

July 13, 2025

The Gospel of John

XXVIII. Can I Trust the Pilot?

John 8:37-47

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Let me begin with a story told by John Ortberg, a Presbyterian pastor:

Some years ago my wife arranged for us to ride in a hot-air balloon as a birthday gift. We went to the field where the balloons ascended and got into a little basket with one other couple. We introduced ourselves and swapped vocational information. Then our pilot began the ascent. The day had just dawned – clear, crisp, cloudless. We could see the entire . . . Valley, from craggy canyons to the Pacific Ocean. It was scenic, inspiring, and majestic.

But I also experienced one emotion I had not anticipated. Want to guess?

Fear.

I had always thought those baskets went about chest high, but this one only came up to our knees. One good lurch would be enough to throw someone over the side. So I held on with grim determination and white knuckles.

I looked over at my wife, who does not care for heights at all, and relaxed a bit, knowing there was someone in the basket more tense than I was. I could tell, because she would not move – at all. During part of our flight there was a horse ranch on the ground directly behind her. I pointed it out because she loves horses, and, without turning around or even pivoting her head, she simply rolled her eyes back as far as she could and said, “Yes, it’s beautiful.”

About this time I decided I’d like to get to know the kid who was flying this balloon. I realized that I could try to psyche myself up into believing everything would be fine, but the truth was we had placed our lives and destinies in the hands of the pilot. Everything depended on his character and competence.

I asked him what he did for a living and how he got started flying hot-air balloons. I was hoping for his former job to be one full of responsibilities – a neurosurgeon, perhaps, an astronaut who missed going up in space.

I knew we were in trouble when his response to me began, “Dude, it’s like this . . .”

He did not even have a job! He mostly surfed.

He said the reason he got started flying hot-air balloons was that he had been driving around in his pickup when he'd had too much to drink, crashed the truck, and badly injured his brother. His brother still couldn't get around too well, so watching hot-air balloons gave him something to do.

"By the way," he added, "if things get a little choppy on the way down, don't be surprised. I've never flown this particular balloon before, and I'm not sure how it's going to handle the descent."

My wife looked over at me and said, "You mean to tell me we are a thousand feet up in the air with an unemployed surfer who started flying hot-air balloons because he got drunk, crashed a pickup, injured his brother, and has never been in this one before and doesn't know how to bring it down?"

Then the wife of the other couple looked at me and spoke – the only words either of them were to utter throughout the entire flight: "You're a pastor. Do something religious."

So I took an offering.

The great question at a moment like that is, Can I trust the pilot?

I could try telling myself that everything would turn out okay. Facing the flight with a positive attitude would certainly make it a more pleasant journey. But the journey would be over soon. And the real issue concerned the dude who was flying this thing. Were his character and competence such that I could confidently place my destiny in his hands?

Or, was it time to do something religious?

Every day you and I take another leg of our journey in this giant balloon that's whirling around a vast universe. We only get one trip. I long to take it with an enormous spirit of adventure and risk – and I'll bet you do, too.

But it's a pretty uncertain ride sometimes. I wish the walls to my basket went up a little higher. I wish the balloon was a little thicker. I wonder how my little ride will end up. I'm not sure how it will handle on the way down.

*I can try to psyche myself up for taking chances and believing everything will turn out okay. But the real question is, Is there somebody piloting this thing? And are his character and competence such that he can be trusted?*¹

I tell you that story, one, because it is a great story; but two, because I think it serves to take us to the heart of what Jesus is saying to us this morning. Ortberg's question, "*Can I trust the pilot?*," takes us directly to the root of Jesus' dispute with the religious leaders. The religious leaders are convinced that Jesus cannot be trusted. They believe that He is telling lies, blasphemous lies even, when He claims to be speaking to them the Word of God – and especially

so when He claims that God is His Father and that He is the Son of God. Jesus responds to them by saying that they are the ones not to be trusted because they are refusing to hear the Word of God and are instead choosing to live by the lies of this world, by the lies of the father of lies who clearly is their father. Of all Jesus' disputes with the religious leaders, this one is the most contentious.

But "*Can I trust the pilot?*" helps us to grasp what Jesus is saying to us this morning through His contentious dispute with the religious leaders. Because it puts before us the fundamental choice of every human life: who do we trust to tell us the truth about our lives? The truth about how to live our lives, what our lives are for, what things matter most and what things matter least, what truly constitutes success and happiness and a life well-lived – who do we trust to tell us the truth? And what Jesus tells us this morning is that there are really only two options for us on this question. We either trust Him to be speaking to us the Word of the God who gave us life; or we choose to trust some other voice – a voice which ultimately comes only from out of this fallen world, and there is only speaking to us lies about our lives. Who do we trust to tell us the truth? Whose word do we cling to when all else is to be stripped away by death? Who is our pilot?

My favorite Winnie the Pooh story. Christopher Robin has gathered up all the animals to go on a great expedition to find the North Pole. Thus ensues a meandering tale in which everyone is completely serious about this noble quest, but also one in which everyone is completely in the dark about where the North Pole is to be found. Along the way, little Roo falls into a stream and needs rescuing. Winnie the Pooh picks up a pole lying on the ground near the stream and fishes Roo out of the water. The emergency over, the animals gather round and celebrate this great rescue, while Pooh just stands there with the pole in his hands. Suddenly, Christopher Robin exclaims:

"Pooh . . . where did you find that pole?"
 Pooh looked at the pole in his hands.
 "I just found it," he said. "I thought it ought to be useful. I just picked it up."
 "Pooh," said Christopher Robin solemnly, "the expedition is over. You have found the North Pole!"
 "Oh!" said Pooh.²

And, with that, they stick the pole in the ground and Christopher Robin ties a message to it reading: "North Pole. Discovered by Pooh. Pooh Found It."

And that, says Jesus – apart from listening to Him and to the Word of God which He speaks to us – that is the situation in which we find ourselves in this fallen world. For someone, somewhere, is always finding and lifting up a new North Pole and shouting to us, "*Here it is! I have found it! Here is the real key to happiness! Here is the real key to abundant life! Forget everything you thought was true before – here is the new and improved answer to all your problems! Here is the life you have been looking for*" And everyone whoops and hollers and celebrates, falls into line and makes the necessary alterations – until, as it always turns out, until it turns out not to work, not to be true, not at all the answer we are looking for but only yet another bright, shining lie. But, fortunately, soon someone also comes along and starts shouting, "*Here it is! I have found it!*" And the whole sad sorry story starts all over again.

Ever since Adam and Eve turned their backs on God, this is how it has been in the world – someone always claiming to know better than God how to live in this world God has made, and what to live for. Despite the fact that none of us has a clue, unless we are listening to God. And ever since Adam and Eve, this world has been filled with fools willing to follow whatever the world is currently saying works best. And if we want to keep on chasing after such shiny little lies, Jesus will not stop us.

But what Jesus will do is offer is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Not the TikTok truth of today, but the one truth which is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow.³ Jesus speaks to us as our true North Pole – the voice of the One who made us, who willed us into being, shaping us in our mother's womb and endowing us each one with the unique gifts that render us precious and irreplaceable in His sight. Jesus Christ is the One who alone tells us the truth about who we are, tells us the truth about what our lives are for and how to live them best in this world. “*Can I trust the pilot?*” Jesus Christ is the only One we can trust to tell us the truth.

A wonderful Christian writer named Emilie Griffin wrote this:

We must cling to the one reality that does not crumple. The one rock that will not be washed loose in the tide and onslaught of anything. We must cling to the one reality that will hold firm, though the earth be destroyed and the mountains flung into the sea and the sun put out. We must cling to the One who holds eternity in his hand, who will not perish in the end, and who has the power to save us, too . . . Away from [him], we feel at odds with existence and even with ourselves. Close to him, we are at peace . . . And the more we cling, the more we experience strength not as what we do, but what God does in us.⁴

Or, as Jesus Himself put it, last week and this: “*If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth*⁵ . . . *Whoever is of God hears the words of God.*”

Of course, last week Jesus didn't only promise us that abiding in His Word will enable us to know the truth – He promised us that knowing that truth would set us free: “*You will know the truth and the truth will set you free.*” Which brings us to a second aspect of that question, “*Can I trust the pilot?*” It's not just a matter of trusting that our Pilot is telling us the truth, but also is a matter of whether we, then, are willing to bet our lives on Him and His truth? Do we trust the Pilot enough to put into practice, in our daily lives, the truth He speaks to us? Accepting what Jesus tells us to be the only real truth is only the first step on the way to freedom. Putting that truth into practice, following where He and His truth lead us – that is how the truth truly makes us free to live the abundant life God wants for us.

In our passage, this is what Jesus is speaking of when He talks of Abraham to the religious leaders. A lot is being said about Abraham in this section of John – we'll hear more about Abraham next week – but the key word for us this morning is what Jesus says right at the start of our passage: “*If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing what Abraham did.*” If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing – **doing!** – what Abraham did. So what did Abraham do?

Genesis chapter twelve. After the fall of Adam and Eve, the murder of Abel by Cain, Noah and the great flood, and finally the Tower of Babel – one tragedy of human rebellion against God after another – after all that, God speaks to Abraham the promise of a great salvation to come, the great plan of salvation by which God will one day redeem all the earth:

Now the Lord said to Abraham, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”⁶

That is the great promise and plan of our salvation which, at the right time, is fulfilled by the coming of Jesus into the world – a descendant of Abraham, and the One in whom indeed God blesses all the families of earth with the gift of salvation.

But what did Abraham then do, in response to this promise from God, in response to the great truth of God’s plan of salvation for all the earth? Remember what this promise of God required of him – it was a steep ask! – that he should leave everything and everyone he had known behind, and step out into a great unknown, not even knowing where God was going to lead him. Just trust God and go. Just do what God had told him to do, put into practice what God had said to him. And what does Abraham do in the face of such a daunting demand? Chapter twelve, verse four: “*So Abraham went, as the Lord had told him.*”

Abraham didn’t just believe the Word of God to be true, but also to be trustworthy. True enough, trustworthy enough for him to risk his whole future upon doing what God had told him to do. “*If you were children of Abraham,*” Jesus is saying to the religious leaders back then, and saying to us this morning, “*If you were children of Abraham, you would be doing what Abraham did.*” Not just hearing the Word of God, not just believing the Word of God to be true – but to be willing to entrust our lives, surrender our lives, build our lives, rearrange the daily ordering of our lives upon the doing of that Word. The putting into practice of what God has told us about how to live in His world, with the lives He has entrusted to us. And then, indeed, “*You shall know the truth, and the truth will set you free.*”

Here is the testimony of one modern-day Abraham:

I liked to be in control. I was the mother of eight children, and I ran a tight ship. I bought the food. I made the dinners, I washed the clothes, I helped with the homework, I went to the plays and ball games, I was home and school president. The word “surrender” was not in my vocabulary. What I didn’t realize was that surrender to God does not mean giving up so much as it means giving over. I had to give over my control, my unrest, my loneliness, my being overwhelmed – even my children – to God. And in each

area of my life where I was able to do this, the tangible peace I experienced was almost instantaneous . . .

My schedule can [still] be overwhelming, but it no longer overwhelms me. My peace is deep. It's a serenity that seems to have settled in for the long haul, as long as I keep renewing my surrender to God.⁷

“*You shall know the truth*” – do the truth! – “*and the truth will set you free.*”⁸

Can I trust the Pilot? “*Yes,*” says Jesus. We can trust Him with our lives, our loves, our happiness, our hopes. We can even trust Him enough to do what He has told us to do. For then, not only shall we know the Truth, but the Truth really will set us free to live before Him and before others an abundant life, a good and fulfilling life, a life marked by faith, hope, and love.

¹ John Ortberg, If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get Out of the Boat (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), pp. 11-13.

² Quoted in Eugene H. Peterson, The Jesus Way (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), p. 193.

³ Hebrews 13:8.

⁴ Emilie Griffin, Clinging: The Experience of Prayer (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), p. 56.

⁵ John 8:31-32.

⁶ Genesis 12:1-3.

⁷ Molly Kelly, quoted in Johann Christoph Arnold, Seeking Peace (Farmington, PA: The Plough Publishing House, 1998), p. 81.

⁸ John 8:31-32.