

The Son of Perdition

On Judas Iscariot, False Profession, and the Certainty of God's Purpose

The case of Judas Iscariot raises one of the most pointed questions in all of theology. Jesus chose twelve disciples. He called them, taught them, sent them out, and shared His ministry with them for three years. And one of them was a traitor from the beginning. If Jesus is God, and God does not make mistakes, then what does the inclusion of Judas tell us about election, about saving faith, and about the nature of Christ's purposes?

I. Jesus Chose Judas Knowing What He Was

The first thing to establish is that Jesus was not surprised. John's Gospel makes this explicit at multiple points. *"Jesus knew from the beginning who those were who did not believe, and who it was who would betray him"* (John 6:64). And again, at the Last Supper: *"I am not speaking of all of you; I know whom I have chosen. But the Scripture will be fulfilled, 'He who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me'"* (John 13:18). Jesus chose Judas deliberately, with full knowledge of what Judas would do. The choosing of Judas was not an election to salvation; it was an appointment to a role in the redemptive plan.

This distinction matters. The word "chose" in John 13:18 does not carry the same meaning as "chose" in Ephesians 1:4. When Paul says God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world, he is talking about election unto salvation. When Jesus says He

chose the Twelve, He is talking about their appointment to apostolic ministry. Judas was chosen for the Twelve. He was not chosen for eternal life. The categories are different, and Scripture keeps them distinct.

II. Judas Was Never Truly Saved

This is the right conclusion, and it is well supported by the text. Judas walked with Jesus, heard His teaching, witnessed His miracles, and even performed signs himself when sent out with the other disciples (Matthew 10:1–4). But none of that constituted saving faith. External participation in the community of Christ is not the same as internal union with Christ. Jesus Himself draws the line in John 6:70–71: *“Did I not choose you, the twelve? And yet one of you is a devil.” He spoke of Judas the son of Simon Iscariot, for he, one of the twelve, was going to betray him.*

The language is stark. Jesus does not say Judas *would become* a devil. The description is present tense. Judas *is* a devil. His nature was never changed. He was never regenerated. The external calling was real, but the internal, effectual calling of the Spirit that produces new birth never took place in Judas. He was, as Jesus says in John 17:12, *“the son of destruction,”* a designation that points to his appointed end.

John gives us another revealing detail. When the disciples were reclining at the table and Jesus identified the betrayer by dipping the morsel, John records: *“Then after he had taken the morsel, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, ‘What you are going to do, do quickly’”* (John 13:27). Satan entered Judas. That is something that cannot happen to a person indwelt by the Holy Spirit. *“Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world”* (1 John

4:4). The very fact that Satan could possess Judas demonstrates that the Spirit of God did not dwell in him.

III. The Fulfillment of Scripture

But here is what makes the Judas question so theologically significant. His betrayal was not a deviation from the plan. It was the plan. Peter says as much in his sermon at Pentecost: *“This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men”* (Acts 2:23). The crucifixion, which required the betrayal, was according to the *definite plan* of God. Judas acted freely. He was not coerced. His greed and his unbelief were genuinely his own. And yet the whole sequence, from betrayal to arrest to trial to crucifixion, had been decreed from eternity.

Jesus Himself frames the betrayal in terms of scriptural fulfillment. In the Upper Room discourse, He tells the disciples: *“I am telling you this now, before it takes place, that when it does take place you may believe that I am he”* (John 13:19). The betrayal, rather than undermining faith, was meant to *confirm* it. When Judas did exactly what the Scriptures said would happen, it proved that Jesus was who He claimed to be: the sovereign Lord who knows the end from the beginning.

The Puritan John Owen, writing on the extent of the atonement, addresses Judas directly in the context of Christ's purpose:

“The Father imposed His wrath due unto, and the Son underwent punishment for, either: all the sins of all men, or all the sins of some men, or some of the sins of all men. If the last, then all men have some sins to answer for, and so none are saved. If the first, why are not all men free from the punishment due unto their sins? You answer, ‘Because of unbelief.’ I ask, Is this unbelief a sin, or is it not? If it be, then Christ suffered the punishment due unto it, or He did not. If He did, why must that hinder them more than their other sins for which He died? If He did not, then He did not die for all their sins!”

— John Owen, The Death of Death in the Death of Christ

Owen's logic is tight. If Christ bore the punishment for all the sins of all people, then no one could ever be condemned, because the penalty has already been paid. The fact that some perish means either the atonement was designed to accomplish something specific for a specific people, or it was designed to accomplish nothing definite at all. The Reformed position is that Christ died for His sheep, and that Judas, though he sat at the table, was never one of them.

IV. What Judas Teaches Us About the Perseverance of the Saints

The case of Judas is one of the strongest arguments for the Reformed understanding of perseverance. If Judas had been truly saved and then lost his salvation, the promises of John 10 and Romans 8 would be meaningless. But Judas was never saved. He fell away from external association with Christ, not from genuine union with Christ.

And this is exactly how the Apostle John explains similar cases in 1 John 2:19: *“They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us.”*

John’s logic is plain. Those who depart were never truly part of the body. Their departure does not prove that saints can fall; it proves that not everyone who associates with saints is a saint. Judas is the paradigm case. He was as close to Jesus as any human being on earth, and yet he was never born again. Proximity to Christ is not the same as possession by Christ.

This should produce two things in us. First, a sober self-examination. *“Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves”* (2 Corinthians 13:5). True faith bears fruit. It produces love, repentance, and perseverance. If those things are present, even imperfectly, they are evidence of the Spirit’s work. Second, it should produce confidence. If you are trusting Christ today, if you are fighting sin and running to the cross when you fail, that is itself evidence that you are not a Judas. Judas never repented. He felt remorse, but remorse and repentance are not the same thing. *“For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death”* (2 Corinthians 7:10). Judas experienced worldly grief and went out and hanged himself. Peter experienced godly grief and went out and wept bitterly, and Christ restored him.