

A TALE OF TWO SINNERS

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Luke 22:1-6, 31-34

Last week, I talked about the end before the end—that period of time that Jesus was in Jerusalem teaching in the temple. Today, we cross a boundary. We are now at the end—the final days of Jesus’ life.

Luke introduces this new section by informing us that the Festival of Unleavened Bread—which was called the Passover—was getting near. This simple statement carries powerful political overtones.

The Passover recounted that time in Israel’s history when the Hebrews escaped slavery in Egypt. As you recall from the Joseph story, back in Genesis Joseph brought his brothers and their families to reside in Egypt. In Egypt, they were successful and they multiplied and became a great people. However, as we read in the first chapter of Exodus, a *new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph*. After several generations, the Egyptian people had forgotten what Joseph had done for them, how he had saved their country. They began to regard his descendents—the Hebrews—as little more than an immigrant population to be exploited. They were enslaved and forced to labor in the great Egyptian construction projects. On the night of their escape from Egypt, the angel of death took the lives of the first-born sons of the Egyptians—but **passed over** the homes of the Hebrews.

In Jesus’ day, Jews from all over would convene on Jerusalem for the Passover festival. Although it was a religious festival, political tensions were high because once again, in a parallel to the Egypt story, the Jews found themselves subject to a foreign government.

In the days leading up to the festival, as Luke tells us, the chief priests and scribes continued to look for an opportunity to get rid of Jesus. However, because of Jesus’ popularity with the people, they could not figure out a safe way to do this.

Why the chief priests and scribes wanted to eliminate Jesus is not completely clear. Possibly, as I mentioned a few weeks back, it had to do with a turf battle over the temple. The chief priests ran the temple and did not appreciate Jesus’ interference and how it challenged their authority. Or maybe the reason was economic and the chief priests and scribes were protecting the profits they received from their relationship with the money changers and animal sellers. Or maybe they regarded Jesus as a disruptor of the political system. Maybe they thought that his disturbing the status quo with Rome would threaten their power and stability. Or maybe it was a security issue. The chief priests had negotiated a delicate peace with the Romans and they wanted to maintain that peace. It was probably all of this and

maybe more. But as Luke has stated several times, the chief priests want Jesus dead.

Into this bubbling cauldron of conspiracy enters the figure of Satan. Other than a couple of references so far in this gospel, we have not seen Satan since chapter 4 when he was testing Jesus in the wilderness. When Jesus did not submit to the devil's temptations, Luke tells us that *he departed from [Jesus] until an opportune time*. (4:13). That opportune time, it appears, has arrived in the person of Judas Iscariot.

Judas, of course, is the villain of the gospels. Everyone knows that he is the one who betrayed Jesus to the authorities. Luke tells us almost nothing about Judas. In chapter 6, when Jesus calls the twelve, Judas is identified as the one *who became a traitor*. Judas does not reappear until today's reading when Satan enters into him. Presumably, because of Satan's influence, Judas goes to the chief priests and the officers of the temple police about how he might alert them that Jesus was alone and away from the crowds. The authorities are pleased with this arrangement and they *agreed to give [Judas] money*.

We don't have any idea what motivated Judas to betray Jesus. Maybe it was the money; maybe Judas also viewed Jesus as a threat to political security and the safety of his country; maybe Judas thought he was protecting Jesus by arranging this opportunity to meet with the authorities and work things out. We don't know. Luke clearly implies it is the influence of Satan.

For us, Satan, or the devil, is a scaly, horned demon that wreaks havoc on the earth—a force of evil and destruction. For the Jews of Jesus' day, however, Satan was different. He was known as the *Adversary* or the *Accuser*. In the Old Testament book of Zechariah (3:1), Satan is portrayed as a member of God's heavenly council. It was his job, in times of judgment, to accuse mortals of wrong-doing. This in turn, gave God the opportunity to acquit or condemn the accused. Satan was sort of a prosecuting attorney.

No matter the reason, Judas' betrayal is hard on all of us who follow Christ. Why is this? Back in chapter 18, in the story of the rich man who came to Jesus seeking eternal life, Jesus told him to sell all he owned and give the money to the poor. Although the man had devoted his life to following the Law, he could not do this. Those observing this asked, *then who can be saved?* Because if this good, upstanding man could not be saved, then what hope is there for the rest of us rascals and scallywags? I think of this question when I read of Judas. Judas was not just some guy off the street. He was one of the twelve—the inner circle chosen by Jesus. If Judas can't deflect the influence of Satan, what chance then do the rest of us have? When Satan comes knocking, we are going to open the door and welcome him in like he's holding a giant check from Publisher's Clearinghouse. Resistance is futile.

But Luke does not leave us in that place. Later in this chapter, Luke offers another story—the story of Simon Peter. Following the Passover meal—the Lord’s Supper—Jesus says to Simon, *listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat*. Sifting wheat is the process of separating the edible grains from the rest of the plant—the stems and stalks. Satan wants to separate Jesus’ followers into the good and the bad. That is his job. Jesus recognizes that Simon Peter—like all of us—is not strong enough to survive this sifting; he cannot resist Satan. He will be found wanting. And once again, this forces us to ask the question, if not Simon, then who? Who can be saved? I can’t speak for you, but I am certainly doomed.

But Jesus says to Simon, *I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail*. Yes, even though we may be found coming up short, that we may give into the testing and temptations of the devil, Jesus prays for us. That is not something that I think of very often, that Jesus is praying for me. Jesus knows that Simon would falter but Jesus continued to pray that even then that Simon would *turn back and strengthen [his] brothers*. I think of the parable of the prodigal son. The son turned away from his father but the father continued praying for him. And finally the son does repent and turn back to his waiting father. Jesus tells Simon that when he has returned that his job will be to strength his brothers in the faith. As a Christian leader, it is his job to support and encourage his brothers and sisters in the faith.

Simon is a little bewildered by this. Why does Jesus need to pray for him? He is not going to falter. He is 100% for Team Jesus. He says to Jesus, *Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death*. Of course he is. And no doubt he is. On paper, Simon is sincere in his commitment to Jesus. But Jesus knows that truth and tells him that even before the sun comes up, Simon will have three times denied even knowing him.

In these passages, Luke offers us tales of two sinners—Judas and Simon. In Judas we find the villain who betrayed Jesus. In Simon is the apostle who denied him. I’m not going to argue which one was the greater sinner, who was weaker in faith. The point is that they both were.

Remember, Luke is teaching his congregation how to be followers of Jesus. And with these two we are reminded that even the apostles—those closest to Jesus—weren’t perfect. When the going got tough, Simon crumbled like tissue paper. Luke’s people would have known Simon by reputation. He had been the first great leader of the church after Jesus. And yet, when the going got tough, he denied even knowing Jesus. Or the Apostle Paul, who by his own admission, had been one of the most enthusiastic persecutors of the church. In time, he turned around and became the church’s greatest proponent.

By this logic, it makes me wonder if Judas, if he had not killed himself, could he have been redeemed? Would Jesus have prayed for him? I think he would.

Church leaders aren't perfect; they aren't impervious to the temptations of Satan. But Jesus prays for them none-the-less. And Jesus' prayer is that when they sin, they will repent and then be a source of strength to the others in the church. I have no doubt that Simon Peter told that story of his denying Jesus over and over as proof of Jesus' forgiveness.

You are all leaders in the church. None of us are perfect and so it is a source of comfort to know that our Lord keeps us in his prayers. Amen.