

## The Aspen in the Garden of Gethsemane

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He no longer had the strength to bear the heavy burden of the curse that he had voluntarily brought upon himself. Before casting the cold snake of a noose around his neck, Judas Iscariot glanced for the last time at the stunted apple tree near which he had spoken with the Teacher, falling on his knees before him.

“My Lord Jesus Christ,” he had said then, “I do not even love my own dear mother or father, nor my brothers and sisters, as much as I love you. Until now I have concealed my feelings, but now I must tell all, in order to reveal what is going on in my heart. It grieves me, Teacher, that you will undergo a terrible punishment, sacrificing yourself for the sake of people who are in the thrall of this world’s emptiness, and who are not worth even a hair from your head. I understand everything, everything, but tell me just one thing: what punishment befits one who betrays your innocent blood?”

Jesus silently pondered these words. His gaze was turned to the stunted apple tree—twisted and deformed by a storm, it had grown crookedly. The trunk of the apple tree was somewhat reminiscent of a bent knee. On that bulging bend, in a cranny that had been filled with earth by wind and driving rain, a couple of flimsy blackberry shoots had sprouted. This was what had caught Jesus’s eye.

Dusk was descending in the Garden of Gethsemane. Here, away from the din and roar of the streets of Jerusalem, all alone with one’s own thoughts beneath the bright starry sky, among the olive groves and the occasional apple trees, one could find rest for the soul and regain one’s calm and composure. Jesus loved to wander in this place. He always walked alone, without his disciples, but on that day Judas summoned the courage to approach him and, falling on his knees, he began to plead with him:

“My Lord Jesus Christ, hear me.”

And then he spoke of everything that was torturing him and waited for a reply. The man from Nazareth remained silent and contemplated the stunted apple tree with its swollen branch sprouting two slender blackberry shoots.

“Teacher, why do you not speak? Are you really surprised by my questions? Do you really think they come from the devil? After all, you know very well how often people break their word and betray one another. Children even betray their parents and sell their graves to their enemies.”

The cool evening breeze wafted intoxicating aromas of apple blossom and fresh green grass. Judas grasped the Teacher’s right hand, now pressing

it to his cheeks, now covering it with passionate kisses. Jesus did not snatch his hand away, nor did he get Judas to stand up; he continued to silently contemplate the apple tree, covered in its modest blossoms.

"Lord, I know, you have eyes to see, and you have ears and hear all, and I did not need to speak of my love for you. But sometimes the serpent of doubt creeps into the soul: and what if you nevertheless do not know of my love and go to your death not knowing of it?"

As soon as he had spoken, immediately he regretted those words. As long as he held back his feelings from everybody and confided in no one, they sounded sweet, and they were pure and clear. But the moment he pronounced them, they immediately faded, and in uttering them he had lost something valuable.

Jesus freed his hand and with a gesture ordered Judas to arise. The latter obeyed the order at once. He stood face to face with Jesus and looked at him despondently. Judas's dark, shining eyes were filled with sadness.

"Teacher, forgive me the temerity of my foolish words, and hear me out. All your disciples think I am seized by the spirit of arrogance. It is not true, Lord. I am not filled with self-pride; that is alien to me. I do always wear a frown, but that is merely a mask that conceals from strangers my love for you."

They remained silent for a while. Judas could hear his heart pounding inside his chest, sending the blood coursing through his veins; it throbbed in his temples.

Now the stars were shining in the sky. The bright moon cast its light on the calm face of Jesus.

"What is destined to be, will be, and there is no stopping it, no going back. And Jesus is now ready for his journey to the cross," thought Judas, and he recalled the Pharisees and their evil preaching. And he was enraged that they would speak mendaciously of Christ's passion, and his anger made the blood rush to his head.

"Lord, you say, 'If someone strikes you on the right cheek, show him the left one also.' I have obediently followed this commandment, but when I see the Pharisees I cannot be tolerant, and I must oppose evil. Teacher, they themselves prompted me to consider what punishment a person should suffer for betraying your innocent blood. And I realized that this punishment must be so terrible that the mere recollection of it would cause a shiver of fear to run down anyone's spine. And I know how it should be inflicted."

Judas spoke hurriedly and with fervor. His face turned purple from the agitation and this showed even by moonlight.

"Lord, if my words are unwelcome to you, I ask you not to banish me but to hear me out. To you my thoughts may seem unworthy, I do not know.

"One thing I can say: I do whatever my heart commands me to do. So hear what I have decided." Judas swallowed hard and mopped his sweaty brow. His hands were shaking slightly. He gripped the hem of his robe firmly.

"Lord, these thoughts are terrible to me as well, but I must confide in you. Teacher, fate has ordained that you shall be seized and crucified. Therefore I have decided to go to the Pharisees, with your knowledge and your consent, to tell them I will betray you. And I will betray you for a few pieces of silver. They will readily agree, for they rejoice in every thought, in every person, opposed to you and your teaching. All the more will they rejoice that I, one of your disciples, have deserted you. But they will not realize, Lord, that I value them and their teaching at just a few pieces of silver."

Jesus calmly turned and set off down the hill. Judas caught up with him and fell on his knees before him. His shoulders were shaking as he wept silently. When he raised his head, tears were running down his cheeks.

"My Lord Jesus Christ, forgive me, I beg you—do not be angry with me. Hear my confused thoughts, for it is in your name, Son of God, that I want to suffer dreadful torture—to be cursed. If people learn that one of your disciples has betrayed you, they will curse my name constantly and they will banish me from their homes. Observing my torture, no one will ever want to betray your innocent blood. Do not banish me, Lord; permit me to suffer this punishment. I accept it willingly, so that you will understand how much I love you. Further, Jesus, I will voluntarily accept the burden of the curse from one of your disciples. For if one of them was to betray you, as fate has ordained, he will not now do it. Therefore, I beg you—accept my sacrifice. And when you eat the Passover with us, your disciples, tell them that there sits among us one who will betray you. They will ask his name, but do not tell them, let it remain a secret until the time comes. And when I ask, 'Lord, can it be me?' and you say: 'You have said it!'—this shall be a sign to me that you have accepted my sacrifice, and I will go to the Pharisees. And then all your disciples will say—and they will be deeply convinced of it—that I have become possessed of the devil and that I have betrayed you out of pride."

Jesus left Judas in the Garden of Gethsemane and went to his disciples, who were sitting by an open fire.

"Oh dear Lord God, how unbearably the burden of this curse oppresses me, how mercilessly the cold serpent of the noose burns me!" Judas weeps, and through his tears he sees, as in a mist, the stunted apple tree and the two flimsy blackberry shoots growing from its swollen branch. The blackberry shoots will probably bear fruit, and in early summer some passer-by wandering into the Garden of Gethsemane will come across the apple tree, and he will be most surprised to see a blackberry bush growing on it and producing fruit. But its roots will certainly not be healthy, and sooner or later it will wither.

When Christ left him alone in the Garden of Gethsemane, Judas was seized by severe doubts. Had it been necessary to mention his terrible thoughts to the Savior? Yet he who seeks to be saved on Judgment Day will

believe firmly in the Kingdom of Heaven and the teachings of the Lord, and he will not contemplate betrayal. If anyone does betray Jesus, perhaps it is better for the black sheep to be excluded from the flock. One should fear only God alone, but I am proposing to Jesus a mortal fear. Surely it is the devil that is prompting me in this, not love. I have doubted myself and I have doubted others. I thought that people, confused by the cunning Pharisees, would not have the fear of God such as it is supposed to be but such as it is not supposed to be. It is supposed to enter one's heart and soul. Everyone will see this mortal fear, the fear of being cursed; it will be before their eyes always, and they will be fearful of betraying the Savior.

"Perhaps I have indeed succumbed to pride," thought Judas presently, "if I seek to oppose the fear of God with mortal fear. But I have not yet done so—it is not too late to renounce my intention. Surely Jesus left me in the garden without saying a word in order to give me the opportunity to reconsider everything and to repent. That is so, and I must go as quickly as possible to the Teacher, fall at his feet, and ask forgiveness."

He set off but stopped beside the apple tree.

"How will he receive my declaration of love for him? He will certainly think that everything I said before was hypocritical, mere empty words."

He shook his head with its shock of black hair, to drive away these unpleasant thoughts. He was inwardly disturbed, and he did not know what he should now do.

"Perhaps I should go to Jesus, anyway, and tell him all about my indecision, and he will reassure me and forgive me."

Then this thought was overtaken by another: "What if the Lord thinks that I, fearing torture, am irresolute in my convictions and shames me in front of the disciples?"

His glance fell once more on the apple tree. The moon bathed it in a silver light, caressing it, and Judas recalled the Serpent that tempted Eve. If it were not for Eve's weakness, if she had not persuaded Adam to taste the fruit of knowledge, would the human race have experienced such suffering? And, come to think of it, was not he, Judas, reminiscent of that serpent, even though he was doing everything with the best of intentions? So he must dissuade himself from carrying out that dreadful intention, and he must go to Christ and beg for forgiveness. For evidently the Serpent and his cunning are present here also.

"Dear Lord, grant me steadfastness, help me to withstand the wiles of the devil."

The stars flickered in the dark blue sky, the moon flooded the earth with its light, and in the Garden of Gethsemane it was as bright as on a fine day.

Somewhere in the distance, as though beyond a thick wall, the croaking of frogs could periodically be heard, and it surprised Judas. At first their croaking seemed meaningless, but he perceived in it a harmonious, coordinated chorus of praise to the heavenly Creator. They were not

troubled that someone could be betrayed; the main thing was to sing their thanks to God.

"If only one could just pray like that and not think, not torture oneself." Judas brushed his cheeks with his hands and, kneeling down near the apple tree, he recited the Lord's Prayer over and over again. The longer he prayed, the more relieved he felt and the more his doubts receded.

"His fate will be as it is ordained. Perhaps I am suffering needlessly? Jesus will not want to accept my sacrifice, he will not want my name to be cursed forever. It is certain that everything will come to pass as it is intended—there is no point in suffering."

He was grateful that unintelligent creatures—the frogs—had persuaded him to praise God in prayer. Surely Christ would not be willing to accept such a terrible sacrifice from him. For the mere thought of one's name being cursed for eternity is sufficient to instill horror.

"But why should Jesus not accept my sacrifice, if I willingly consent to it and wish to do it for the greater good? No, no, there is no need to think about this; it is better to pray once more, for no good deed can justify betrayal."

He went towards the fire, whispering the Lord's Prayer. The glow of the open fire was scarcely visible among the trees. The disciples were sleeping peacefully around it. Whenever one of them awoke, he probably threw another branch on it, so the flames were not dying out but quietly smoldered in the peace of the night. Judas lay down to sleep at the feet of Christ.

The next day the disciples asked Jesus where they should prepare the Passover for him. And he told them to go into the city and find a man bearing a pitcher of water and to follow him. And when he entered a house, they were to ask its owner: "Our Teacher asks: 'Where is my guest room, where I shall eat the Passover with my disciples?'" And he would show them the guest room.

The disciples carried out Christ's command. That day Judas busied himself with all kinds of chores, now running to buy flour, now seeking out wine, now washing the floor. Something seemed to be torturing him and he sought to relieve the pain through hard work.

When all was prepared and the disciples had taken their places at table, anxiety seized Judas's soul. With bated breath he looked at Christ. The Lord was silent, and this long silence threw Judas into a fever. The sweat stood out on his brow, and his heart beat so hard that he was afraid someone would sense this tell-tale beating; unobtrusively he rested his chest against the table.

"Truly I say to you," Christ began, "One of you who eats with me will betray me." At this they were all struck speechless, and then they growled menacingly:

"Who is it, Lord? Tell us the traitor's name. Name the renegade!" Peter seized a knife. His eyes were aflame with rage.

"Name him, Jesus, name him!" the others demanded, their faces, too, burning with hate.

Judas felt his shirt sticking to his body.

"No, I won't betray Jesus. I am not capable of it. I have taken on too heavy a burden. Let Christ think I have broken my word, let Him consider my confession worthless, but I will not carry out what I had intended. I will fall at his feet and confess."

"In truth, the Son of Man will go as it is written of him," said Jesus, "but woe to him who betrays Him; it would be better for him if he had not been born!"

"My sacrifice is sincere, and Christ accepts it. And if he says it would be better for his betrayer to have never been born, then I must carry out my intention. I must submit to that dreadful punishment.

"But what if Jesus is testing me, giving me an opportunity to confess?" Judas suddenly thought.

He mopped the sweat from his face and took a breath. All the time that Jesus was speaking, Judas was afraid to look Him in the eye. Eventually he summoned the courage to look up. Jesus was calm. It was difficult to believe that in a few days' time he would accept the terrible punishment of the crucifixion for the sake of people not worth a hair on his head. Jesus's eyes radiated love and warmth, and his movements were unhurried.

"Lord, tell us the name of the traitor! Name him!" the disciples were insistent.

"Is it not me, Teacher?" asked Judas in a quiet voice.

"You have said it," replied Christ.

Judas did not feel his trembling legs bear him from the room. Tears ran involuntarily down his cheeks. He walked through the dark streets of Jerusalem and went to the Pharisees.

"Dear Lord, no one will ever learn the truth about me. No one will wish to mention my name or to say a prayer for my soul. Lord, give me strength to bear my cross! For unless it was your will, Jesus would not have accepted my sacrifice."

And again the thought came to him: was the Teacher not giving him an opportunity to resolve everything himself, was he not testing him? Then Judas dismissed the idea. He whispered that all was God's will, and he prayed.

He walked on through the narrow streets, turning now left, now right. They seemed endless, boundless, like a maze from which everyone must find their own way out. It may be that there was only one way out but various streets lead to it. And again it seemed to him that Jesus had deliberately spoken of a traitor in order to test him, Judas. Jesus wanted him to confess of his own accord.

His legs were taking him to the Pharisees, and he could not now turn back and return to Jesus; he no longer had the strength. And now everything

was happening so quickly. He had told the Pharisees that he would betray Jesus for thirty pieces of silver, and they had agreed. They rejoiced that the Messiah had been deserted by one of his disciples. Everyone tried to shake Judas's right hand and several of them even embraced him.

"So where should we seek the Nazarene?" they asked.

"In the Garden of Gethsemane," replied Judas without hesitation. He was convinced that Christ would be in that very place, perhaps standing beside the stunted apple tree with the gnarled trunk, on which two frail blackberry shoots were growing.

As he walked at the head of the armed throng, he was painfully aware that he was about to see the Teacher for the last time but would not be able to say farewell to Him, that he would not be able to fall on his knees before Him and kiss His hand. This distressed him so much that he bit his lips until they bled and dug his nails into the palm of his hand yet did not feel any pain. He struggled to conceal his emotions, in case the Pharisees became suspicious. In an instant, the thought came to him that there was a way for him to bid farewell to Jesus. He stopped and spoke to the mob:

"The one that I kiss will be Jesus."

He said this, and then he froze at the thought that his kiss would be one not of farewell but of betrayal.

He went pale and his eyes looked wild. In a moment, in just an instant, he would fall to the ground, grovel in the dust, and gnash stones so that none of this would happen, so everything would be reversed. But it was clear that fate had already determined everything and that there was no turning back. So as not to succumb to weakness, he shouted at the top of his voice:

"What are you waiting for?! Come on!! Hurry!!" He ran, and the mob could scarcely keep pace with him.

Jesus was standing by the apple tree, as though He had expected them. He looked sorrowfully at Judas, who felt his strength ebbing and his legs giving way.

"Why have you come, my friend?" asked Jesus in a loud voice.

Judas trembled at these words. They radiated a fresh, moist warmth, and Judas felt his strength returning.

"Hail, Teacher!" he said faintly, and he kissed Christ.

Hurling themselves at Jesus, the mob uttered a roar, but Judas no longer heard or saw anything. He hurried away, running into the darkness of the city to return to the Pharisees the thirty pieces of silver that burnt his palm like fire.

Here and there groups of people were standing on the street, talking animatedly. He heard someone say:

"One of the disciples has betrayed the Messiah!"

The cold serpent of the noose wound itself around the neck of Judas, and he glanced at the stunted apple tree with its gnarled trunk where he had

spoken with Jesus for the last time, where he had bid Him farewell for the last time.

"Lord, forgive me my terrible sin, save my soul, Lord!" Forgive me for not possessing the strength to bear my cross. It is unbearable, this cross of the people's curse.

Hot tears flowed down Judas's cheeks. An aspen leaf rustled treacherously above his head, the only aspen in the Garden of Gethsemane. Who knows how it had taken root and grown here. Could a seed have been carried on the wind, or by a bird, or by a person, so it grew alone among the olive trees and the apple trees, though it is quite out of place in an orchard? Judas continued to pray, whispering through his parched lips:

"My Lord Jesus Christ, forgive me also my excessive love for You..." These were the last words of Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve disciples of Jesus Christ.

It was a peaceful, moonlit night in the Garden of Gethsemane. The full moon bathed the aspen in a silvery light as it treacherously rustled its leaves above the head of a silent Judas.

*Translated by Patrick Corness and Natalia Pomirko*

Original publication: Vasyl' Gabor, "Osyka v Hetsymans'komu sadu," in his *Knyha ekzotychnykh sniv ta real'nykh podii* [A Book of Exotic Dreams and Real Events], 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Lviv: LA Piramida, 2003, pp. 42–49.