

## Thirty Pieces of Silver

By Allen Dvorak

It had been the potter's field, full of clay and probably not very good for farming. But another use was found for it – it became a place to bury strangers. Poor, non-local Jews who died while in Jerusalem could be interred in this field bought from the potter and made into a cemetery. It may have been the potter's field in the past, but it became known as the “Field of Blood” because it had been purchased with “blood money” (see Matthew 27:3-10).

Judas, one of the twelve, had conspired with the chief priests to deliver Jesus to them and had received thirty pieces of silver for his perfidy (Matthew 26:3-5, 14-16). John's gospel informs us that Judas was the disciple who carried the “moneybag” containing the common funds of Jesus' disciples during His public ministry (12:6; see also 13:29). He was also a thief and stole from these funds. He was a greedy man who apparently thought he could profit monetarily from the hatred of the chief priests for Jesus.

It was Judas' thirty pieces of silver which were used to purchase the potter's field. Since the money had been paid to Judas as recompense for delivering Jesus to those who would eventually condemn Him to death, it was “blood money.” The story of how this purchase occurred is instructional.

The motivation of Judas in betraying his Master is identified only implicitly. In Mark's gospel, we are told that the chief priests and scribes were plotting how they could take Jesus by trickery and put Him to death, but the problem with doing so was the multitudes that followed Jesus (14:1-2). It is likely no accident that Mark next records the anointing of Jesus with oil in a home in Bethany and the criticism of some of the disciples, including Judas (14:3-9). Mark then notes that Judas went to the chief priests and offered to betray Jesus to them. In the story of the anointing of Jesus, sandwiched between the plotting of the Jewish leaders to take Jesus by trickery and Judas' offer to betray his Master, Mark suggested a possible motivation of Judas to betray Jesus.

Matthew tells us that Judas brought the thirty pieces of silver back to the chief priests and elders (27:3). It would appear that these Jewish leaders had returned to the temple, after having delivered Jesus to Pontius Pilate and been assured of His destruction at the hands of the Romans (see 27:20). Judas was filled with regret that he had betrayed Jesus. He knew that Jesus had already been condemned by the Sanhedrin (Matthew 27:3; if it was the condemnation by Pilate, then the material in Matthew 27 is not in strict chronological order), but I suspect that he was surprised that this had happened. As one of the twelve, Judas had seen Jesus do many miracles and also escape the murderous designs of His enemies on more than one occasion. He probably had reasoned that Jesus would escape harm as He had done in the past and he (Judas) might as well put some cash into his pocket from the whole affair.

Note that Judas confessed two things: the innocence of Jesus and his sin in betraying Him (27:4). Stricken with remorse because of his evil deed, the money he had so eagerly coveted was burning a hole in his pocket. He wanted nothing more than to return the money as though his guilt could be erased by doing so. His fellow conspirators, however, offered him no comfort; they cared nothing for the sudden resurgence of his conscience. “What is that to us? You see to it!”

Judas threw the pieces of silver into the temple (the Holy Place?) and left. After he left, the chief priests collected the coins and decided among themselves that it just wouldn't be “right” to put them into the temple treasury since they represented the price of blood (27:6). They used the money instead to purchase the potter's field which came to be known as the “Field of Blood” because of the circumstances of its purchase.

### **“What Were You Thinking?!”**

The thirty pieces of silver must have looked so appealing to Judas before the betrayal, but he eventually realized that their worth was nothing compared to the cost of obtaining them. So many baubles of the world are like that; to covetous eyes they sparkle and shine...and men and women give up things of much greater worth to obtain them. Those same men and women often realize later, even as Judas did, the great cost they have incurred for such temporary trinkets.

Even though Judas brought the money back, he couldn't undo the treachery he had committed. Even if the chief priests and elders had been willing to take the money back, the deed had been done and Jesus had been arrested, abused & condemned to death.

Giving up the reward for evil wouldn't take away the guilt for sin committed. What a hard lesson to learn! Many people would love the opportunity to "undo" the terrible things they have done, but it is not possible. We must learn about the bitter aftertaste of the fruit of wickedness from the things "written for our learning" (Romans 15:4).

Although we cannot remove the guilt of our sins by ourselves, fortunately we CAN be forgiven. If only Judas had waited for three days! Perhaps he would then have seen the victory of the resurrection... as Peter did. Instead, Judas committed suicide by hanging himself.

## **Of Gnats and Camels**

The behavior of the chief priests and elders on this occasion qualifies as a perfect example of "straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel" (Matthew 23:24). That expression, used by Jesus to describe the conduct of the scribes and Pharisees, made reference to the custom of some Jews of putting cloth over the mouth of a vessel containing drink to prevent gnats from falling into the vessel and defiling the liquid.

The scribes and Pharisees were totally concerned about the smallest matters of defilement at the same time that they were willing to ignore more obvious causes of defilement, i.e., "swallow a camel." The camel was the largest unclean animal known to the region.

The chief priests and elders had just condemned an innocent man and arranged for His death in a parade of unrighteous travesties, but their “piety” would not allow them to mingle “blood money” with the rest of the money in the temple treasury. Apparently, they had already “forgotten” that it was they who had paid the blood money to Judas! In keeping the price of blood out of the temple treasury, they had carefully strained out the gnat, but only after having already “swallowed the camel.” We must be careful that we are not likewise swallowing camels in our daily lives, while we are ostentatiously straining out gnats to impress our religious neighbors!