

Scripture for Sunday January 17th 2021

Prov 3:1-8 (NRSV)

My child, do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments; ²for length of days and years of life and abundant welfare they will give you.

³Do not let loyalty and faithfulness forsake you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart. ⁴So you will find favor and good repute in the sight of God and of people.

⁵Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. ⁶In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. ⁷Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD, and turn away from evil. ⁸It will be a healing for your flesh and a refreshment for your body.

Heb 11:1-3; 8-16 (NIV)

¹¹Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. ²This is what the ancients were commended for. ³By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.

By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. ⁹By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. ¹⁰For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. ¹¹And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the promise. ¹²And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore.

¹³All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. ¹⁴People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. ¹⁵If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

In God We Trust

One of my favourite drama genres is political thrillers and spy stories. One thing they have in common is the twin themes of trust and suspicion. As a particular story unfolds, we are always wondering *who* is telling the truth and *who* can we trust, knowing full well that that doubt and betrayal is what the plot is all about. These dramas may be full of intrigue and a means of escapism, but there is a darkness to them that can exacerbate cynicism in politics and national security, along with raising moral questions about “the ends justifying the means.” It’s true that such stories may often be fanciful and far from our daily experience, but we relate to the issues of trust, doubt, and betrayal because they are at the heart of *all* relationships, including our relationship with God. I therefore want to speak about *trust* today.

Let’s first connect “trust” with “faith.” “Faith” is a noun. Recall that Jesus said to his disciples, “Have faith in God.”¹ He also chided his disciples for having “little faith.”² The Greek word for “faith” (*pistis*) also has a verb form (*pisteuo*), but English does *not*, and so this verb is generally translated as “believe” or “trust.” Consequently, when faith entails an action, it is described as believing or trusting. That being the case, and going back to the noun form for a moment, we therefore link *faith* with *belief*, specifically belief *that* a particular statement³ is true – such as, belief that there *is* a God. Important though such statements are, we need to move beyond seeing faith purely in terms of “belief *that*,” and see it also as “belief *in*,” in other words, *as active trust*. It is in trusting others – and their trusting in us – that shapes our most valued experiences of life. Trust is *personal*, it’s *risky*, and it’s something we *choose*. I want to begin by briefly considering those three practical elements of trust this morning, not least because Martin Luther conceived of faith in God primarily in terms of trust.⁴

It has been suggested⁵ that we *rely on* objects but *trust in* persons. In other words, we may rely on a chair to hold us up when we sit on it, or we rely on our phone, laptop, or Wi-Fi connection. You, like me, may have been frustrated with a lack of internet stability recently because we have all come to rely on it as we try to work from home!⁶ Evidently, we can’t *trust* machines (just like we can’t trust the weather)! That’s because we place our trust in a person’s *character* and *capabilities*. Trust, then, is *personal*, it involves people – as well as God.⁷ In other words, it’s helpful to consider “trust” as “reliance *plus*,” that “plus” is an attitude or openness to the person we are actively trusting, and it’s that openness that makes us susceptible to both betrayal and gratitude.⁸

¹ Mark 11:22.

² See Matt 6:30; 8:26; 14:31; 16:18.

³ Technically speaking, a “proposition.”

⁴ He also argued that faith is a personal commitment or investment in the promises of God that unites the believer with Jesus Christ.

⁵ See Wm. Curtis Holtzen, *The God Who Trusts* (IVP, 2019), 39. I acknowledge material from this book for this sermon.

⁶ In the same way, I might think I am trusting in my car or in my wristwatch but, really, I am *relying* on them, which is why I get frustrated when my car gets a flat tire or when I watch battery dies!

⁷ That also implies it’s something shall we can evaluate *morally*.

⁸ Although trust is personal, it need not include love; consider your doctor, for example.

Moving on to “risk.” Risk is the essence of trust; there is no trust without some risk.⁹ That’s because trust comes with the necessary fact that the person we trust may not be competent in their skills or mature in their character. This is true whether we are trusting a friend, a family member, or God. Now, it’s quite common and acceptable to minimize the risk when trusting another. We would check the references before hiring someone to babysit our child. This does not eliminate the risk but it can minimize unnecessary risk. And the more we trust, the less monitoring we will do. Now, it might seem strange to say that trusting God is inherently risky, but by trusting in God we risk that God may *not* do what we want or need God *to* do. That’s why we need to explore and appreciate the *character* of the God in whom we trust. Even so, if God *is* who I have faith God *to be*, then there is no safer place to be!

Having described trust as “reliance plus” and having mentioned “risk”, there is also a sense of “resolve” and that leads us to our human will; it’s our *choice* to trust. We make an active decision to trust *in* a particular person, including *in* God. When we risk, we often assess whether the risk is worth it and then decide whether to trust or not to trust. Recall the story of Jesus bringing Jairus’ daughter back to life.¹⁰ Jesus stopped to heal a woman on the way there, and during that delay, the girl died. Those messengers who brought the sad news said to Jairus, “She’s dead, why bother the teacher anymore?” Jesus overheard and said to Jairus, “Don’t be afraid, only *trust*.”¹¹ In John 14:1 we hear Jesus instruction to his disciples: “You *trust* in God, *trust* also in me.” There is a subtle difference between *believing* in God and *trusting* in God. There is an active, on-going commitment – a *choice* - in trusting, and that’s risky.

God wants our *trust in him* and not just believe *that* he exists!¹² Furthermore, it’s also important to recognise that God does *not* simply want us to *obey*; he calls us to trust. Too often we want to reduce our faith to obedience to a set of rules. Imagine if our relationships with others were restricted to mere obedience *how* impoverished that would be! Obedience can be commanded; trust must be invited – and even earned. Both trust and obedience are a choice. Out of trust we may also choose to obey; but obedience need not lead to trust.¹³ The penalties for failing to obey can bring condemnation and retribution, but failure to trust cannot be punished because it would only result in *less* trust, and so damage the relationship. It is certainly good to obey God; it’s better to *trust in God*.¹⁴

Faith in God is much more than trust in God, but surely for faith to be healthy and growing, trust is a much-needed element. The opposite of faith here is *not* in doubt but *distrust*, which – in this context - is *not* failing to believe what is true about God, *but* failing to *trust in* the love, will, and wisdom of God.

⁹ Although there can be risk without trust!

¹⁰ See Mark 5:21-43.

¹¹ Mark 5:36.

¹² See James 2:19.

¹³ Parents need to trust the children but are not required to obey them. It seems quite healthy for spouses to be working towards unreserved trust one another, but unreserved obedience seems an odd goal for a couple to be working toward!

¹⁴ Consider this point in the context of the lyrics of the much-loved hymn “*Trust and Obey*.”

Let's pause for a moment and think about faith and trust in the Bible. Our reading from Hebrews 11 defines faith and then gives a list of Jewish heroes noted for their trust in God. In my mind, Abraham was the true pioneer of faith because he initially *trusted* God without the benefit of prior historical evidence of God's faithfulness.¹⁵ In Genesis 12 God called him leave his homeland and his family to a land that God would show him. God promised to, "Bless him and make his descendants into a great nation and that all the peoples of the world will be blessed through him."¹⁶ Theirs was a literal journey of faith and they were utterly dependent on God for provisions along the way.¹⁷

Only one woman is included in that catalogue of heroes, that's Rahab¹⁸ who protected the two Jewish spies in Jericho. But there are others that deserve to be honored, such as, Hagar,¹⁹ Ruth, Esther, and Mary - the mother of Jesus. As women, they did not have the rights that the men enjoyed in that patriarchal society. They chose to trust others and they trusted God, even in dire circumstances. Consider teenage Mary; we are told she trusted the angel and hence God. In her vulnerability, she must have also trusted in Joseph and Elizabeth and – no doubt – others in her community. The short book of Ruth is a bitter-sweet story of family tragedy that eventually has a happy ending for both Ruth and her mother-in-law, Naomi. There is faith and tenacity being presented here, along with love and trust. (I encourage you to re-read the story!) Many Bible stories contain elements of trust, mistrust, and sometimes even betrayal. That's because they are all about relationship between individuals, and between people and God. We can be both inspired *and* troubled by those stories! These are accounts of discovery; through these stories people throughout history have found faith - or had it re-kindled.²⁰ God is continually doing new things for new times. That's why we need to read these stories with wisdom and be careful not to merely "apply" them for ourselves and our contemporary situations. Instead, we are to *trust* God to speak *through* them, inspiring us with new *aha* moments for us today.

How do we make this practical? What, then, are the dynamics of creating trust and thus building a relationship with God and with others? Let's consider this briefly in the context of trusting in God.

God's character matters! I plan to talk about God's love next week,²¹ so I will move on to another trust-building quality: God's *reliability*.²² There is a difference between constancy and reliability. Just because someone is constant does not necessarily mean that you want to depend upon them; they may be

¹⁵ The pre-history of Gen 1-11 has a legendary quality about and should *not* be seen as *literal* history, but *literary* history revealing profound spiritual truths. Abraham is, therefore, the *primary* person in Israel's history – the father of faith.

¹⁶ Gen 12:1-3; Heb 6:12–15; 11:8. Notice how the writer of Hebrews changes "land" to "place," so sounding notably less territorial (and anticipating 11:10;16; 12:22-24).

¹⁷ See also: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Walking-by-Faith.pdf> .

¹⁸ Josh 2.

¹⁹ Gen 16, 21.

²⁰ I would suggest that God *learns* too (for God is engaged *in* time).

²¹ If God is the object and the ultimate end (*telos*) of faith without love is the best contractual - not covenantal. In 1 Cor 13, Paul speaks of love and hope and combines them with *trust* (see v7).

²² James 1:17.

constantly unreliable! In contrast, the psalmist frequently describes God as his *Rock* because he has discovered God to be *dependable*.²³ Isaiah also proclaims: “You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in you. Trust in the LORD forever, for the LORD, the LORD himself, is the Rock eternal.”²⁴ He, like others in the Old Testament, had learned through experience those parting words of Moses, “The LORD himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.”²⁵ Another important quality for trust is *truthfulness*. A known liar or a deceiver is not one you even *want* to trust. We are told God cannot lie²⁶ and his Spirit is known as the Spirit of Truth.²⁷ Because God cannot lie, we can trust in his promises – even if they are not fulfilled in our lifetime. That is one feature of Abraham’s story of faith.²⁸ The final quality I will mention here is *sensitivity*. Who places their trust in one who is insensitive and who does not try to understand? The writer of Hebrews describes Jesus as our High Priest, as one “who can sympathize with our weaknesses, who has been tempted in all points like we are, yet without sin.”²⁹ It is easier to place our trust in someone whom we perceive to be compassionate and understanding of our situation, perhaps especially in one who has had similar experiences and risen above it.

In conclusion, to have faith in God is to love and trust *who God is*. Likewise, for God to be in relationship with others mean that God loves us and trusts us to be a faithful partner in his mission for the world. God is not just our Father; he is our *friend*.³⁰ God’s constant character is *dependable, truthful, and sensitive*. If you want others to trust in you or you are seeking to trust in others, those three qualities create the necessary environment *for* trust. As Christians we are called to authentically embody those qualities. Because we are human, we are fallible and can fail. That is one reason why a Christian *community* is vitally important so that we can support each other, empowered by the Spirit of Truth.

Sometimes things happen in our lives that make it difficult for us to trust. Someone has betrayed us or promised something but did not deliver. They may even have taken advantage of us. Our tendency is to withhold trust from them and often from anyone else. We can be hesitant even to trust God. In these COVID times, when we are walking through the valley of the shadow of death, we wonder where God is and if we can trust him. In response, let us begin by considering the past stories of faith, including our own, in order to rediscover when and where we have recognized God faithfulness. Let us also reexamine God’s good character so that we may renew our trust in him. And let us, with the Spirit’s help and with authenticity, live up to our high calling as Jesus-followers so that others will trust in us and in God. Amen.

²³ For example: Ps 18:31; 42:9; 62:7; 78:35; 95:1-2; 92:15; 144:1.

²⁴ Isa 26:3-4. See also Isa 44:8.

²⁵ Deut 31:8 (and 6). See also Heb 13:5 and Matt 28:20b – the parting words of Jesus in Matthew’s gospel.

²⁶ Titus 1:2; Heb. 6:18.

²⁷ John 14:17; 15:26; 16:13; 1 John 4:6. We are called to be truth-tellers too; Matt. 5:33-37.

²⁸ Heb. 6:13-18.

²⁹ Heb. 4:14-16.

³⁰ See Isa 41:8; James 2:23; John 15:13-15.