

*Mementos of Christ's Passion – Part II***“THIRTY SILVER COINS”**

Our Lenten series this year is titled MEMENTOS OF CHRIST'S PASSION; that is, items which remind us of persons, places, and events within the Passion History, and especially of that which our Savior suffered and sacrificed to atone for our sins.

The first memento we discussed was the alabaster jar described in Matthew 26:6-13. An alabaster jar containing expensive perfume, which Mary of Bethany used to anoint Jesus for burial. An alabaster jar representing trust, understanding, and gratitude. Mary's trust in Christ's words. Mary's understanding of the need for Christ's death. And finally, Mary's humble gratitude for Christ's willing sacrifice.

Tonight, we consider the second memento: the THIRTY SILVER COINS Judas Iscariot was paid to betray the Son of God. The financial terms of this betrayal are recorded in three of the four Gospels: Matthew 26:14-16; Mark 14:10-11; and Luke 22:3-6. We'll use the first of these readings as our text.

Matthew 26:14-16, “Then one of the Twelve—the one called Judas Iscariot—went to the chief priests and asked, ‘What are you willing to give me if I hand Him over to you?’ So they counted out for him thirty silver coins. From then on Judas watched for an opportunity to hand Him over.”

What were these thirty silver coins? While the composition of the coins is named in Scripture, specifically, thirty *silver* coins, the exact value of the coins is not named. Yet, whatever their value, a mere thirty silver coins were an impoverished pittance compared to the vast wealth in the Temple treasury. Yet, to Judas and the religious leaders, thirty silver coins were what Jesus Christ was worth.

And if the thirty silver coins were Hebrew shekels, as seems likely, the value of one shekel, according to some Bible commentators, was only seventy-two cents. And if true, then Jesus Christ, God the Son, the Creator of the entire universe and everything and everyone in it; the One whose priceless blood redeemed us from our sins—if the coins were shekels and their value fixed at seventy-two cents per shekel, then Jesus Christ was betrayed for a grand total of twenty-one dollars and sixty cents.

“So they counted out for him thirty silver coins,” Matthew 26:15. What may we learn from this memento of Christ’s passion—these thirty silver coins? Have you heard the phrase “follow the money”? This phrase was popularized by the 1976 movie *All the President’s Men*; a film about two reporters for the Washington Post, Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward, whose investigation of the Watergate Scandal eventually led to the resignation of President Richard Nixon.

At one point in the film, when their investigation fails, the reporters are told by a clandestine informer named Deep Throat: “Follow the money.” Following the financial transactions would lead the reporters to the right people, places, and conclusions. And the transactions did. So, I began to wonder: Where would those thirty silver coins lead us in Scripture if we “followed the money”? Let’s see.

First, the thirty silver coins lead us to the religious leaders of Israel; that is, the scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees; the Herodians, elders, high priests, Jewish Sanhedrin, and officers of the temple guard.

Why did Judas approach these *religious* leaders about betraying Jesus? Why not Herod the Jewish King or Pilate the Roman Governor? The answer is: Long before Judas wanted to betray Jesus, the religious leaders of Israel wanted to kill Jesus—

a murderous desire which only increased throughout Christ's ministry, from His first sermons and first miracles to His last breath on the cross.

Yes, even then, as Jesus hung bleeding and dying on the cross, these religious leaders were reviling and ridiculing Him; as stated in Mark 15:31-32, **“In the same way the chief priests and the teachers of the law mocked Him among themselves. ‘He saved others,’ they said, ‘but He can’t save Himself. Let this Christ, the king of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe.”**

Over time, the religious leaders of Israel accused Jesus of blasphemy; of being a Sabbath-breaker, law-breaker, tradition breaker, and trouble-maker; of being a glutton, drunkard, and in league with the Devil; of casting aside the laws of Moses and associating with tax collectors and notorious sinners.

And so we read telling statements in the Gospels like: **“This fellow is blaspheming,”** Matthew 9:3. **“It is by the prince of demons that He drives out demons,”** Matthew 9:34. **“Why do Your disciples break the tradition of the elders?”** Matthew 15:2.

And then in Matthew 26:3-5, immediately before the accounts of the alabaster jar and the thirty silver coins: **“Then the chief priests and the elders of the people assembled in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas, and they plotted to arrest Jesus in some sly way and kill Him. ‘But not during the Feast,’ they said, ‘or there may be a riot among the people.’ ”** So, to these religious leaders, Judas Iscariot and his nefarious plan must have seemed the perfect solution; and a mere thirty silver coins must have seemed an unbelievable bargain.

Most of all, the religious leaders of Israel hated Jesus for

telling the truth: the truth about God; the truth about sin, judgment, grace, faith, forgiveness; the truth about the only way for mortal man to be saved—namely, through faith in Him, Jesus Christ: **“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me,”** John 14:6. He told them the truth about Himself, saying, **“I and the Father are one,”** John 10:30. One in power. One in glory. One in essence. And the Jews picked up rocks to stone Him.

The religiously leaders especially hated Jesus because He told them the truth about themselves. **“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites!”** said Jesus in Matthew 23. **“You shut the kingdom of heaven in men’s faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to...You blind guides! You strain out a gnat and swallow a camel...You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?”** This is what Jesus told the religious leaders of Israel to their faces, and more than once.

Thirty silver coins, twenty-one dollars and sixty cents, to betray Jesus Christ. And the ones who willingly, in fact, gleefully and delightedly paid the money—**“they were delighted,”** states Mark 14:11 and Luke 22:5—were the religious leaders in Israel. And to place this description in a modern context, think of Israel’s religious leaders as the clergy; as pastors, teachers, professors, doctors of theology, youth ministers, even voters, elders, or church council members.

How many church leaders today would be delighted to be rid of Jesus Christ and the truths of His word at any cost—leaders who are, as were many of Israel’s religious leaders, blind guides, broods of vipers? Leaders who prefer to build cathedrals instead of building people up in the Christian faith. Leaders who prefer to preach material prosperity instead of preaching the cross of Jesus Christ. We can all do the math. Simply follow the money.

Second, the thirty silver coins also lead us to Judas Iscariot. Among the long and varied lists of the world’s most renowned betrayers—for example, Ephialtes of Trachis, who betrayed King Leonides and the Three Hundred Spartans at Thermopylae in 480 B.C.; or Marcus Brutus, who betrayed Julius Caesar in 44 B.C.; or Benedict Arnold, who betrayed the fledgling United States in 1780 A.D.—among such betrayals, Judas Iscariot is surely the most infamous betrayer. After all, he betrayed the Lord Jesus Christ.

Yet, despite the infamy of Judas’ public actions, little is known of his personal life. His father’s name was Simon. His first name, Judas, from the Hebrew YEHUDAH, ironically meant “praised”—something Judas the Betrayer would never be. His surname Iscariot may have meant “inhabitant of Kerioth,” though this is uncertain.

Rather, when Judas is mentioned in the Gospels, he is consistently described by two phrases; namely, as one of the twelve original disciples, and as the one disciple who betrayed Jesus Christ. In Luke 6:16, for example, a list of the twelve disciples, Judas is named last and simply called: **“Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.”**

Of course, the fact that Judas was personally called by Jesus only underscores the heinousness and devilishness of his betrayal of Jesus. Remember, Judas was with Jesus for three-and-a-half years—nearly the amount of time I spent in seminary, I greatly respected my seminary professors. But Judas Iscariot was taught by God Himself.

Imagine the powerful sermons Judas heard. Imagine the great miracles Judas witnessed. He saw Jesus cast out demons, control weather, walk on water, heal lepers, restore cripples, even raise the dead. When Jesus miraculously fed thousands from five

barley loaves and two small fish, Judas was one of the disciples who served the food and later gathered the leftovers.

And we wonder, “How could such a man betray Jesus? Why would such a man betray Jesus?” In the beginning, Judas must have been sincere in his discipleship. Why else would he have left everything, like the other eleven original disciples, to follow Jesus. Something changed; or at least, something previously in the background came forcibly to the forefront. But what? Scholars have debated this question for centuries.

Some believe that Judas grew disillusioned with Jesus; that Judas had expected riches, not rags; status, not service; associating with society’s best not worst—the nobodies, outcasts, misfits. Others believe that Judas had wanted a different type of Messiah; a Messiah who would oust the hated Romans, restore glory to Israel, and usher in an unprecedented era of peace and prosperity. As such, Judas had no use for a Messiah who was determined to die on a cross for the sins of the undeserving world.

Were these the reasons and motivations which drove Judas Iscariot to betray Jesus? Truthfully, we don’t know, and the Bible doesn’t provide a specific answer. However, it does provide a tantalizing clue. And that clue lies in following the money, the thirty silver coins.

As we learned last week, Judas **“was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it,”** John 12:6. What question did Judas ask the religious leaders when proposing to betray Jesus Christ? He said, **“What are you willing to give me if I hand Him over to you?”** Matthew 26:15. A financial transaction. And so it seems, my friends, that greed, not patriotism or nationalism or disillusionment—but common greed led Judas Iscariot to betray the Son of God.

Judas Iscariot “followed the money” in a literal sense. He valued thirty pieces of silver more than the precious blood of Jesus Christ. And tragically, in the end, where did the thirty silver coins lead Judas? To absolute despair. To unrepented sin and unrequested forgiveness. To a cliff. To a noose. To a suicide. To a burial in a potter’s field which, ironically, was purchased with those same thirty silver coins. And of all this heartache, surely the greatest tragedy is this: Jesus called Judas. Jesus loved Judas. Jesus died for Judas too.

A man named Colin Smith wrote: “With Judas’ eyes, he saw the clearest evidence. With his ears, he heard the finest teaching. With his feet, he followed the greatest example. And yet, this man still betrayed Jesus.

How many prosperity preachers are there today who willingly betray Jesus Christ—not for thirty silver coins; but for thirty million dollars and expensive mansions and luxury cars and personal jets. Preachers like TD Jakes, Kenneth Copeland, Joel Osteen, Joyce Meyer, and Rod Parsley, who said: “I just love to talk about money. I just love to talk about your money. Let me be clear: I want your money. I deserve it. This church deserves it.” How many such preachers are there? We can all do the math. Simply follow the money.

Lastly, the thirty silver coins lead us to the truthfulness and dependability of Scripture. How so? We all know that Judas betrayed Jesus. We all know that the amount Judas received was thirty silver coins. But how many of us know that this dreadful betrayal and exact financial transaction were prophesied in Scripture centuries before they happened—and with such amazing detail that the prophecy not only described the betrayal and the haggling over the price; but also that the thirty silver coins, the blood-money, would be hurled back into the temple for a potter. This is exactly what happened.

We read in Zechariah 11:12-13, “I told them, ‘If you think it best, give me my pay; but if not, keep it.’ So they paid me thirty pieces of silver. And the LORD said to me, ‘Throw it to the potter’—the handsome price at which they priced me! So I took the thirty pieces of silver and through them into the house of the LORD to the potter.”

The same true, reliable word of God tells us this: **“For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect,”** 1 Peter 1:18-19.