

# Trusting God - an Introduction

The story is told about Blondin, the world-famous high-wire performer of the 1800s, who first crossed the Niagara Falls on a tightrope in 1859. When he had crossed over and back, he asked the excited crowd “Do you believe I could carry a man across on my back?” “Yes, definitely” was the unanimous response, and some people cheered enthusiastically. Looking at one such enthusiast near the front of the crowd, Blondin invited the man to come up and join him on the rope. Needless to say, the man refused.

He ‘believed’ but could not trust.

*“Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.”* (Proverbs 3:5-6)

What does it mean to ‘trust God’? For some, it is a way of saying “Don’t worry; whatever is going to happen will happen and you can’t do anything about it, so you may as well resign yourself to it.” That is not trusting God but dressing up fatalism in religious words. If we think that everything that happens in the world is the will of God, then we have adopted a basically Islamic view that resigns itself to ‘the will of Allah’. No actual trust is required!

So what does trusting God mean? What does trusting anyone mean?

We don’t normally trust anyone unless we know them a little and have formed the opinion that they are probably trustworthy. We need some evidence for our trust and, for something fairly trivial, it might be enough to just feel that the other person is OK. On the other hand, we sometimes form an opinion quite quickly that we will NOT trust someone. It may just feel like a ‘gut reaction’, but we have usually gathered a little information as the basis for our distrust. Perhaps something about them reminds us of someone else whom we have had every reason not to trust, or their way of speaking seems to betray insincerity.

We may easily be mistaken in our initial impressions - one way or the other - and as time goes on we collect more information which either confirms or contradicts them. The result is that we gradually learn to trust that person more or less than we initially did. If our trust increases enough, we settle into a sense of security and expect them to be thoroughly reliable in every fresh situation. We may find ourselves drawn into friendship or some form of relationship with them as a direct result of our growing trust in them. We would certainly be very unlikely to enter into any sort of relationship with someone we did not trust.

So how about trusting God? Can we just ‘trust God’ without any preparation? Surely we need to have some basis for trusting him, don’t we? So what is it?

Before going any further, it is good to check out some of the words we are going to find in the Bible. First of all, the words translated ‘believe’ or ‘belief’ mean more than just an idea that something might happen - like when we say ‘I believe it will rain today’. The word for ‘believe’ in the New Testament comes from the word meaning ‘to be persuaded’ or ‘to rely on’. ‘Faith’ comes from the same word. So really these words are all about trusting, not just having an idea about something. When the little

boy in Sunday School was asked what faith is, he said 'Faith is believing what you know ain't true' - ! Hopefully we shall discover that he got that wrong!

Paul writes that *"faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ"* (Romans 10:17).

I like that. He does not say that you have to try hard to have faith, he says it comes from hearing. If I say "I believe you!" as soon as you walk into the room, you will say "Wait a minute. I haven't said anything yet - how can you say that you believe me?" But if you start telling me what happened in your life yesterday, or about an event you witnessed recently, then I have something to go on and can decide whether I can trust what you have told me.

It is the same with God. He does not expect us to trust him as a leap in the dark. He gives us information - what Paul calls 'the word of Christ'. In other words, information about Jesus: what he is like, what he has done for us and what difference he can make in our lives. As we hear this information, we can begin to decide whether it is trustworthy or not. We can ask other people what brought them to trusting God and we can read and ask questions to find out more.

In the end, though, trust is a decision that no-one else can make for us. Although it is not a leap in the dark, or even 'believing what we know ain't true', there is still an element of uncertainty involved. Just as when we trust another person, there are always some facts that we don't yet know, some events coming that we can't predict, and trusting is an act of commitment which can feel a bit scary.

For example, more than 40 years ago Val and I decided to trust each other and got married. There were lots of things we didn't know then, about each other, our own selves, our families, what the future would bring (including children!) . . . the list is almost endless! But we knew each other a little and we thought it was enough to start with. We also felt that the Lord was leading us together and trusted him in our commitment to each other.

So, how do we start trusting God? What do we know about him? What have we heard of the message of Jesus? Is there something that has struck us about Jesus that makes us want to trust him? Perhaps there is something that seems to answer a deeply-felt need in our lives? Jesus said that the Holy Spirit would reveal him and bring awareness of our needs (John 16:5-15). Maybe that process has been going on with you?

A big issue for many people is a sense of failure, often joined with a feeling of low self worth. But it is hard to admit weakness and failure, isn't it? Perhaps especially to God, when we know he has absolutely no faults at all!

Failure brings with it a sense of debt, that I **ought** to have done better and that somehow I should now work really hard to make up for my shortcomings. If you have tried doing that, then you know deep down that it hasn't worked. However hard you try, you never quite make it, and often things seem to get worse the more effort you put in! The more you try to get yourself 'off the hook', the more firmly you seem to be hooked on it!

This is exactly where forgiveness comes in. A key part of the 'word of Christ' is that he has done everything necessary to clear our debt and take us off the hook. The old-fashioned word 'sin' means 'missing the target' - failure, in other words - and Peter writes of Jesus: *"He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed."* (1 Peter 2:24) That word 'righteousness' sounds religious, but it just means living as we are supposed to, living rightly, living as we were always designed to be.

So here is something to trust - and someone! If you have heard this, then maybe the beginnings of faith / trust are starting to stir with you. "Can I really rely on this?" "It seems too good to be true." "But it seems to answer my need." "Will it work?" If you are coming to the point of trust on this, then you are ready to tell God that you have decided to trust what Jesus has done for you and receive the forgiveness which he has already provided for you. No more working to try to please God - just accept his free gift! This applies to all of us, however long ago we may have first trusted Jesus.

So faith, trusting God, is not something we can do to try and please him. In fact, it comes from him as a gift: *"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no-one can boast."* (Ephesians 2:8,9) As Francis Schaeffer wrote: "My faith is simply the empty hands by which I accept God's free gift." (*The God Who Is There* - Francis Schaeffer, 1977) *"And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe (trust) that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him."* (Hebrews 11:6)

Whether we are coming to trust in Jesus for the first time, or have been 'on the road' for a long time, the process of faith and trust goes on in exactly the same way as our 'trust relationship' with God grows:- He shows us things, we learn to trust him. Learning to hear, recognise and respond to the voice of God is one of the most fulfilling experiences of our lives. We start to live in light instead of darkness! *"For God, who said, "let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ."* (2 Corinthians 4:6)

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But what about the alternative to trust? *"... and lean not on your own understanding."* Perhaps a greater danger than deliberately distrusting God is our tendency to try to work out for ourselves things that he has already promised or provided.

One of the most subtle is trying to earn his approval. Perhaps we know that we have been forgiven by God's grace, his free gift through Jesus, but then we start trying to improve our own lives instead of allowing him to do it from the inside. We feel unworthy and think that we can achieve acceptance by smartening up our act, and soon we have given ourselves a long list of things that we need to do in order to prove to ourselves (and God?) that we really are good Christians.

That's bad enough, but then we may start passing on this approach to other people, putting them under the same pressure to prove themselves to themselves, as well as to impress other Christians (and hopefully God!) at the same time.

We may fool other people; we may even fool ourselves for a while. But God is definitely NOT fooled. He knows what we are like, and he also knows that we are already accepted and approved in his presence by trusting in Jesus and what he has done for us. He longs for us to give up the pretence and come back and rest in that simple trust. “. . . *his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the one he loves.*” (Ephesians 1:6)

Is that you? Trying to achieve approval before God? Sparing no effort to make yourself and your work acceptable to him? It is time to stop. You are already accepted in Jesus by his grace; it is time to ‘enter his rest’. See Hebrews chapter 4!

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Some things don’t change, however long we have been on the road with the Lord Jesus! In a couple of passages in his second letter to the Christians in Corinth, Paul writes about how the Lord had to remind him to trust him and not Paul’s own abilities. In Chapter 1, verses 8 & 9, he says “*We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.*”

Don’t worry; this is not the sort of thing that normally happens in the early days of our learning to trust God. But Paul had a track record with the Lord, who had entrusted him with responsibilities to take the good news of Jesus to different parts and to see churches established. The Lord allowed enormous pressure to fall on Paul and his companions, to teach them to trust him even when the situation looked impossible. The result was that the ‘impossible’ was achieved *and* Paul’s relationship with Jesus was deepened.

Then, in 2 Corinthians 12, Paul admits that he was in danger of getting big-headed with all the things that the Lord was showing him; so much so that he was bothered with a weakness (a ‘thorn in the flesh’ - we don’t know what it was). NOT as punishment, but just to help him keep relying on God’s grace. You might say that the Lord had made more aspects of Paul’s life ‘impossible’ for him, so that he would just *have* to rely on the Holy Spirit at work in and through him. (See 2 Corinthians 12:7-9)

We may find ourselves faced with seemingly ‘impossible’ situations. It will be too easy to become angry, resentful and depressed about ‘God allowing this to happen to me’. If, on the other hand, we are learning to trust him, we may find that even these setbacks are not just something that we somehow struggle through, but actually a source of real spiritual deepening as we learn to rest in Jesus and hand over all the problems to him.

***“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.”***  
(Matthew 11:28)

Dave Taylor, April 2016

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