

MATTHEW 27:1–10. (EHV)

Early in the morning, all the chief priests and the elders of the people reached the decision to put Jesus to death. They bound him, led him away, and handed him over to Pontius Pilate, the governor. Then when Judas, who had betrayed him, saw that Jesus was condemned, he felt remorse. He brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders and said, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." But they said, "What is that to us? That's your problem." He threw the pieces of silver into the temple and left. Then he went out and hanged himself. The chief priests took the pieces of silver and said, "It is not lawful to put these into the treasury, since it is blood money." They reached a decision to buy the potter's field with the money, as a burial place for foreigners. So that field has been called The Field of Blood to this day. Then what was spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled:

They took the thirty pieces of silver, the price the sons of Israel had set for him, and they gave them for the potter's field, just as the Lord commanded me. [Jer. 19:1–13; Zech. 11:12–13]

We are continuing our series on Jesus's passion or suffering between Holy Thursday and Good Friday. In this devotion, we will look at one of the most tragic events in the Scriptures—the suicide of Judas.

We don't know where Judas went after Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane or where he was while Jesus was on trial before the Jewish ruling council. But he must have kept his ear to the ground and stayed informed about what was going on. Matthew tells us that when Judas found out that the Jewish ruling council condemned Jesus as worthy of death, he felt remorse.

What did Judas think was going to happen when he betrayed Jesus to his enemies? Perhaps Judas thought Jesus would just perform another miracle, like he had one time at Nazareth when the crowd tried to throw him down the brow of the hill on which the town was built, and Jesus simply walked right through the crowd and went on his way (Luke 4:28–30). No one and no thing had been able to harm Jesus thus far. Perhaps Judas thought he could simply exploit Jesus's supernatural power: He could betray Jesus for thirty pieces of silver, Jesus would simply escape and be none the worse for wear, and Judas would be thirty silver pieces richer. Judas would have only lost his close relationship with Jesus, which he apparently thought was not as valuable as thirty pieces of silver.

That's what *might* have been going through Judas's head. We can't know for sure, because the Scriptures don't tell us. All we know is that, now that Jesus was actually condemned and was being led off to Pontius Pilate, Judas felt remorse. Jesus's final words to him might have been ringing in his ears: "Friend, why have you come?" (Matt. 26:50). He couldn't take it anymore. The money wasn't worth his guilty conscience.

I said before that this is one of the most tragic events in the Scriptures. That's because, once Judas realizes his sin, he initially feels and does everything he should have felt and done. He feels remorse, genuine sorrow over his sin, which is the first part of repentance. And to bring resolution to his remorse, he brings back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders,

the people who had given it to him, and he confesses his sin to them: “I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.”

So far, so good. Whom better to confess his sin to? The chief priests are the religious representatives of God’s chosen people. These were the men who did their work in the temple complex, amid the building and furnishings and rituals and sacrifices that beautifully foreshadowed the work of the Messiah and proclaimed the Lord’s forgiveness. If anyone had the training and responsibility to absolve people of their sins and guilt, it was these men.

But how do the chief priests and elders respond? “What is that to us? That’s your problem.”

Imagine if there is some sin you’ve committed that’s bothering you. It keeps you up at night and it won’t let you have a moment of peace during the day. Maybe it’s a secret abortion or sexual activity outside of marriage or something cruel and spiteful that you said to a close relative who is now deceased or some other horrible sin, and your conscience is eating you up inside because of it. Finally, you can’t take it anymore. You need to confess it to someone, so you go to a pastor and you confess your to him with tears in your eyes...

And he responds to you, “Oh my goodness! How could you do such a thing? Please leave my office immediately. I don’t want to have anything to do with you.” How horrible!

Make no mistake: What Judas did in response to this answer was still sinful and ultimately his own fault, and he has to pay for it eternally. But make no mistake about this either: Woe to those chief priests and elders on Judgment Day! Woe to all those public ministers, those whom God called to publicly represent him, who failed to proclaim forgiveness to repentant sinners, who proclaimed law when they should have proclaimed gospel!

Without any assurance of forgiveness from the chief priests and elders or from God, Judas despaired of life and of God’s grace. God says life is his gift (Deut. 32:39; 2 Cor. 6:2) and that he always stands ready to forgive those who repent of their sin, no matter how horrible the sin may be (Psalm 32:5–6; 1 John 1:9). But the kind of despair Judas had calls God a liar. Judas threw the pieces of silver into the temple and left. Then he went out and hanged himself.

We might be tempted to think that this was all unfair to Judas. After all, Judas’s betrayal was prophesied already in the Old Testament (e.g. Psalm 41:9). It was a critical component of God’s plan to hand his Son over to death to pay for the sins of the world. But we have to remember a couple things: First, foreknowledge does not equal causation. Many of you remember the events of September 11, 2001. Most of you remember the Covid-19 pandemic. But the fact that you remember those things does not mean that you caused them. Think of foreknowledge as being able to remember into the future. Just as you remembering something does not automatically mean you caused it, the same is true with God and the things he remembers, whether in the past or in the future.

Second, the prophets prophesied that someone close to the Messiah would betray him, but they never named him. Judas did not have to be the one to betray Jesus. Just as with all of us, so also with Judas: If we are saved, all the credit and glory goes to God in Jesus’s name. If we are condemned, it is always no one’s fault but our own, no matter what the circumstances or who else may have contributed to or participated in our downfall.

Let me take this opportunity to say a word about suicide. The Bible has two things to say

here. First, suicide is a sin. It is self-murder. It is one of the most selfish acts a person can commit, because suicide does not care about the grief and the mess it leaves behind. Every suicide recorded in the Scriptures was also an act of despair,¹ which is also a grievous sin since, as I said before, despair says that God's promises of hope, grace, forgiveness, and provision are all lies. Despair is one of the coarsest forms of unbelief. If you are thinking about suicide, please, talk to someone who can help. It is not the right path. It is not God-pleasing. It is not a solution that brings any happiness or peace. There is always hope in Jesus Christ.

On the other hand, suicide is not the sin against the Holy Spirit, the sin that will never be forgiven. Jesus died for the sin of suicide, just as he died for all other sins. Which means that committing suicide does not automatically mean that a person is going to hell. Unbelief is the sin that condemns, nothing else. Again, every time it occurs in Scripture, suicide is a demonstration of unbelief, but that does not mean that that is always necessarily the case. Even the reformer Martin Luther himself said that he did not share the opinion that everyone who committed suicide automatically went to hell. His reasoning was that some people do not wish to kill themselves but are overcome by the power of the devil. He compared them to a man who is murdered in the woods by a robber, the robber in this case being the devil (*Luther's Works* 54:29).

Especially in these last days, with the proliferation of mental illness, it may be possible for a believer to commit suicide while not in his or her right mind. The only question that matters is not, "What was the person doing when he or she died?", but, "Did the person die with faith in Jesus in his or her heart?" That is a question that ultimately only God can answer. But here on earth pastors, who cannot read hearts but can only judge by a person's actions and confession of faith or lack thereof, may have to make difficult decisions about whether or not to perform this or that funeral.

From Judas's suicide, we see how all humanity was at their worst on the night on which Jesus was betrayed, tried, and condemned. Judas was at his worst, betraying his Lord and despairing of his grace. The leaders of the church were at their worst, refusing forgiveness and absolution to a repentant sinner. Only Jesus was at his uninterrupted best, continuing resolutely on the path of his Father's will, to pay for your sins, and my sins, and the sins of the whole world, that everyone who repents and believes in him may not perish but have eternal life. Amen.

¹ I personally do not count Samson's death as a suicide, since suicide also involves intent. Samson did not intend to kill himself, but to kill the enemies of God's people, which God had called him to do. This is akin to a soldier who jumps on a grenade for his fellow soldiers. His intent is to save them, not to kill himself.