

LIFE BIBLE STUDY

SESSION OBJECTIVE: MATTHEW 27:1-10

To understand Judas' fate, and the bigger picture of suicide.

Soul Care

I remember some time ago, I asked one of the men in our church to be one of our Sunday school teachers. My pitch was simple: "Love God's Word and love God's people, and you'll do great." He has done both of those things well, and I continually receive compliments regarding his care for the people God has entrusted



to him. One man told me recently, "He's a true shepherd." What a compliment, and what a blessing. It's a blessing to the church, but it's also a blessing to me, to get to watch him develop and really walk right in what God has so clearly equipped him to do.

So often churches employ pastors and recruit lay-volunteers who are really good at loving the Bible, but not always great at loving people, and it's a tragedy. People are complicated. We have many layers, and are more often than

not, a mess. We need shepherding. It can be devastating when a hurting person is left alone. In Matthew 27, Judas feels the weight of his betrayal of the Lord Jesus, and goes back to the Jewish leaders of his day who paid him the money to betray Jesus in the first place, and their response to him is essentially to kick him to the curb. They were the religious leaders of their day, and meant to be the shepherds of the people.

Unfortunately, they were only concerned with their own affairs, and thus fulfilled the role of the wicked shepherds described in Ezekiel 34. Would things have turned out different for Judas if they had cared? Maybe? Maybe not. If there is one small application we receive from this passage, however, it's that casting aside hurting people has consequences. Is it up to the pastors and shepherds to keep people from making mistakes? No. But great care and concern should always be given to care for the flock (John 21:17-19).

Judas' Final Moments

In Matthew 27, Jesus is quickly taken away by the chief priests and elders and delivered into the hands of Rome where His fate was almost certainly discerned by the disciples well before it took place. Judas, realizing this, begins to regret what he had done. After attempting to give the money back, Judas goes away alone,

grieved by his own betrayal. It's hard to not think of the Apostle Peter during this, as Peter did the very same thing, and yet the end results are starkly different. Peter, after denying Jesus three times before the rooster crowed, goes away and weeps bitterly (Matt. 26:75). Judas, on the other hand, hangs himself (Matt. 27:5). Below are some thoughts on the unfolding events in this passage.

REMORSE OR REPENTANCE?

It seems like, at first glance, that perhaps Judas might have repented of his actions. The text says that, "he felt remorse and returned the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, saying, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood" (Matt. 27:3b-4a). There is a subtle difference, however between remorse (or regret) and repentance, and there is perhaps no clearer example than 2 Corinthians 7. Paul talks about feeling regret over writing such a harsh letter to them regarding their sinful behavior. However, his regret is short-lived when he learns that the letter made them sorrowful. He says in verse 9, "I now rejoice, not that you were made sorrowful, but that you were made sorrowful to the point of repentance." In this passage, we find the word μεταμέλομαι, the Greek word for, "regret or remorse." It's the same word that describes Judas' reaction in Matthew 27, and it does not carry the idea of permanence with it. To be remorseful or to feel regret, but for only a set amount of time. The word for "repentance" however is a slightly different word (μετανοέω), which denotes a lasting change. In this instance, it seems from the text that Judas was not repentant, but did regret what he had done. However, Christians are not told to regret their sins, but to repent of them (Acts 2:38).

THE WRONG SHEPHERDS

Feeling remorse, Judas goes back to the chief priests and elders to return the money he had been paid to betray Jesus, and their response indicates the hardness of their hearts: "But they said, 'What is that to us? See to that yourself!'" They quickly blow him off and move on, demonstrating no care towards him. There is a flare of irony here. The chief priests and elders disregard the Torah's commands to not falsely accuse an innocent man (Deut. 19:18-19), and even pay Judas to participate in their sin. Yet, when Judas brings the money back, they reply, "It is not lawful to put them into the temple treasury, since it is the price of blood" (Matt. 27:6). Instead they purchase a field for the burial of strangers, thus fulfilling Jeremiah's parables in Jeremiah 19, which also alludes to Zechariah 11:12-13.

There is a sharp contrast between the soul care given by these so-called spiritual leaders, and the care given by Jesus. The prophet Ezekiel prophesies of the condition of the shepherds of Israel. He says in Ezekiel 34:2b-3, "Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep." He brings to mind leaders who do everything for themselves but neglect to give care to those of God's people who are in need. Ezekiel 34:15-16 shows God's plan to counteract their wickedness: "I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord GOD. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice." This is why Jesus says in John 10:11, "I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." Judas has abandoned the good shepherd in support of the bad ones, and once he realizes his mistake, he is met with no care or concern by them.

THE WRONG CONFESSION

His lack of judgment continues to be unveiled. His remorse leads him to confess, but his confession is directed to the wrong group. He could have gone first to the disciples to confess his sin before them. After all, he had spent several years with these men and followed Jesus along side of them. Not only had he betrayed Jesus, but he had betrayed them as well. It would have shown a sound understanding of the effects of his sin had he gone to them and confessed what he had done. He also could have gone to Roman authorities and

confessed his participation in bribery to falsely accuse Jesus. Judas instead goes back to the men who paid him in the first place. What good could this accomplishment? What wrongs could be righted through this course of action? Confession is an important practice for Christians, and part of mastering it is learning *who* to confess to. Judas' failure confirms he was remorseful, not repentant, because the wrong actions followed.

A DAVIDIC CONNECTION?

Recall that the very first verse of Matthew's Gospel calls Jesus, "the son of David." The thought behind the title is that Jesus not only has legitimate claim to the Davidic throne (confirmed in his genealogy), but also that He is in some typological fashion a, "greater David." Throughout Matthew's Gospel, that theme has played itself out repeatedly. In several instances, Matthew intends to show the reader how Jesus is not only the final and ultimate Davidic king, but how their lives are very similar. This narrative concerning Judas is perhaps another Davidic connection. Judas serves as a close confidant of Jesus, betrays Jesus, and then hangs himself. How does this connect to David?

In 2 Samuel 16:20-17:23, there is a story about a close confidant of King David named Ahithopel. During Absalom's revolt, Ahithopel betrays David and gives counsel to Absalom to attack David unexpectedly, resulting in his death. The plan is foiled however, and David lives. The response in verse 23 is striking: "Now when Ahithopel saw that his counsel was not followed, he saddled his donkey and arose and went to his home, to his city, and set his house in order, and hung himself; thus he died and was buried in the grave of his father." Perhaps, in some way, the Judas parallels to Ahithopel's story are meant to show a further typological connection between David and Jesus.

More On Suicide

There is a lot of confusion today regarding suicide. Perhaps because of movies and extra-biblical literature that have popularized the idea that suicide is somehow an, "unforgivable sin," there are a lot of Christians who are struck with fear when a loved one who was a professing believer in Christ takes their own life. But what does the Scripture actually say regarding suicide? Actually, it doesn't directly address the topic. There are, however, some pieces we can put together to get a clearer picture.

THE SIXTH COMMANDMENT

For certain, suicide breaks the sixth commandment to not commit murder. This is about the only actual law that can be applied to the discussion. Some people have tried to argue that since it's a broken commandment that causes life to end, there is no chance for repentance and thus, it is unforgivable. That kind of logic is, however, deeply flawed. If people were required to repent of any sin they had committed prior to dying, very few Christians would end up in heaven. That's the whole point of the Gospel; we are sinners in need of a Savior, and it is by His merit and not our own that we are saved from our past, present, and future sin (Col. 2:13-14). While it is true that the sixth commandment is broken through suicide, it also true that all commandments are broken by individuals who die before they confess them and repent of them. The only unforgivable sin has already been addressed in Matthew 12:32, when someone repeatedly rejects the work of the Holy Spirit.

EXAMPLES OF SUICIDE

There are some examples in the Bible of suicide happening apart from Judas. Abimelech (Judg. 9:54) and King Saul (1 Sam. 31:4) are both technically examples of suicide, although they are more closely related to, "assisted suicide," as they have their armor-bearers strike them down. Ahithopel (2 Sam. 17:23) was already mentioned above. The last two examples are Zimri (1 Kings 16:18) and Saul's armor-bearer (1 Sam. 31:5), who

also intentionally cause their own death as a result of despair. In all of these examples, nothing is said of salvation or faith. In fact, after Saul's death, David weeps and mourns, not over the fact that Saul took his own life but simply that he was dead. There is nothing in any of these stories that indicate anything at all about this act being unforgivable. Sad or hopeless? Yes. Unforgivable? No.

Samson (Judg. 16:29-30) is often thrown into this conversation, but incorrectly. While it is true that Samson causes his own death, the circumstances are markedly different from that of a suicide. Samson died as a result of a righteous action. Suicide, on the other hand, often comes in a moment of weakness in despair.

CONCLUSION

Suicide is sad. Christians sometimes face despair and, in a weak moment, make a choice that, unlike many other choices made in a moment of weakness, has fatal consequences. However, the hope of the Gospel is that God's grace covers all of our sins through faith in Jesus Christ. The fact that the Bible doesn't rule explicitly on suicide is indicative that the readers understood it to be no different than any other sin. It is also important to keep in mind that suicide comes from despair that is brought on in many different ways. Sometimes the despair is circumstantial. Sometimes the despair is spiritual. Sometimes the despair is physiological. It's important to remember that not everyone is moved to suicide for the same reasons, and extreme caution and care should be given to grieving loved ones left behind. If a question about the salvation of the deceased one arises, that is a question that is answered based, not on how someone dies, but on the faith that was exhibited when they lived. If, by faith, they believed the Gospel, then the Apostle Paul's words remain true: "you will be saved" (Rom. 10:9-10).

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Matthew 27:1-2. Who bound up Jesus? Where did they take Him? Write down any other details you notice that seem important.
2. Read Matthew 27:3-4. What is Judas' response to Jesus' arrest? What does he do as a result? Who does he talk to and what does he take with him? What are his words?

Day Two

1. Read Matthew 27:5. What did Judas do in response the chief priests' and elders' response?
2. Read Matthew 27:6. Now, read Deuteronomy 23:18. What did the chief priests and elders NOT do with the silver coins that Judas gave back?

Day Three

1. Read Matthew 27:7-8. What did the chief priests and the elders do with the silver coins Judas gave back? What did they purchase? What is it called, and why?
2. Read Matthew 27:9-10. What prophet is fulfilled in this passage. Read Jeremiah 19. Now, read Zechariah 11:12-13. How do these passages connect with the Judas story?

Day Four

1. Read 2 Samuel 16:20-17:23. Note any of the similarities and also the differences between Ahithopel and Judas. Do you think, given the Davidic connections that Matthew regularly makes, that there is a connection here?
2. Who were the other people who committed suicide in the Old Testament (Note: see above)?

Week 31 Discussion: When Love Meets Pain

Matthew 27 touches on one of the most delicate and difficult topics in life and ministry: suicide. Often times, well-meaning Christians offer up advice or opinions that are meant to be helpful and instead are hurtful and/or not relevant. However, when suicide happens, it is paramount for Christians who have suffered the loss of a loved one to be met with love and reminded of God's grace. Talk as a group about what is and isn't helpful, and how powerful love can be in the face of tragedy.

1. Icebreaker: Have you ever known anyone close to you that has committed suicide? If you feel comfortable with sharing, share with the group how it made you and the people around you feel.
2. Have you ever been told that suicide is unforgivable? How did that make you feel? After this lesson, do you believe that it is unforgivable still? Why or why not?
3. What's the most helpful thing you can say to someone who has lost a loved one to suicide?
4. What's the most helpful thing you can do for someone who has lost a loved one to suicide?
5. How important is community in light of this lesson? What role does the church play when a suicide takes place? What role does the small group play when a suicide takes place?

Takeaways:

1. Judas was remorseful but not repentant and, because of his despair, committed suicide.
2. Suicide is tragic and is a sin, but it like all other sins is covered by the blood of Jesus.

PRAYER REQUESTS: