

**Questions of the Cross:
TRUST**

**Luke 19:29-40
Mark 15:1-39**

Can the God of the cross be trusted?

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Have you heard any good conspiracy theories lately? If you haven't, you must be on a media fast for Lent. Talking about conspiracy theories is a cottage industry, maybe even big business, in America today. Of course, behind-the-scenes conspiracies are nothing new. When I was a kid, the Warren Commission investigated the assassination of John F. Kennedy, and some still claim there was an FBI or CIA conspiracy behind it all. Some people still maintain that the landing on the moon 50 years ago was done on a soundstage somewhere—completely fake. And of course, some believe that most of the world events for the last 300-400 years have been directed by a secret society of rich and powerful people call the Illuminati. Such conspiracy theories have provided the narrative for countless movies, plays, and mystery novels.

In the last few years, it seems conspiracy thinking has increased and become more divisive and hurtful. Alex Jones and his infamous website “Infowars” has claimed that the terrorist attack on the World Trade Centers was engineered by our own government and that the killing of 20 school children and 6 adults at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut was a hoax perpetrated by gun rights activists. Despite the protests from first responders and bereaved parents, such unsubstantiated ranting continues all over the internet.

Conspiracy theories continue to gain credence because we don't trust our government, and we are afraid of strangers. Either the government is out to get us, or those people who are a different color or race or nationality or language or religion are. Sam Wells points out that we have a universal distrust of authority—government, schools, church, business. We also can't trust our communities any more, because most of us are not from wherever we live. If you didn't grow up where you live, it's hard to trust people you don't know.¹

So what we do in our contemporary society is to draw in and to put all of our emotional weight on the people closest to us. We have our family—spouse, parent, child—and we can always trust them—until we can't. Or we have a close friend—our BFF—on whom we unload everything, until something happens and we find out we can't trust them, either, and so we

don't anymore. Suddenly we find our trust "hanging by a thread." Where can we turn? Whom can we really trust?

These questions should not be unfamiliar to anyone who has read the Passion story of Jesus. He found himself alone and friendless as he hung by a thread at the end of his life.

It all started so well. Jesus rode into the city of Jerusalem on a donkey—a Messianic sign! He came through the east gate—the Messiah's gate! They shouted, "*Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!*"² Words fit for a king!

But by the end of the week, the crowd had changed their tune. The shouts of "Hosanna!" had turned to "Crucify him!" Instead of wanting to crown him, they wanted to kill him. You can't trust a crowd. Popularity rises and falls, ebbs and flows. It varies like the wind.

But Jesus was betrayed by those much closer to him than the crowd. Sitting at table with him the night before he died was Judas, a disciple he trusted so much he let him handle the finances for the group. When Jesus shared the bread and wine and told the disciples it was his body and blood, he shared them with Judas. But Judas had already made arrangements to betray Jesus. We'll never know why. Maybe he was disillusioned. Maybe he was trying to force the hand of Jesus. We just don't know. But we do know that when Judas identified his Master to the authorities by giving him a kiss, it started the downward spiral to the cross.

Remember that Judas wasn't the only disciple who betrayed Jesus. When he was arrested, Scripture says, "*they all forsook him and fled.*"³ When the going gets tough, the tough get lost, right? Only Peter hung back and followed Jesus to the house of the high priest—Peter, the rock on whom the church would be built, the lead disciple, the one who vowed never to leave or forsake his Lord. But when he was accused of being a friend of Jesus, Peter did just what Jesus predicted he would do. He denied three times that he even knew Jesus.

So Jesus learned at the end what we all learn eventually: that trust hangs by a thread. Generally speaking, the only certain thing is uncertainty. There

is hardly anyone, from the crowd at large to your closest friend, that you can trust completely. And there's nothing we long for more, is there?

The reason we keep hanging on, the reason our trust still hangs at least by a thread, is that for all our failures, human beings are sometimes still capable of "grace and kindness beyond our imagination."⁴ People can act horribly, and we all do sometimes, but people can also act gloriously, with compassion and love and courage, and that's what keeps us hanging on by a thread.

We see some of that glory in the Passion of Jesus. A woman anoints Jesus' feet with expensive ointment. Simon of Cyrene carries the cross for Jesus. The women and the beloved disciple come to the crucifixion. Joseph of Arimathea steps up and provides a tomb. Even in the worst of circumstances, there's love and devotion and service.

You've seen this. This kind of thing keeps us hoping and trusting even today. In March of 1987, a sea-ferry bound across the channel to England sunk in the harbor of Zeebrugge in Belgium. Ninety seconds into the journey, the boat went down, because the person in charge of the bow doors had fallen asleep and failed to close them. The person who was supposed to check on the bow doors didn't show up for work. And the supervisor saw the doors were open but ignored it because it wasn't his job. Nearly 200 people drowned because the people in charge couldn't be trusted. Nobody acted the way they were supposed to. It was like the Passion narrative all over again.

But in the midst of this tragedy, there was a passenger named Andrew Parker, a bank manager who was over 6 feet tall. He saw the water rushing in, and he stretched out his body between the boat and the pier, holding on to the railing of the boat with his feet and ankles, and grabbing the railing on the pier with his hands, forming a human bridge across the gap. Over 20 people climbed across Andrew's legs and back to safety, including his own wife and daughter. Andrew himself was able to cling to the pier as the ferry went down.⁵

When Jesus had been betrayed even by those closest to him, as his trust was hanging by a thread, how did he respond? He stretched himself out on the cross and offered his life for the world. He became the bridge between

God and human beings, between hope and despair, between sin and holiness. He became the way of escape from death and the way toward salvation. In love, he considered us worth saving. In trust, we climb across him to safety.

For several weeks, we have been asking the Questions of the Cross: What happens when story meets history in the cross? How can the Cross give life? How does the Cross give purpose to existence? What sort of power is found in the cross? How is God's love revealed in the Cross? And today, can the God of the cross be trusted? We have gone pretty deep. I hope we are a little closer to understanding the width, breadth, and depth of the unique act of love and sacrifice. But are we? At the end of the day, what is the meaning of the cross?

Sam Wells ends his book with a synopsis of a movie I had heard of but never seen. It is called *The Boy In The Striped Pajamas*. It's a story about two boys, set in Germany during World War II. Bruno is the son of a Nazi officer. His dad is given the responsibility over a strange kind of camp, and the family moves to a house next to the camp. One day while playing in his back yard, Bruno sees a boy about his age on the other side of the fence. He finds out the boy's name is Schmuel, and he is also eight years old. They become friends, often meeting to talk or play games through the fence. Bruno can't really understand why Schmuel is imprisoned in the camp, or why he has to wear striped pajamas, or why he is hungry all the time.

Gradually the tension increases as Bruno's family begins to understand what is going on at the camp. One day Bruno slips some food to Schmuel and is spotted by a guard. He confronts the two boys, and Bruno denies knowing him. Despite the betrayal of trust, Schmuel comes back to the fence, his face bruised from the beating he received. Bruno apologizes, and Schmuel forgives him.

The climax of the film comes as Bruno's father decides that near the camp is no place for his family to live, and he prepares to move them far away. For Bruno and Schmuel, this means they will be separated forever. Bruno goes to visit Schmuel at the fence one last time, but Schmuel has brought some striped pajamas for Bruno to put on and blend in to the camp. Bruno puts them on and scrambles under the fence. Suddenly Schmuel and Bruno

are caught up in a crowd of people being ushered into a big barn at one end of the camp. They are told to take off their clothes because they are about to get a shower.

Meanwhile, Bruno's mother has discovered that he is missing and sounds the alarm. Guards begin to pour through the camp searching for the commandant's son. But it is too late. Somehow knowing that this is going to be no ordinary shower, Bruno and Schmuel clasp their hands and squeeze tight so they will never be separated. As the doors close and darkness descends and the poison gas begins to pour from the shower heads, Bruno says, "You're my best friend, Schmuel. My best friend for life."⁶

It's a story about children. But it's not a children's story. It's about hatred, mass murder, genocide, merciless cruelty, and indescribable suffering. Yet in the middle of the apocalypse, there are these two boys, ironically from two situations that couldn't be more different, too young to know better, clasping hands as they face their deaths, "knowing nothing more truly than the indivisibility of their hearts and the inseparability of their destinies, defined by trust and friendship and forgiveness and love."⁷

Sam Wells suggests that the story of these two boys is a great picture of God and us:

It's the story of the incarnation and the cross. Jesus enters the camp of danger with every likelihood that his entry will sooner or later entail his gruesome execution. Jesus takes on the garment of exclusion and prepares to face the consequences of humanity's rejection of God. Jesus becomes a Jew and discovers for himself the reviling and persecution Jews have known throughout the ages. Jesus becomes a little child and places himself at the mercy of adults who can't be trusted to have any idea what they are doing. Fundamentally, when we're surrounded by chaos, in the midst of hell, at the mercy of cruel powers, terrified, naked, humiliated and helpless, Jesus is right beside us, saying, "You're my best friend. My best friend for life. I wouldn't be anywhere else in the world but right here beside you."⁸

That's what it means when we say "God is with us." That's what it means when the Gospel of John says, "*The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we beheld his glory.*"⁹ The real glory of God appears when Jesus

takes on flesh and stands beside us and will never let us go, whatever may happen. Wells says, “The Christian faith is this: despite our meanness, despite our faithlessness, despite the danger and disgrace of doing so, God chose to become our friend.”¹⁰ The real glory of God appears when we accept that friendship and make Jesus our best friend for life and discover the life he brings to us.

On the way to the cross, Jesus was betrayed by the unknowing crowd, his mortal enemy, and his best friend. Yet he became the bridge, the way to safety and salvation. You can trust that—now and forever. Amen.

¹ Samuel Well, *Hanging By A Thread: Questions of the Cross* (New York: Church Publishing, 2016), 22f.

² Mark 11:9-10.

³ Mark 14:50, Matthew 26:56.

⁴ Wells, 27.

⁵ Wells, 27f.

⁶ Wells, 57ff.

⁷ Wells, 59f.

⁸ Wells, 60.

⁹ John 1:14.

¹⁰ Wells, 61.