of those men and women who, though they be called away from the ways of the world, nevertheless find how difficult life is, saying with the Apostle Paul, that “it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me ... O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death” (Rom. 7:17, 24). By seeing the failures of those who have gone before, we can take hope in the forgiving nature of our Master, identifying ourselves with them, throwing ourselves upon the mercy of the Lord.

But we must not presume. We cannot hope to be delivered from the body of this death, if we continue in Sin, and follow after the ways of the flesh. Those who seek after the affairs of this world, the Apostle describes, are those who “run greedily after the error of Balaam for reward” (Jude 11). And Judas was no exception. Betraying Messiah for a few pieces of silver, he treasured the things of this life as being better than the life to come. After the error of Balaam, who sought to curse Yahweh's People, Judas sought to bring the curses of men upon the Only Begotten Son of Yahweh – but in so doing, he secured his own destruction.

There is a background to the ways of Judas described in the book of Psalms. Three Psalms in particular describe the pernicious ways of the betrayer of Messiah, and we shall consider them in turn:

“When he shall be judged, let him be condemned: and let his prayer become sin. Let his days be few; and let another take his office. Let his children be fatherless, and his wife a widow. Let his children be continual vagabonds, and beg: let them seek their bread also out of their desolate places” (Psa. 109:7-10).

This is cited by the Apostle, in Acts 1:20, and directly applied to Judas. This man was crooked from the outset. When he protested against what he considered to be a waste of ointment poured over the Master, claiming it could be better used to help the poor, the narrative informs us:

“... this he said, ***not that he cared for the poor; but because he was a thief***, and had the bag, and bare what was put therein” (Jno. 12:6).

He stole from the collection. No doubt, to support his family which Psalm 109 refers to, and raise their standard of living, seeking to improve their lot in life. Interestingly, the Psalm seems to allude to this disregard for the poor, saying in verse 16:

“... he ***remembered not to show mercy***, but ***persecuted the poor and needy*** man, that he might even slay the broken in heart” (Psa. 109:16).

Seeking his own wellbeing before those for whom the money was collected, he “remembered not to show mercy”, and as a consequence was condemned to die – albeit at his own hand. But in the ultimate sense, the poor and needy man who he “persecuted” is Messiah himself. Christ is “the broken in heart” who Judas sought to destroy, as we read earlier in Psalm 69:

“Reproach ***hath broken my heart***; and I am full of heaviness ...” (Psa. 69:20)

The Master bore the scorn and reproach of many, as those he came to save derided him on every side. Yet he had a work to do. “Christ pleased not himself; but, as it is written, The reproaches of them that reproached thee fell on me” (Rom. 15:3). Bearing reproach for his Father’ Sake, Christ gave us an example, that we must position ourselves in the same situation: “Let us go forth therefore to him without the camp, ***bearing his reproach***” (Heb. 13:13).

The other two Psalms that directly speak of Judas are Psalms 41, and 55:

“Yea, mine own familiar friend, in whom I trusted, which did eat of my bread, hath lifted up his heel against me” (Psa. 41:9)

“for it was not an enemy that reproached me; then I could have borne it: neither was it he that hated me that did magnify himself against me; then I would have hid myself from him. But it was thou, a man mine equal, my guide, and mine acquaintance ...” (Psa. 55:12-13).

There is a historical background in the life of David, and his relationship to Ahithophel. During the time of Absalom's rebellion against his father, Ahithophel sought to betray David, and it is that situation that the Psalmist is alluding to in this prophecy of Messiah. The words here are most instructive: we are told that "Jesus knew from the beginning who they were that believed not, and ***who should betray him***" (Jno. 6:64). With the full knowledge of what Judas was to do, the Master regarded him as a "familiar friend:" "my guide, and mine acquaintance". Even at the time of his betrayal, Messiah addressed him as such: "***Friend***, wherefore art thou come?" (Mat. 26:50). Such things are surely most instructive to ourselves in dealing with issues between brethren. The Master did not give a railing accusation, but left his Father to rebuke his enemy.

It is difficult to see what motivated Judas to betray Messiah, being as that he saw all the healing miracles of Messiah, which demonstrated his power over mortality. But it would appear, that for the love of money – filthy lucre – he sought occasion against the One who though he were rich, became poor for his brethren. As it is written: "that we, through his poverty might be rich" (2 Cor. 8:9). So it was that his greed became Judas' downfall, and the curse of Psalm 109 came true – as Jesus himself said: "truly the Son of Man goeth, as it was determined: but woe unto that man by whom he is betrayed" (Lu. 22:21).

Peter on the other hand, although he exhibited weakness when pressed about his relationship to Christ, did not set himself against his Master. His denial was not a betrayal; it was a distancing himself from the sufferings of Christ, that he might not be condemned with him. We see a reformed Peter later speaking of how he was "a witness of the sufferings of Christ ..." (1 Pet. 5:1). No longer afraid to be identified as being an apostle of Jesus Christ, he was moved by the Spirit to write to others:

"Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you: but rejoice, inasmuch as ***ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings***; that, when he glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy" (1 Pet. 4:12-13).

Psalm 1 speaks of the Blessed:

"Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful ..." (Psa. 1:1).

Ultimately, "the man" who was separate from sinners is Messiah, yet these words take a more general sense for those who seek to become like him. Peter, in his momentary weakness stood in the company of the sinners who recognised his connection with Christ. He even went so far as to sit with them, and warm himself with the light of their fire:

"And Peter followed him [i.e. Christ] afar off, even into the palace of the high priest: and ***he sat with the servants, and warmed himself*** at the fire ..." (Mrk. 14:54).

So it was, that at the time of our Master's final hours, none stood with him. Thrice Peter was asked if he were one of the disciples. But rather than being ready always to give an answer to those who asked him (cp. 1Pet. 3:15), he repudiated association with Christ.

First, "he denied before them all, saying, I know not what thou sayest" (Mat. 26:70). Then, secondly the record recounts that "he denied with an oath, I do not know the man" (Mat. 26:72). Then thirdly: "then began he to curse and to swear, saying, I know not the man. And immediately the cock crew," and the Master "turned and looked upon Peter" (Mat. 27:74; Lu. 22:61), who as a broken man "went out, and wept bitterly." As a stone smitten by the gaze of the Greater Than Moses, the water of repentance flowed from his eyes, as he realised that his Master's prediction of failure had come true. What a desolate position Peter was now in – separate from his Master, with all hopes and expectations dashed, as there was a certainty that Christ would be condemned to death by Jew and Gentile alike.

But our Lord is merciful. When he was raised incorruptible, the Angels told the women who had gone to the tomb:

"Be not affrighted: Ye seek Jesus of Nazareth, which was crucified: he is risen; he is not here: behold the place where they laid him. But go your way, tell his disciples **and Peter** that he goeth before you into Galilee: there shall ye see him, as he said unto you" (Mrk. 16:6-7).

Notice this: specific mention is made of "Peter" – it was of utmost importance that he know that the Master be risen, for Christ had a further purpose with him. Though it is true that if we deny Messiah, he will deny us (2 Tim. 2:12) - and that before the angels of God (Lu. 12:9), Peter was going to be given another opportunity to be reconciled to his Master, and devote the rest of his life in humble service in his Name.

In fact, when we consult the record, we find that the resurrected Jesus himself gave Peter a special and specific mission. So the narrative recounts in John chapter 21:

"... Jesus saith to Simon Peter, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee. He saith unto him, Feed my sheep" (Jno. 21:16).

Peter had only days before denied association with Christ, and now the Master asked him if he loved him more than any of the other disciples! There is a point here that is missed in the English translation: the words "lovest" and "love" are different in the Greek. The love that Messiah asked about was "*agape*" – a sacrificial love. This is the love being referred to in the saying, "Greater **love** hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (Jno. 15:13). This is the love of Christ extended to his brethren. How could Peter claim to have such a love towards Christ?! So he used a different word, saying "lord, though knowest that I love thee". The word here is "*Phileo*," which is a love from a man to his friend or acquaintance. Not quite as intimate a love as one where a man is willing to lay down his life for another, but a sense of liking, or enjoying one another's company. Peter here does not claim to love Messiah any more than others – indeed, he is even unable to use the same word –

agape – as Christ does. He said, “thou knowest that I love thee”, as if to say, Thou knowest I can only admit to *phileo*, but not *agape*.

The Master repeated the question, and Peter repeated his answer a second time. Then a third time – but here, Christ himself changes the word that he uses. Now, he uses the word “*phileo*”, a recognition that Peter could not, as yet, claim to have that sacrificial love that Christ had for him:

“He saith unto him the third time, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest (*phileo*) thou me? Peter was grieved because he said unto him the third time, *Lovest thou me?* And he said unto him, Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I *love thee*” (Jno. 21:17).

Peter was grieved, because he knew that the Master was coaxing out of him a declaration of what he had done - that rather than lying his life down for Christ’s sake, as he had pledged to do, he had denied him, and did not show forth *agape* love. But here was the mercy of Christ: Peter had denied him 3 times, and was now induced to confess his love 3 times. Moreover, rather than to be separate from Christ, the Master gave Simon a new work, which he was to spend the rest of his life doing: “feed my sheep”. And moreover still, he assured Peter that in his death, he would be very closely identified with his Master:

“Verily, verily, I say unto thee, When thou wast young, thou girded thyself, and walkest whither thou wouldest: but when thou shalt be old, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee, and carry thee whither thou wouldest not. This spake he **signifying by what death he should glorify God**” (Jno. 21:18-19)

Rather than to deny his Master, Peter was to devote his entire life in service to Christ, and even at the end, would glorify God by his mode of death.

In these two men therefore, we have two representatives of mankind that we can identify ourselves with. Judas, who after the error of Balaam turned against his Master and Peter, who disassociated himself from Christ. One was greedy for filthy lucre, but the other disabled by human weakness. For Judas, his sin was the end: there is nothing but “woe” to await him at the grand assize. But for Peter, there was a life of remorse for what he had done. It has been pointed out many times that for Peter, his initial denial is what shaped the rest of his life, as he laid it down in the servitude of Messiah. We also, then, can take heed to his example. Let us forsake the way of Judas, and consider the latter end of Peter. Let us truly show that precious *agape* love for our brethren and sisters, and also the Master himself, that in the day of his appearing, we shall be confessed, and not denied before the Angels of God (Lu. 12:8).

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