

Good Friday, 1:30 a.m.

*Gethsemane*

## When Darkness Reigns

*Then all the disciples deserted him and fled.*

—*Matthew 26:56*

In Shakespeare's play *Julius Caesar*, Senator Cassius conspires to have Caesar killed and even gets his brother-in-law Brutus to join the assassination plot. As planned, on 15 March, 44 BC, all the conspirators attack Caesar, stabbing him 23 times. Because he trusted Brutus, the Roman leader is most distressed by his participation. Caesar dies broken-hearted at the betrayal, crying his famous last words, "*Et tu, Brute?*" (Even you, Brutus?).

However, what Brutus did to Julius Caesar paled in comparison to what Judas did to Jesus Christ—a deed so repugnant the Lord

himself described it as the “moment . . . when the power of darkness reigns” (Luke 22:53 NLT).

## **The Hour of Darkness**

Two days earlier, Judas schemed with the religious leaders to arrest Jesus secretly and kill Him (vv.1–6). In this chapter, we look at the moment of betrayal that took place around 1:30 a.m. on the first Good Friday morning in a place called Gethsemane.

*“Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!” —Matthew 26:46*

These words were directed at Judas Iscariot, “one of the Twelve” (v.47), handpicked by Christ to be part of the great plan of God to save the world (10:1–4). Judas followed Christ the last three years, heard His teachings, and participated in many amazing miracles (Acts 1:17). But Judas chose the path of evil—the path of treachery and betrayal.

Why did Judas choose to betray Jesus, his king, his rabbi, his friend and brother? Fellow disciple Matthew says Judas did it for the money (Matthew 26:15). As treasurer, Judas was known to have pilfered from ministry funds (John 12:6).

Some scholars suggest another compelling reason. Judas was disappointed and disillusioned as it became clear to him that Jesus was not the kind of Messiah he had expected—a political Messiah

who would rule on David's throne. Instead, Jesus talked about submitting to Caesar. To Judah's horror, Jesus was not going to Jerusalem to become king, but to be arrested, and to die. What kind of king allows himself to be trampled by the people? Perhaps Judas had hoped that if Jesus was arrested, He would be forced to use His supernatural power to fight the Romans. Perhaps Jesus' arrest would be the spark that ignites nationalistic fire for a rebellion.

## Judas and the Large Crowd

Judas wasn't alone in betraying Jesus. A large crowd of people actively participated in the treacherous betrayal.

*While he was still speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, arrived. With him was a large crowd armed with swords and clubs, sent from the chief priests and the elders of the people. —Matthew 26:47*

I believe there were four different groups of people in this “large crowd”. The first group comprised of ordinary folk like you and me. Individually, these people would not have betrayed the Lord. They had no reason or motivation to do so. Neither would they have the courage or the audacity. As a mob however, they blindly followed the instigators. Some in this group were probably part of the “very large crowd” that had welcomed Jesus as king when He rode a colt into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday (Matthew 21:8–10). But in this hour, they came, not to crown, but to capture Jesus.

The second group were people “sent from the chief priests and the elders of the people” (26:47). The religious leaders were the masterminds orchestrating the betrayal, organising the arrest, and mobilising the crowd. The chief priests even came to the Garden of Gethsemane to supervise the arrest (Luke 22:52).

Gospel writer Luke identified a third group of people—“the officers of the temple guard” (v.52). They were the Jewish temple police whose duty was to ensure the security and safety of the temple. But now, as a component of this mob, they had come to track down a criminal.

What is surprising is the fourth group—“a contingent of Roman soldiers” (John 18:3 NLT). A Roman contingent normally comprised of 600 soldiers. They were well-trained, well-equipped, and battle-hardened warriors. For Pilate the Roman governor to agree to dispatch his soldiers, the Jewish religious leaders must have somehow convinced him that Jesus was a political and military threat to Rome.

Scholars estimate that Judas led a disproportionately large crowd of a thousand people (or more) just to arrest one man. This motley crew came “armed with swords and clubs” (Matthew 26:47), “carrying torches, lanterns and weapons” (John 18:3), determined to apprehend Jesus at all costs!

## The Disciples Abandoned Jesus

*Then all the disciples deserted him and fled. —Matthew 26:56*

Matthew must have written these words with much anguish and shame. He was writing about his own cowardice and failure. Jesus had warned the disciples that they would all abandon Him. All the disciples promised they would never do that (v.35)!

The disciples had wanted to draw swords to protect Jesus, to prevent His arrest. But Jesus put a stop to their attempts, warning that those “who draw the sword will die by the sword” (v.52). I suspect that they were glad Jesus intervened. Despite their initial bravado of wanting to fight it out, the disciples soon realised that they were grossly outnumbered. 11 men against a large crowd of armed men and 600 well-trained Roman soldiers. When that reality set in, they, too, became petrified. Jesus’ prediction came to pass. All the disciples deserted Him and fled (v.56). Judas planted the kiss. But everyone who was there in the garden of Gethsemane was complicit in the betrayal. Jesus stood alone.

## Dealing with Betrayal

Many of us have our own painful stories of betrayal to tell. Some have experienced betrayal by a close friend or a loved one—a husband or wife, a sibling, a family member.

Betrayal is a vicious weapon wielded only by people we trust. An enemy or stranger has no such weapon or power. Only a loved one, a trusted friend can betray you. Novelist Suzanne Collins writes, “For there to be betrayal, there would have to have been trust first.”<sup>1</sup> This is why betrayal is always so viciously destructive and devastatingly painful. You are the deliberate target of someone you love and trust.

When you are betrayed, what do you do? Pretend it didn’t happen? Get angry? Take revenge? We can learn how to deal with betrayal by looking at how Jesus dealt with His betrayal.

### ***i. Forgive the Friend***

*Jesus replied, “Do what you came for, friend.” —Matthew 26:50*

Friend. In the original Greek, *hetairos* refers to “companion” or “comrade”.<sup>2</sup> Though not very intimate, yet given the circumstances, this is a surprisingly kind and open-hearted address from Jesus. Surely stronger words like “traitor” or “coward” or some condemning expletives would be appropriate—words that would best fit the hideousness of the wrong done. For us, betrayal is the unforgivable sin. Yet Jesus called Judas “friend”. Jesus’ gracious response indicated that He still loved Judas.

How about retaliation? Jesus warned those planning a tit for tat, “For all who draw the sword will die by the sword” (v.52).

Revenge is a double-edged sword. It may slay your enemy. But it will certainly destroy you in the process! Vigilantism justice is not an option for the Christ-follower. Paul reminds us, “Do not repay anyone evil for evil . . . Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written, ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord” (Romans 12:17, 19).

Perhaps the idea of releasing your bitterness and hatred is too surreal. Perhaps calling such a person a friend is irrational, and the idea of forgiveness is unfair. *I deserve justice. Nothing is fair or right until my Judas gets the punishment he deserves. I want my Judas to be punished immediately.*

We need to realise that we may not get justice on this side of heaven. When you are betrayed, do not look for fairness. Instead look at where Jesus looked. He looked at His betrayer and called him “friend”. Later, from the cross, Jesus prayed: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). I may not like this one bit, but I am sure that all the Judases in my life are covered in Jesus’ prayer! We need to learn to pray just as Jesus taught us to pray, “Forgive us our sins, as we have forgiven those who sin against us” (Matthew 6:12 NLT).

## ***ii. Trust the Father***

*Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? But how then*

*would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?”—Matthew 26:53–54*

Whilst dealing with the pain of betrayal on earth, Jesus kept His eyes on His Father in heaven. As His friends on earth abandoned Him, His Father in heaven assured Him that all was going according to plan. The Father was in full control of the situation. Jesus was not a helpless victim.

He is the omnipotent victor who willingly allowed himself to be betrayed, to do His Father’s work and to carry out His Father’s salvation plans—plans that were laid “before the creation of the world” (1 Peter 1:20).

When you walk alone in the dark valley of betrayal, look upward to your Heavenly Father and your heavenly friends. Jesus has at His disposal twelve legions of angels. A Roman legion is 6,000 soldiers. If just a single angel killed more than 185,000 men in a single night (2 Kings 19:35), imagine the damage 72,000 angels can do! We do not walk the dark valley of betrayal alone, for our loving Father and our heavenly friends walk with us (Hebrews 1:14; 13:5–6).

### ***iii. Look Towards the Future***

*The high priest said to him, “I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God.” “You have*



*said so,” Jesus replied. “But I say to all of you: from now on you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.” —Matthew 26:63–64*

In the midst of His betrayal, Jesus looked at a third direction. He looked towards the future—His glorious return!

Life on this earth is unfair. You will suffer injustice. That the righteous suffer whilst the wicked prosper is our common experience, a reality living in a fallen and sinful world. And betrayals are part and parcel of living on this sin-infected, sin-ravaged world.

In His first coming on Christmas Day, Jesus came to be our Saviour. But when He comes the second time, Jesus will come as the righteous Judge (Acts 17:31). Because He is perfect, only Jesus is capable of judging rightly and justly. He will punish evildoers. He will bring justice to this world (Isaiah 11:3–4).

## **Where Is Justice?**

Some of us here are suffering because of the betrayal by a loved one or the treachery of a trusted friend. You felt the stab on your back. The knife went deep. You bleed. You are cut down. You cannot forgive. You cry out aloud: Is there no justice in this world?

Yes, there is justice. But we will need to walk up a hill, to a cross. On that cross, our Lord Jesus was crucified. Blood dripped from His hands, where the nails were hammered through. Blood dripped from His head, where the crown of thorns pressed in. Blood flowed from His back, where the whip had lacerated skin and flesh. On that cross, our Lord Jesus bled.

This is *where* Justice is. This is *who* Justice is. And this is *what* Justice is doing—carrying all our betrayals, our injustices, our unfairness, our pain, and our sins on the cross. He is suffering injustice to give us justice.<sup>3</sup>

Our suffering Saviour was betrayed by a trusted friend and abandoned by His friends. Jesus knows the pain you are going through, because He experienced raw undiluted betrayal first hand. This is why the writer of Hebrews could write, “We do not have a high priest who is unable to feel sympathy for our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.” He invites us to come boldly to the throne of our gracious God, who experienced betrayal first hand. For there we will find grace to help us when we need it most (Hebrews 4:15–16).

To all of us who have been betrayed, there is justice. More importantly, there is forgiveness—for all. For you and for your

betrayed. The cross of Calvary guarantees it. Will you look to Jesus for justice—and forgiveness?

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1. Suzanne Collins, *The Hunger Games* (Scholastic Ltd, 2011), 139.

2. NIV Word Study Dictionary, Zondervan (Olive Tree Bible Software).

3. Writing to encourage believers who were suffering and denied justice because of persecution (1 Peter 3:13–17), Peter reminded them of the cross, where Jesus who is just, was unjustly put to death on our behalf. “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit” (1 Peter 3:18, NKJV). The substitutionary “the just for the unjust” death of Jesus, and Christ’s resurrection gives suffering Christians a secure foundation for hope and victory. The unjust suffering that Christians experience is not the final word because “[God] has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead” (Acts 17:31).

*Footprints on Calvary Road: Walking with Jesus to the Cross*

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