Jesus knew that betrayal, humiliation, and crucifixion were on the horizon. Approaching the cross was emotionally exhausting for Jesus. Grief and anxiety filled His heart. Yet in spite of it all, He prayed passionately for His beloved disciples.

John 17 recounts Jesus’ earnest prayer for His followers. He loved the twelve disciples, poured Himself into these men, and knew challenging days were ahead for them. He also knew one of the twelve, Judas Iscariot, was ready to betray Him. This was troubling. Jesus loved Judas, sharing His life with him—the same way He had invested in the other disciples. Yet Judas had evil intentions. So in His prayer, Jesus described His betrayer using the dark and troubling phrase “son of perdition.”

**General Understanding**

*Perdition* is a word that has not changed much from the meaning it held in Jesus’ day. Modern dictionaries explain *perdition* as an eternal state of punishment that comes after death for those who are evil. This meaning is clearly derived from biblical usage, as well as later literature, such as John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (which was also influenced by the Bible’s depiction of perdition).1

The New Testament word translated “perdition” (Greek, *apoleia*) means “an everlasting state of torment and death.”2 Other meanings rendered from *apoleia* include annihilation, ruin, utter destruction, and wasting away (as in squandering resources).3

Jesus’ use of the phrase “son of perdition” is a “Hebraism,” which means the word is best understood in light of Jewish/Hebrew thought in Old Testament context. The *Septuagint* (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) uses *apoleia* to describe one’s character. This

**Lesson Reference**

FBS: John 17:12
is the case in Isaiah 57:4 where the phrase tekna apoleias carries the meaning “children of unrighteousness.” The Septuagint also uses apoleia to describe a person’s destiny. For example, Isaiah 34:5 states, “the people I have doomed” (RSV). The New Testament uses the phrase “son of perdition” on two occasions—John 17:12, which is Jesus’ reference to Judas and 2 Thessalonians 2:3, which pertains to the Antichrist. Both of these New Testament references connect with perdition’s use in the Old Testament context, communicating a description of both character and eternal destiny.4

Following traditional Jewish form Jesus used the phrase “son of . . . ” in His description of Judas. In the Hebrew tradition introductions were often made in light of one’s ancestral connection.5

The lineage defined who a person was. (For an example of this form, see Matthew 1:1—“Jesus Christ, the son of David,” KJV.) Jesus used “son of perdition” to describe Judas Iscariot as being related to—literally as a child of—destruction or a child of hell.

More troubling is the fact that the “son of perdition” can lead others toward destruction, which makes him even more dangerous.6 In Jesus’ case, Judas would betray Him into destruction on the cross. This was the betrayal of which Jesus would say, “but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born” (Matt. 26:24).7

“Perdition” as “Hell” in the New Testament

As noted earlier, perdition refers to a state of eternal destruction, death, waste, and ruin—all of which are clear references to hell. Within the context of the New Testament, perdition clearly refers to this eternal state of waste, which has everything to do with judgment and death. Such is the eternal fate for those who do not repent and who reject Christ. Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 7:13, for example, describes a broad road that leads people to a place or destiny of apoleia—of ruin and destruction.8

“Perdition” also gives a clear sense of something being wasted or made useless. In this sense, hell is a place of wasting away and uselessness. The New Testament uses apollumi, the verb form of apoleia, to describe this sense of “wasting.” The disciples used the word apoleia to voice their protest at the woman’s extravagant waste of perfume, as she poured it on Jesus’ head (26:8).9 Interestingly, Matthew credited the disciples with making this complaint regarding wasted perfume. However, John’s Gospel particularly specified Judas, the son of perdition or wastefulness, as the one who scolded Mary for wasting the perfume (see John 12:1-8). Judas, who criticized others for wastefulness, was actually wasting away himself as he planned to betray Jesus.

The New Testament uses apoleia (translated as “perdition” or “destruction”) 20 times. In several of these New Testament uses, the word specifically refers to a place of destruction, namely hell. As mentioned earlier, Matthew 7:13 refers to “the gate is wide and the road is broad that leads to destruction.” Because Simon the sorcerer tried to purchase the power of the Holy Spirit from Simon Peter, Peter rebuked him saying, “May your silver be destroyed with you” (Acts 8:20). Paul’s usage as well in his Epistles relates to a destiny of eternal ruin: “objects of wrath ready for destruction” (Rom. 9:22); “evidence of their destruction” (Phil. 1:28); “their end is destruction” (3:19); “desires, which plunge people into ruin and destruction” (1 Tim. 6:9); and “we are not those who draw back and are destroyed” (Heb. 10:39). A form of perdition is in Revelation regarding the destiny of the beast—“The beast . . . is about to . . . go to destruction” (17:8) and “goes to destruction” (v. 11).

Second Peter also uses apoleia often to describe eternal ruin: “They will secretly bring in destructive [worthless and even damning] heresies” and “will bring swift destruction on themselves” (2:1); “their destruction does not sleep” (v. 3); “day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men” (3:7); and “twist them to their own destruction” (v. 16).

Other Usage . . . Abaddon/Apollyon

The New Testament also refers to perdition (apoleia) by the name Apollyon. Revelation 9:11 states, “They had as their king the angel of the abyss; his name in Hebrew is Abaddon, and in Greek he has the name Apollyon.” Abaddon is a Hebrew word for destruction (see Job 26:6; 28:22; Ps. 88:11; and Prov. 15:11). Abaddon is personified as the dark angel of Revelation. Apollyon, playing off of the Greek apoleia, is Abaddon, the angel who—like the son of perdition—is a destroyer of self and one who ruins others.10

Exploring the meaning of perdition is sobering. Jesus’ calling one of His disciples a “son of perdition” is a reference to both Judas’s destructive desire to betray the Son of God as well as his destiny of eternal ruin. Perdition describes a place, namely hell, which embodies wastefulness and destruction. To call someone a “son of perdition” was to say that he was a child of hell who leaves a trail of ruin wherever he goes. Judas embodied this reality. He was swallowed up
in destruction and his actions would lead to a terrible event—Jesus’ crucifixion.

Yet Christians must always view perdition in light of the resurrected Christ. Judas’s betrayal was not the last word! Perdition, likewise, does not have the final say for those who trust Christ as their Lord. For Jesus has defeated death and created eternal relief from the perils of perdition.


5. Oepke, 397.


7. Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the Holman Christian Standard Bible.


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