

REAL IDENTITY

WHERE BIBLE AND LIFE MEET

THADDEUS BARNUM



Indianapolis, Indiana

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THE CROSSING



Reflections on Mark 4:1–20 and Matthew 7:24–27

*And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds
blew and slammed against that house; and yet it did
not fall, for it had been founded on the rock.*

—MATTHEW 7:25

Here I stand. At the crossing.

Sometimes I wish it wasn't so hard to find. That what we see on the outside is what's real on the inside. Just that simple. But too often the chasm between the two is huge.

And I forget about the crossing, where the outside and inside meet.

Sam taught me that years ago. He was the perfect testimony. He came to faith in Christ through the witness of Christian men in our church. And Sam jumped in—Bible studies, home group, ministries in the church and our local community. He gave time, which in his profession he had little of. He gave money to the church and beyond . . . way beyond.

Because he cared for the needy. It hurt him to see people suffering. Off he went on mission trips to remote parts of the world, wanting to help, needing to serve, having a big heart.

His name came up to serve in church leadership. Who could be better? He met all the criteria: strong in belief, in conduct, in service, in leadership.

Sam.

Until the testing came, and it came hard. By the time we heard about it, it was too late. Sam had left his job, left his wife, left his teenage kids, left his church family. Sam was gone. The guys closest to him at church pursued him. They still do, even to this day so many years later.

Some said it was an affair. Others said something big happened at work. Was he caught doing drugs? Smuggling money? A cover-up of some kind? It almost doesn't matter. Whatever it was, it was big enough to expose his heart.

And that's what testing does.

In the parable of the sower, the seed of God's Word has to land in the heart—the good soil. If not, when testing comes, we fall away (Mark 4:17).

In the same way, the foundation has to be on rock, not sand. So when the storm comes, we stand strong, unshaken (Matt. 7:25).

Jesus taught us this. The world is full of trial and trouble. What matters is that we're ready for it—that what He has done in us is real. To the heart. And what He will do for us is see us through the storm. He will give us what we need to endure. To persevere.

That's His promise (John 16:33).

James said it. All we have to do is ask. In the midst of the mess of this world, we ask the Lord “who gives to all generously and without reproach,” and He gives us the

wisdom we need in the moment (James 1:5). As long as we ask in faith. And from faith.

Because our faith is real. He has penetrated our hearts. But that's the problem, isn't it?

Sam looked so real. He said the right words. He did the right things. He leapt beyond himself for the sake of others. He wept at the reading of Scripture. He showed us what it means to have a passion for the things of God. He testified in- and outside church. He looked so real.

None of us dreamed that he lived in two worlds. One on the outside. One on the inside. And the one on the inside was so dark and secretive, controlled and well-protected, that none of us saw it coming. A big storm. Bigger than him. Exposing him. Tearing his two worlds apart.

Double-minded, that's what James called it (James 1:8). A word meaning "two-souled," it's deeper than being two-faced—hypocrites with an image on the outside that betrays the heart on the inside.

It goes to the breaking of the soul. As if, deep in our cores, we can be two.

And we can't. Not before God. Never, never can we serve two masters and get away with it (Matt. 6:24). No matter how in control we think we are.

Because storms come. Storms expose.

Sam became exactly what James said: "Like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind" (James 1:6). The storm hit and he was gone. His wife, teenage kids, and church family bereft without him. His kids ached for their

dad. One of them wondered if being a Christian was really even worth it.

Sam.

He taught me to stand at the crossing.

He taught me that it's not enough, as a Christian leader, to help people believe in Jesus Christ, know the Bible, learn to pray, belong to the church, grow in service and ministry, give from our resources, and serve the poor, the needy, the voiceless.

All of it can be done and the heart never touched, the gospel never made real. The salvation given us in Jesus Christ never known in the depths of who we are. Outward Christians: right words, right deeds, playing games, two-souled.

So I make myself stand at the crossing.

Between the outside and the inside. And I beg the Lord to have mercy on us. To help us cross. So that Jesus Christ is real to our hearts, in the depths of our souls, before the storms come.

So we're not like Sam—disciples on the wrong foundation, rooted in the wrong soil, double-minded, two-souled, rudderless at the time of testing. But just the opposite. We know Him. He knows us.

We've made the crossing. We've found real.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION*

Can you talk about what it's like to stand at the crossing between the image you project and who you really are?

Is Jesus Christ real for you? Is He the foundation on which your life is built?

** The reflection at the end of each devotion is designed to encourage prayer, journaling, and conversation in small group settings. It's easy to read and go on. It's better to read, stop, and engage in dialogue and prayer.*

HELP ME STAY HERE



Reflections on Luke 9:18–27

If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it.

—LUKE 9:23–24

It's hard to stay here—at the crossing.

Just like it's hard to be in battle, on the front lines, and suddenly find I have no shields. No lines of defense. Nothing to protect me, my heart, my soul.

And here I stand. Exposed. Vulnerable. Helpless. Way out of control.

Some people call it hitting bottom. I call it the crossing, where what we project on the outside meets who we are on the inside. Of course, most of us don't know who we are on the inside. We've guarded our hearts for so long that we've come to believe we are what we know—deep down—we're not.

And we don't want to go there. We don't want to be exposed. We don't want to stand at ground zero and face the stuff of life. The real stuff we've been avoiding and neglecting. Because we hate to confront. We *won't* confront.

Who wants to be like Adam and Eve and suddenly find the tree we're hiding behind is gone? And there we stand in the presence of the Lord, in the light of His glory, with fig leaves in our hands crumbling to dust.

Exposed.

It's hard to stay here.

I remember the summers during seminary when I had to do chaplaincy work. The first was at a hospital and it was hard for me. I'd go to be with a patient suffering in pain and wouldn't know what to do. So out came my rescue mode: "How can I help? What do you need? I'll get the nurse. I'll get the doctor. They'll get meds to ease your pain."

"Whose pain?" my supervisor asked. "Sounds like the one in pain was you. Sounds like you couldn't just be there with them. Pray with them. Suffer with them. Be an ambassador of Jesus Christ to them. You wanted to go for meds?"

I had to *do*. I couldn't just *be* there. It's the crossing again. Let me do, and I'm somehow still in control. Force me to just be there in their suffering, and I risk that. I risk me entering their world. To be with those in pain and do nothing? Just be there? Just feel it? Feel what it's like to cry out completely helpless, alone, afraid? And then stay there, as long as it takes?

No thanks.

Who can stand with someone at bottom and not be at bottom too? Who can weep with those suffering and still stay in control?

Don't teach me to be. Let me do. Get the meds. Numb them out. While you're at it, numb me too. Because it's true. I don't want to be here.

Of course I want to say I was there. Past tense. I've been at bottom. That's the incredible power of Christian testimony. I personally love the sheer joy of brothers and sisters in Christ getting up in the church and sharing what the Lord has done for them. They've been there. Their worlds have been torn apart. Helpless, hopeless, unable to do for themselves. Vulnerable to the forces of evil. At the very edge of despair. Suffering hardship and affliction. Feeling the hot breath of the Devil on their faces. Running deep into the valley where fear and death overpower the soul.

And then the Lord meets them, rescuing from bottom, making them safe.

And the church roars with applause. Praise to the Lord for what He has done! Yes, He allows us to be here, at the crossing, fully exposed and helpless. For it is here where we meet Jesus Christ. Where He changes lives. Where the cross is. Dug into the earth's soil. It's the only place to go to be saved, forgiven, and set free.

But we don't stay here. We never stay here.

That's the whole point, isn't it? He rescues us from places like that. He would never make us stay there. Not there. Doesn't He want us to be like we were? Shields up, defenses in place, back in control, guarding the heart? This is the Christian message I like.

The one I don't like goes like this: We never leave here. We stay here. We build our homes here. We build our churches here. Why? Because this is where Jesus Christ is. At ground zero. Where *real* is. No more Eden trees to hide behind. No more fig leaves. No more dividing walls between

what we project and who we are. No more games pretending we are what we know we're not. No more meds or drink to numb out. No more busy-busy doing so we don't have time to face ourselves. No more running from the call of Jesus Christ.

He said it plain. Clear. Unmistakable. Unavoidable.

“If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it” (Luke 9:23–24).

Stay here. Where we are exposed. Vulnerable. Helpless. Way out of control. Where we have to depend upon the Lord, trust in the Lord, every day. Where in our weakness, His grace is sufficient. Because it is. Where we can be with others who suddenly find themselves here. In the terrifying sufferings of this world. Ambassadors of the Holy Spirit.

Here we are.

Where the Lord Jesus Christ presides. Where disciples are made. Where the kingdom of God is made real.

O Lord, help me stay here.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

How good are you at staying in places where you feel out of control?

Do you know something about meeting Jesus at ground zero?

I KNOW I SAY NO



Reflections on Psalm 23

*Even though I walk through the valley of the
shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me;
Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.*

—PSALM 23:4

Testimonies are born here—where it hurts, where people suffer, where all we can do is cry out to God for help because there’s nowhere else to go. Here. Stand here. Never leave here.

It’s where our Lord is.

Listen to the stories. They are all the same. Every one of them gets to Easter morning the same way—through the cross. We can’t avoid suffering, not in this world. Eventually, we’re going to find ourselves here in need of a Savior. Because we’re lost. We’re scared. We need help. We need Him.

Here. He meets us here.

Even our children who grow up in Christian homes know the story. They say their prayers. They live the life. But eventually a day comes and they do what we all do. They enter the “valley of the shadow of death” (Ps. 23:4). They know about evil, but suddenly they feel it. They feel the fear of it. The power of it.

The rod, the staff, the Shepherd—no longer just a story in the Bible.

It's real. In a place called real. Where we find inside us the deepest cry the soul can ever cry: Are you real? Really real?

Testimonies are born here.

But not just testimonies. This is the exact place where discipleship happens. Where we grow up in Christ day by day, all our days. It's here where we don't play games. Where we keep our hearts open to Him. Our minds set on Him. Our wills given, in full surrender, to do what He's calling us to do.

Discipleship.

I sat across the table, sipping my coffee. The pastor and I went out for breakfast to catch up. I was visiting his church and this gave us an opportunity to enjoy each other's company and talk openly about the stuff of our lives. Inevitably, we stumbled into one of the most pressing theological issues of our day.

At some point, I shook my head and laughed a little. He asked why.

"Because it's amazing to me," I said, "what seminary did to us. We become doctors of the mind and not the soul. We forget that the truth of God's Word is intended to move from the mind so as to touch the heart. To impact us. To bring us to the place where we meet Christ and He meets us."

"It's my biggest defense!" he crowed.

"What is?"

“My mind. I thank God for seminary. It taught me how to build a fortress around my heart so I never have to deal with it. Or with anybody else’s for that matter. It’s how I protect myself when I’m in the middle of people’s suffering. I pull out the right quote from the Bible. I tell the right story from Christian history. I give them the right answer.”

“Well done us,” I lamented, admiring his honest sarcasm.

“But it’s all too true,” he confessed. “It’s how I preach. It’s how I lead Bible classes. I find myself discipling Christians in just the same way. Building fortresses. Stockpiling right answers. Filling the mind with all kinds of great knowledge but never speaking to their hearts. Never entering into their pain.”

And with that, somehow, we were there. At that place.

He opened up. For just a moment, the fortress walls came down. His heart was a mess. And there was good reason for it. Things of the past were crushing him, controlling him, dictating every part of his life. And he knew it. He knew it was the cause of his physical and emotional issues. He knew it was affecting his wife, his kids, and the church. But more, so much more, it distanced him from the Lord.

“It’s been this way for years,” he said.

“So why don’t you do something about it?” I asked.

“Don’t need to. I’m so good at what I do, no one really knows. Not really. Except my wife. And it’s easier this way. To be honest, I’m afraid of what would happen to me if I go there. I’m afraid I’ll lose my job. Afraid people will find me out. Afraid of what people will think of me.”

And then he paused. Like he knew he had no choice.

“But I’ll do it,” he promised.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean I’ll go there. I know I’ve been avoiding it. I know it’s what the Lord wants me to do. A couple of times in my life I’ve sought counsel from people I thought could help but it just didn’t work. So I stopped. I didn’t press it. But I should have. Especially me.”

“Why especially you?”

“Because I’m a pastor. My job, like you said, is to be a doctor of the soul and not just a doctor of the mind. But look at me! I pay no attention to my soul. I spend all my time avoiding the very thing I know I need to do and it’s killing me inside. It’s killing my relationship with the Lord. And I know it.”

“Can I help?” I asked.

“Yeah. Call me in a month. Call me in two. Ask me if I’ve started. I know I say yes to this today, but I know myself well enough that tomorrow morning nothing will change. That’s my fear. So call me.”

“But why won’t things change?” I asked, puzzled.

“Because I know I say yes to the Lord today. Yes to you. Yes to my wife. But when it comes time to actually do it?”

He paused. He put his head down. He said it slow. He said it real.

“I know I say no.”



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION



Do you know what you're saying no to and when you need to say yes?

Are there Christians in your life who can help you live into that yes?

HE DIGS DOWN DEEP



Reflections on Hebrews 12:1–3

And let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus.

—HEBREWS 12:1–2

She had gone to a place she'd never been before. Lonely. Empty. Dark.

It's different living in a developing country, in rural Africa, where poverty was the only life she knew. Where the basic needs of food, clean water, security, and health care were always in question. Add to that, she grew up under military rule where news of killings in the villages was common.

But it wasn't different too. Her family was Christian. They didn't turn to the occult or the worship of dead ancestors or the easy out of alcohol. The East African Revival of the 1930s had swept into her family. Every Sunday they spent the day in church. She grew up knowing Jesus.

At the age of twenty-three, she could honestly say she lived a happy life. She adored her father—a common man, a hard-working man, a devoted Christian man who always taught her to turn to the Lord in everything. He taught her

to pray, to love the Bible, to go to God no matter what happens in life.

She loved him so much. She dreamed of marrying a man as faithful and kind as her dad, living in a modest home nearby, raising her children, tending the gardens for food, and having her kids grow up knowing their granddad. And loving him as much as she did.

Dreams that would never come true.

He left for work one morning. Kissed his wife and children, like he did every morning, got on his bicycle and took off down the road. They didn't see anything . . . or hear anything. Not until the neighbors came.

Eyewitnesses were there. They said military soldiers were driving down the road in a camouflage truck. They saw a man on a bicycle and stopped. They stopped for no reason. They stopped because it was fun.

They forced him off his bike. Taunted him. Then struck him once. Laughing like drunkards laugh. Poking him with the butts of their guns. Playing with him like a cat plays with a mouse before the kill. Then they struck him again . . . and again.

He didn't resist, they said. There was nothing he could do. They surrounded him. It happened so fast.

Again and again. Until the game was over.

And they tossed his dead body in the back of the truck and drove off. They didn't give the family the decency of seeing him. Or caring for him. Or giving him an honorable burial. Or ever knowing what happened to his body.

They never saw him again.

And her world collapsed.

Random violence. Meaningless, senseless murder. They stole her father from her. But they stole her too. Her soul went black. Like someone had the power to turn off the lights. Leaving her there. Lonely. Empty. Dark.

Moving. Functioning. Living but dead. Doing what needed to be done—for her mom, for her brothers and sisters. Because she had to. Because her dad would expect her to. Because it didn't matter. Nothing mattered. Not now, not ever.

They killed him. For no reason. Like swatting a mosquito. And they killed her too. But she still had to live every day, her heart tormented by the memory of what they did to the best man she'd ever known. And then making her live. In a world without him.

She tried to pray. She tried to go to church. Tried to do what her father had taught her to do. Tried to believe as her father had believed. But she couldn't. It's not like she was angry with God. It went deeper than that. And worse, far worse. She couldn't feel anything at all for a month. A year. Two years.

Not until an older Christian woman took her aside.

“She prayed with me,” she said. “She prayed the peace of Jesus Christ would pour way down deep into my soul and fill me. Fill me so completely that the emptiness would be gone and that I'd know my Lord was there. In my hurt. My grief. My loneliness. And that I'd never be lonely again. All afternoon she prayed for me. And all these years later, I look back and remember that day as the day I knew that Jesus Christ is truly my Lord. That He met me in the deepest place of my soul and has never left. That He is everything to me and I love Him with all my heart.”

It's not that she doesn't still miss her father. She does. Every day. It's not that she understands why the Lord allowed him to die such a cruel death. Or why his body was not buried with dignity. Or why some of her siblings turned away from the Lord after that—and remain turned away, at least for now. And why she didn't too.

But she always remembers what her father taught her. The world is full of trouble. Trials come, and they come hard. And no matter what happens in life, we always do what He taught us to do.

Go to Him. No matter what happens. Go to Him.

And she remembers what Jesus said. There are Christians who think they are Christians. But when trouble comes or trials or testing, they turn from Him.

“We think we know Him,” she told me. “I thought I knew Him. But it was only on the surface. After my father was killed, I realized it wasn't completely true. I didn't know Him in the depths of my soul. And I didn't know His promise. He meets us there. He promises to meet us in the pain. He digs deep. He always digs down deep.”

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Have you ever—in the darkest of times—turned away from the Lord rather than to Him?

What happens to you when the “why did this happen” questions aren't answered the way you need them to be answered?