

The Trust Factor

Bryan Jarrett

Lead Pastor, Northplace Church, Sachse, Texas

The following article is the manuscript form of a message delivered at AGTS on January 29, 2009. The full audio message is available at

http://www.agts.edu/resources/audio_files/2009day_of_renewal/2009day_renewal_morning.mp3

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Several years ago, I read a sermon manuscript preached by John Maxwell on the topic of trust. In the sermon, he asked two questions. The first seemed safe enough: “Do you trust God?” But the second shattered my safety net: “Can God trust you?” I have been wrestling with the answer to these two questions for the last several years and am convinced that a leader’s answer to these questions will determine his or her effectiveness for the Kingdom. God is looking for someone who trusts Him enough to be trusted.

History has proven that when God is ready to break into the world in an unprecedented way, He searches for someone trustworthy enough to be a vessel of His Kingdom purposes. That man or woman often becomes the catalyst God uses to change the course of history. This understanding caused me to pray that God would make me a man of complete trust and total surrender—a man God can trust.

When God was ready to break into Noah’s day, He gave Noah the ridiculous mandate to build a gargantuan boat while the sun was still shining. Noah did not argue; he trusted.

When God was ready to break into Abraham’s world in an unprecedented way, he challenged Abraham’s trust by asking for Isaac. Abraham did not argue; he trusted. Joshua could have trusted past methodologies when facing the Jordan. Instead, he shirked the safety net of tradition and obeyed God’s unique command and the waters parted. David could have trusted Saul’s armor. Instead, he went beyond the logical and the tangible, and trusted God to slay his giant.

In each of these cases, God was asking these same two questions: “Do you trust me?” and “Can I trust you?” In every case, these leaders trusted enough to be trustworthy. They are our spiritual heroes today because of their complete trust and uncommon obedience. God was ready to break in and do something supernatural in their time, but His intervention was predicated on their ability to trust Him. A. W. Tozer said,

The man of pseudo-faith will fight for his verbal creed, but refuse flatly to allow himself to get into a predicament where his future must depend upon that creed being true.

He always provides himself with secondary ways of escape so he will have a way out if the roof caves in. What we need very badly these days is a company of Christians who are prepared to trust God as completely now as they know they must do in the last day.

Do You Trust Him? Can He Trust You?

The wisdom writer demonstrates that the promises of God are contingent on the obedience to His commands (Prov. 3:1-10). “My son, do not forget my law, but let your heart keep my commands; for length of days and long life and peace they will add to you” (3:1-2, NKJV). Obedience to the command in verse 1 is the condition for the promise in verse 2. The next eight verses continue to establish this same motif. The promise of God is only fulfilled when the command is obeyed.

Trust and obedience are intricately intertwined. The level of one’s obedience indicates the level of one’s trust. My young daughter has an unwavering trust in my inability to fail. When I tell her to jump off of a ledge into my arms, she does. Her obedience indicates her trust. As she grows older, her innocence will be shattered as my vulnerabilities become more apparent. She will learn to distrust me to some degree. Our heavenly Father has no vulnerabilities and deserves our complete trust. We demonstrate our trust in Him and our trustworthiness for Him as we walk in obedience to His commands. John Sammis understood the deep theological connection between trust and obedience when he wrote in the great hymn, “Trust and obey, for there’s no other way to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.”

We see this amazing theme throughout the Scripture. In 2 Kings 3-5, three separate historical events demonstrate the principle that trust expressed through obedience sets miracles in motion. Chapter 5 tells the story of Naaman the leper, who was challenged to dip in the river seven times. His obedience was the catalyst for his miracle. Chapter 4 recalls the story of a widow who obeyed the irrational command of the prophet to borrow vessels when the ones she possessed were empty. God met her at her level of expectation and obedience.

In 2 Kings 3, an alliance of three kings warred against Moab but the allied troops and animals were trapped in a valley without water. The kings inquired of the Lord through the prophet Elisha for water. Before the Lord would make the valley full of water, He demanded that the troops make it full of ditches. Once the troops obeyed His command, God filled the valley full of water. In the church, we have a plague of “water wanters” and not enough “ditch diggers.” Many people want the shortcut to the blessing or miracle without paying the price of alignment with God’s commands. God says, “If you want your valley full of water, then make the valley full of ditches.” Trust and obey.

In almost every miracle Jesus performed in the New Testament, the recipient set the miracle in motion by an act of personal obedience to His command. He told the lame man to “take up his mat;” the man with the withered hand to “stretch forth his hand;” the blind man to “go wash in the pool of Siloam;” and the broken-hearted at Lazarus’ tomb to “take away the stone.” In each case, trusting God enough to obey His command set the miracle in motion.

The only promise of God not contingent on our obedience is the promise of His love. He loves unconditionally. All other promises are conditional. According to the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6:12 and His statements in Luke 6:37, even God's promise of forgiveness is contingent on our willingness to be obedient and forgive those who have wronged us.

If we do the possible, God will do the impossible. If we do the natural, God will do the supernatural. If we will do what only we can do, then God will do what only He can do.

Everyone has a future. We cannot stop tomorrow from coming. However, we can align ourselves with God through obedience and step into our preferred future. According to Psalm 139:15-16, God penned the days of my life in a book before I breathed my first breath. Walking in trust and obedience assures that I stay in the right chapter and on the right page of His book. This "book" is a snapshot of God's plan for my life.

Kay Warren, in *Dangerous Surrender*, compares following God to gazing at an undeveloped Polaroid picture. Many of the younger, tech savvy people laugh at the thought of a camera that spits out a grey hard copy snapshot. To them it is funny. At the time, it was instant gratification. Almost instant—we had to wait and wave and blow, until the grey matter finally began to give way to the image of what we actually photographed. Walking into our preferred future with God demands that we trust Him enough to say "yes" to the undeveloped Polaroid that He hands us. Imagine God handing out snapshots of people's futures. They would excitedly run to Him to get a glimpse of their tomorrow only to be disappointed when the picture reveals no

real clarity. God is saying, "Do you trust me enough to say 'Yes' to My direction in your life without knowing what tomorrow looks like? Will you go for me without knowing all the details?" The longer you walk in obedience, the more you mature in your trust, and the image of your future becomes clearer. This may take months, but more than likely, it will take years.

Several years ago, I signed a contract with God. The front page of this contract says, "Yes, Lord!" in bold letters and below I have signed and dated it. The remaining nine pages are completely blank. It is very different from the contracts I have signed in business dealings with people, where the signature page is the last page, signifying one's refusal to commit without having read and agreed to all the details. Attorneys even scour the small print to protect the participants from unfair dealings.

Living a surrendered life of trust and obedience, being the kind of man or woman through whom God can rewrite history, requires the willingness to say "Yes" on the first page and trust God with the details on the following pages. The pages of my contract with God are blank because He knows better than I do what I need. I submit to whatever His sovereign will requires of me. My contract is a memorial of my earnest attempt to trust Him—a memorial of my earnest attempt at becoming a man God can trust.

God is Trustworthy

Before a person can have complete trust in God, he or she must have an unwavering commitment that He is trustworthy. This revelation of God is not forged during the good times. The litmus test of our trust in God and His trustworthiness toward us

develops in the season of adversity. We sing songs and preach sermons about mountaintop experiences, yet most of us spend our lives tirelessly climbing from one mountaintop to the next, entirely overlooking some of the deepest theological truths and richest life experiences in the valley of pain, tragedy, and sorrow. A quick scan of a mountain range will quickly reveal that the peak of the highest mountains is beautiful but, for the most part, barren. Life, growth, and fertility are in the valley. God shapes our trust and our understanding of His trustworthiness on the journey through the valley.

Just weeks ago I found myself pacing the halls of Medical City Children's Hospital in Dallas in the middle of the night. My ten-year-old had been diagnosed with a rare blood disorder that threatened his life. Those agonizing moments led to days and weeks of questioning without real answers. In a moment of prayer, the Holy Spirit reminded me that God's care is constant. He is trustworthy. Nothing was going to touch my family that had not first touched Him. This valley in my life did not take Him by surprise. Back when I agreed to accept that undeveloped Polaroid and sign a blank contract, God knew this struggle was in the contract. He knew this moment of pain was in the picture. This tragedy did not mean that God had disengaged, gone on vacation, or even blinked for a split second, making my life vulnerable. He is as much in control of my tragedy as He is my triumph.

After my son was released from the hospital, many in our church family joined me in a twenty-one day fast that culminated in a solemn assembly. The power of God was tangible in that service when we gathered around Cadyn to pray. The very next day the doctor's reports were worse than they

had ever been. Why is it that innocent children ask the hardest questions? When the oncologist walked out of the room, Cadyn said, "Dad, how can you fast for twenty-one days, thousands of people be praying for me, and I feel the power of God like I did last night and still be sick today?" I have two theological degrees and am currently working on a third, but I found myself having difficulty explaining apparent injustices on God's behalf to a ten-year-old. I simply reminded him to trust. God is not a Santa Claus or a genie to approach with a wish list. He is holy and sovereign. He cares about our needs and hears our cries. Trusting Him in this struggle will cause us to ask, "What can I learn?" instead of "Why am I sick?" I said, "Cadyn, don't let this sickness define you. Let your faith define you. You came into this diagnosis a little boy, if you continue to trust, you will emerge as a young man. I know this is heavy stuff for a ten-year-old, but do you understand what I am trying to say?" He said, "Yes, Dad, I do."

I heard his response but honestly doubted his ability to grasp what so many older believers cannot even grasp. However, the next day I realized that "older" and "more mature" are not synonymous. Cadyn's post on his Facebook page said, "My platelets are lower, but I'm still trusting God." Trust Him. He is trustworthy.

We often make the mistake of trusting the instrument of God's provision more than we trust God. We are more interested in the gift than we are the Giver. We are more in love with the creation than we are with the Creator. A. W. Tozer, in *The Pursuit of God*, probably captures the concept best when He suggests that God did not really want Isaac when He asked for him. God really wanted Abraham, and Isaac was the key to

Abraham's heart. God had to dethrone Abraham's love of the creation to retake the rightful place on the throne of Abraham's heart.

A familiar proverb to most seasoned believers is Proverbs 18:10, "The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous run into it and are safe" (NIV). However, most of us fail to capture the truth found in the next verse, "The wealth of the rich is their fortified city; they imagine it an unscalable wall." Those who trust in the Lord run into His name for safety in the times of adversity, but the self-reliant trust in their own creations. Many people trust their jobs, their retirement fund, their health, and their education, imagining them to be "unscalable walls" only to find that the answer is not in the blessing but the Blessor.

When the Spirit of God began leading me into deeper levels of trust, He started by testing my obedience. Robert Clinton, in *The Making of a Leader*, describes these strategic incidents of testing as "faith challenges" that God uses to move a leader from one level in the development process to another. According to Clinton, the Scriptures show that God offers a challenge to a leader's faith, and the response will either be cause for Kingdom promotion or correction.

My life has been filled with notable "faith challenges," but a few key tests of my obedience have radically defined my life and my level of trust.

In my first pastorate, I found myself in over my head at several levels. At 26, I was shy on experience but big on faith. The church was struggling financially for multiple legitimate reasons. I found my youthful vision drowning in a sea of indebtedness and

lack of resources. I remember praying, "God, even if I gave up my salary for an entire year it would not make a dent in the church's financial struggle." God took that statement and turned it into a test of my obedience and challenge to my faith.

Over the next eighteen months, I began to realize that my statement was not the over-zealous whining of a young pastor but the verbalization of the greatest trust test of my life. I knew it was irrational. I knew some would not understand, but I knew it was God. I also knew if I was wrong, I could lose everything. Beyond the loss of material things, I faced the threat of losing the respect of my congregation and bringing reproach on the church and the people I loved. God's Spirit continued to whisper to me that this act of obedience would provide an opportunity for Him to reveal himself to me in an unprecedented way and demonstrate His power to a church and city in desperate need of His visitation.

The stories of miraculous provision that my grandfather had told me about were far removed from my own experience. Most people of my generation have never had to trust God for their daily essentials and, in some way, our prosperity has stunted our spiritual growth. It is one thing to trust God for a new Cadillac. It is altogether different to trust Him for your next meal. I have often wondered if the power of God seems to manifest in greater ways in mission environments because the people are desperate and stripped of alternatives. God took me on this journey to strip me of my alternatives and reveal a dimension of His nature I had never been privy to by personal experience. My grandfather's faith had to become my own.

Many believers in Western Christianity are living with less than Jesus died for. We are living below our privileges as children of God, making safe plans while we engage in “image-management” and call it ministry. As churches and individuals, we set goals and objectives safe enough that in case God does not show up we can still “save face.” But God is looking for opportunities to establish His Kingdom in this world, and our safe plans are robbing Him of those opportunities.

From June of 2003 to June of 2004 my family and our congregation met the God of the book of Acts face-to-face. An act of trusting obedience set a miracle in motion. God provided manna for my family and displayed His power for our church and city. Hundreds of people from that church and thousands from that community personally lived those moments, and we will never be the same. God proved himself trustworthy.

The struggles of that year and the thrill of watching God unleash His power seem like

distant memories. Having transitioned from that congregation to a larger, more affluent metropolitan area, I assumed those days of sacrifice were far behind me. I had paid my dues, so I thought, until that same probing voice began to challenge my comfort. God laid another pivotal trust test before me in this new location of ministry that required a greater degree of sacrifice than the first. My first response to Him was, “I have already been through this season of my life! I passed that test!” His response, “It’s not a season. It’s a lifestyle.”

Walking with God is a “lifestyle” of uncommon obedience, complete trust, total surrender, and courageous faith. These personal core values have surfaced in my life while attempting to answer the questions: “Do you trust God?” and “Can He trust you?” God is poised to break into our world in an unprecedented way. He will find and use any man or woman who trusts Him enough to be trusted. May His gracious hands mold us into people that He can trust!