

Trustworthy

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West Side Church of Christ
Searcy, Arkansas
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Scripture Reading

“They refused to listen and failed to remember the miracles you performed among them. They became stiff-necked and in their rebellion appointed a leader in order to return to their slavery. But you are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. Therefore you did not desert them...But in your great mercy you did not put an end to them or abandon them, for you are a gracious and merciful God. Now therefore, our God, the great God, mighty and awesome, who keeps his covenant of love, do not let all this hardship seem trifling in your eyes—the hardship that has come on us, on our kings and leaders, on our priests and prophets, on our ancestors and all your people, from the days of the kings of Assyria until today. In all that has happened to us, you have remained righteous; you have acted faithfully, while we acted wickedly” (Nehemiah 9:17, 31-33 ESV).

“I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True” (Rev. 19:11a NIV).

INTRODUCTION

Second to Jesus, he has been called the wisest man who ever lived. A wisdom given from God but also forged by experience. Solomon tried chasing after everything that our world thinks will bring you happiness, security, meaning, or hope. And at the end of it all, he offered up the results of his life-long dissertation: the only happiness, security, meaning and hope that can be found—can be found by putting our trust in God.

“Remember now thy creator, in the days of your youth,” he writes in the final chapter of Ecclesiastes. Do it now. Before the difficult days come. Before you find yourself in the midst of pain and uncertainty. Let this bedrock principle already be filed away in the recesses of your mind, and may your trust in him fill your heart before the roof caves in.

When philosophers talk about God, two overall characteristics are named immediately: God knows everything, and He can do anything. But that description is incomplete. When you hear God has all knowledge, that can scare you—like someone out there has

your FBI file. When you hear God has all power, it can frighten you—like someone can always overcome your strengths by producing your kryptonite. This description of God says nothing about what such a God would *do* with all that knowledge and power. Talking about God as “all knowing” and “all powerful” makes for a fun debate with atheists but left alone they can (at best) cause you to cower before Him. But the God of the Bible—the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God I see in the face of Jesus Christ—is a God worth loving and trusting.

So what makes God not only powerful but worthy of our trust?

It’s his goodness.

God filters everything through his goodness lens. Our father has no evil intentions. That means that whatever He sends our way comes to us from a God who knows all, can do all, and filters every decision through his complete and total goodness. If he knows about it, he knows it so he can help you with it and bring goodness from it. There is no better guarantee in all the earth.

“*Trust me, my child,*” our Father says to us.

SCRIPTURES RECURRING STORY: GOD IS FAITHFUL

It’s the recurring theme of every hero movie. Someone is in danger, unable to save themselves from the mess that has engulfed them. The hero—who had earlier said “wait here” and “I’ll be there when you need me”—has gone off to fight a courageous battle somewhere else in the kingdom; and the trouble grows. Just when it seems that all hope is lost, here comes our hero: enter, stage right. The hero overpowers the enemy, rescuing the one in danger. Their eyes lock.

“You came back!”

“I promised I’d always come for you.”

“I know. Lots of people promise. But you really did!”

They got that story from our Father. It’s the recurring story of Israel, told over and over again. The story of a faithful God, a promise-keeping Father, our trustworthy friend.

In chapter 9 of Nehemiah, God’s servant stands before the people and reads from the newly rediscovered Book of the Law. In response, the Levites recount the ways God made promises. We were faithless. But God came back.

“You made the heavens and the earth,” they recall. Yes—He did. But we know God intended to walk with us in the cool of the day in the Garden of God. All he asked is that we steer clear from the corrupting influence of sin. And we were faithless, and our faithlessness cursed the ground and created a rift between heaven and earth. But God wouldn’t give up on us.

“You chose Abram, brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans, gave him the name Abraham and you made a covenant with him.” All true. But we have story after story in Genesis of faithless Abraham and faithless Sarah. As soon as God makes a covenant we do everything in our power to ruin that covenant. But God wouldn’t give up on us. As the Levites say in Nehemiah, “you have kept your promise, for you are righteous.”

“You saw the affliction of our fathers in Egypt and heard their cry at the Red Sea.” Oh, yes. We know the story. We remember that God promises his faithful arm, while the people complained at the water’s edge “it would have been better for us to have stayed in Egypt than to die here.” But God wouldn’t give up on us. He parted the waters, as his people crossed on dry land; then he brought the waters crashing down upon the enemy.

And God said “follow me.” “By a pillar of cloud you led them in the day, and by a pillar of fire in the night to light for them the way in which they should go.” “You gave them bread from heaven for their hunger and brought water for them out of the rock for their thirst.” “You came down to Mt Sinai, gave them righteous laws,” and, in the end of it all, “you told them to go in to possess the land that you had sworn to give them.” What a way to sum up 40 years of constant faithfulness from God. But you know the rest of that story. The Levites did too.

The story of God’s faithfulness shines even brighter against the backdrop of our faithlessness.

But they and our fathers acted presumptuously and stiffened their neck and did not obey your commandments. They refused to obey and were not mindful of the wonders that you performed among them, but they stiffened their neck and appointed a leader to return to their slavery in Egypt.

But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and did not forsake them. Even when they had made for themselves a golden calf and said, ‘This is your God who brought you up out of Egypt,’ and had committed great blasphemies, you in your great mercies did not forsake them in the wilderness. The pillar of cloud to lead them in the way did not depart from them by day, nor the pillar of fire by night to light for them

the way by which they should go. You gave your good Spirit to instruct them and did not withhold your manna from their mouth and gave them water for their thirst. Forty years you sustained them in the wilderness, and they lacked nothing. Their clothes did not wear out and their feet did not swell (vv.16-21).

Do you hear the story? God makes promises. We are faithless. But still...He is faithful.

He gave them kingdoms, multiplied their children, and gave their enemies into their hands.

They captured fortified cities and a rich land and took possession of houses full of all good things, cisterns already hewn, vineyards, olive orchards and fruit trees in abundance. So they ate and were filled and became fat and delighted themselves in your great goodness (v.25).

The story sounds too good, given what we know about ourselves. Well, you guessed it.

Nevertheless, they were disobedient and rebelled against you and cast your law behind their back and killed your prophets, who had warned them in order to turn them back to you, and they committed great blasphemies. Therefore you gave them into the hand of their enemies, who made them suffer. And in the time of their suffering they cried out to you... (vv.26-27a)

If this were a movie, how many of us would, by this time, be rooting for the enemy? Someone, take these people out! How Ungrateful! What immature, self-centered, rebellious, walking disasters! Unworthy of God's loving protection. Of course you are in trouble again. How dare you cry out to God! God, you know what they will do if you pull them out of the pit one...more...time! Haven't you read the leading psychologists who tell us this is enabling!

But God is not like any other character. Sometimes he lets us sit in the corner for a while to learn a lesson. Sometimes he rescues immediately, knowing left to our own devices we would not survive one day. Sometimes he allows great calamity to befall us (within his hedge of protection) to help us see the error of our ways. But at the end of it all, here's the deal that we cannot forget: He made a promise. And when we are faithless...against all reason, and against all odds, He is faithful. He comes back. He made a vow, and he cannot deny himself.

And in the time of their suffering they cried out to you and you heard them from heaven, and according to your great mercies you gave them saviors who saved them from the hand of their enemies. But after they had rest they did evil again

before you, and you abandoned them to the hand of their enemies, so that they had dominion over them. Yet when they turned and cried to you, you heard from heaven, and many times you delivered them according to your mercies. And you warned them in order to turn them back to your law. Yet they acted presumptuously and did not obey your commandments, but sinned against your rules, which if a person does them, he shall live by them, and they turned a stubborn shoulder and stiffened their neck and would not obey. Many years you bore with them and warned them by your Spirit through your prophets. Yet they would not give ear. Therefore you gave them into the hand of the peoples of the lands. Nevertheless, in your great mercies you did not make an end of them or forsake them, for you are a gracious and merciful God...[Y]ou have been righteous in all that has come upon us, for you have dealt faithfully [even when] we have acted wickedly (vv. 27-31, 33).

That is the story. The recurring story. I love you. I want you. Here's my covenant with you. If you fail to do what I tell you, life will go very bad for you. It's for your own good. And when you hurt me, lie to me, revile me, turn your back on me, or act treacherously toward me, what evil might befall you. And anybody worth their salt would give up on you. But I'm not like anyone else. No matter how far you fall, no matter where you end up...I will come back. You see, I made a promise. You are my people. And I am faithful. I may never be able to count on you. But you can always count on me. I am a gracious and merciful God (Neh 9:17, 31). Faithful and True (Rev 19:11). Trustworthy is my name.

God keeps coming back! Deserting is easy. Leaving sinful people to reap what they sow, to reap their consequences is easy. But forgiving and showing undeserved mercy is hard. Do you remember that line the wise wizard Gandolf says to Bilbo Baggins at the beginning of *The Hobbit*? “True courage is about knowing not when to take a life, but when to spare one.”¹ And who does our God want to spare? Everyone and everything that he has made.

GOD IS WHAT IS RIGHT WITH OUR COVENANT STORY

I was once asked to give a lectureship speech with the title “what’s right with the church?” Can you imagine how we might have answered that, say, in the wilderness? Or in Egypt? Or in Babylon? When you read about the church in Corinth, or 5 of the 7 churches of Asia Minor addressed in Revelation 2&3, or just pick up any gospel and

¹ J. R. R. Tolken, *The Hobbit*.

follow the apostles around for a little while...an honest look in the mirror requires us to reframe the question.

I am a sheep. We are his sheepfold. And the hero of my soul, the Lord, is my shepherd. It is HE who makes us lie down in green pastures. It is HE who leads us beside still waters. It is HE who restores our soul. Read Psalm 23. The story has a hero, and it's not you or me. He is faithful.

The story of God's and His people is the story of a GPS. God says “turns right in .4 miles” and we say “ah, I know a shortcut!” And we end up in the middle of a cow pasture. And what does God do? “Recalculating. Turn left in 6.5 miles.” God gives us a way. We chose the wrong way. And God finds us in our distress. He tracks us down. And no matter where we end up, God comes back to lead us out. The fact that the ship of Zion is still afloat is not a testament to wise leaders...it is a testament to the Captain of our Ship. I am what's wrong with the church. But Jesus Christ is what's right with the church. And Jesus came to show us the Father. The faithfulness of God is what has always been what is right with our story.

And Israel's story is our story. So the New Testament writers end their letters with similar reminders:

“May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through...The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it” (1 Thess 5:23-24 NIV).

“But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen you and protect you from the evil one (2 Thess 3:3 NIV)

“Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful” (Heb 10:23 NIV)

FALSE FRIENDS AND SKEWED APPROACHES

If only we believed it.

We struggle to believe it because we have never experienced such trustworthiness before. Proverbs 20:6 says “many claim to have unfailing love, but a faithful person who can find?” Confidence and trust are at an all time low. Just two months ago, Pew Research found that 29% of Democrats trusted the government; only 9% of

Republicans do.² Just one month ago, Gallup found that 16% of Americans trust their newspapers, and only 11% trust the news they hear on TV.³ And what about how we feel about each other? 71% of us think that confidence in our fellow man has declined in the last 20 years; that’s because—says 50% of us—because people simply aren’t as reliable as they used to be.⁴ For many in this room, all you have known is unfaithfulness. Your business partner ran off with far more than his share of the goods. Your husband walked out the same week your boss (the one that assured you for 20 years he couldn’t do his job without you) decided to replace you; after all, his niece needed a job. You’ve come to believe all repair men are out to cheat you; all women are out to use you; all men are out to hurt you. You can’t speak of God as your father—not after the father you experienced.

The beautiful truth is that, to understand God, the shoe has to be on the other foot. We don’t start with our own experience (even our best experience) of a friend or father, then speak of God like that. We start with God defining what it means to be a friend and father, and then we judge our experiences in that light.

THE LORD’S PRAYER: LEARNING TO TRUST HIM

In his book, *The Good and Beautiful God*, James Bryan Smith takes a look at 6 characteristics we learn about God from the Lord’s Prayer. A model prayer is just that—a model. These are not the only words to share with God. But this prayer allows us to confess 6 central truths about God. First, God is present. We call him “Father,” like a child who crawls up into his Daddy’s lap. Second, He is pure. “Holy” is your name. Third, he is powerful. The kingdom belongs to Him, and of heaven and earth are answerable to him. Fourth, he is our provider. He gives us our daily bread. Fifth, he is a God who pardons—forgiving us of our sins and our debts. And finally, he is our protector. He keeps us out of temptation, and delivers us from the evil one.

Present. Pure. Powerful. Provider. Pardoning. And Protector. This is what it means to be a parent. We take our cues from Him. In His light, we see light. Can you see faithfulness, loyalty, and trustworthiness shot all through that list? Isn’t that Psalm 23 all over again? This...THIS is our God. You can count on Him.

When we see these characteristics in others, that’s when we see them acting like true friends. In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Frodo’s friends speak to him:

² <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2022/06/06/public-trust-in-government-1958-2022/>

³ <https://news.gallup.com/poll/394817/media-confidence-ratings-record-lows.aspx>

⁴ <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2019/07/22/the-state-of-personal-trust/>

You can trust us to stick to you through thick and thin—to the bitter end. And you can trust us to keep any secret of yours—closer than you yourself keep it. But you cannot trust us to let you face trouble alone, and go off without a word. We are your friends, Frodo. Anyway: there it is. We know most of what Gandalf has told you. We know a good deal about the ring. We are horribly afraid—but we are coming with you; or following you like hounds.⁵

Just as God defines what is good, and then everything that reflects his glory in creation may be called good, God defines what it means to be a father, a protector, or a friend; and the best examples on earth are simply reminders of our Father who is our creator, redeemer, and friend.

When the doctor tells you, “I’m sorry; there is simply nothing else we can do.” When you are overlooked for that promotion; or betrayed by what you thought was your closest friend. When you feel let down by the world, by the church, or even by yourself—we see our God, enter, stage right. The familiar score fills the room.

Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God’ (Ps 20:7)

“He will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness is a shield and buckler” (Ps 91:4)

TRUST MEANS MORE THAN BELIEVING HE WILL ACT AS I WOULD

And we struggle to believe it because we don’t understand what it means to trust.

We don’t trust that God will make the decision we would. He’s faithful when we are not; thank God he’s better than we are. We don’t trust that God will keep us from every temptation. Paul says “God is faithful. He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear; and when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it” (1 Cor 10:13 NIV).

We don’t trust that God will keep us from every difficulty or set-back. We don’t know what to ask for, we don’t know what we need, and we aren’t in a position to know what difficulties will help us in the short term or the long run, or what difficulties must come our way through justice for us or mercy for others. But we do know this: while not

⁵ J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (New York: Ballentine Books, 1954), p. 103.

everything that comes our way is good (there is real evil in the world), God promises that, for the believer, all things work together FOR good; that is, God can bring beauty out of ashes, and he can tell the story of his grace in every moment of your life. You can trust that God is with you, He is at work bringing all things together FOR good. And you can trust that God keeps covenant with his unfaithful, failing, wayward, people. He keeps coming back. Because we are His people.

Trusting in God makes sense of a world that doesn't make sense. He is my answer when I have no answers. In the midst of pain—you don't want theology. You want hope. The writer of Lamentations cries out “things are awful. And I can't hardly stand it. I look every which way and find nothing to hold onto. But this I call to mind, and I have hope: the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning. Great is Thy faithfulness. The Lord is my portion, says my soul; therefore I will hope in him” (Lam 2:22-24). I trust him.

When David had royally screwed up, he was given three options: three years of famine; three months of routing by the enemy; or three days suffering the “sword of the Lord.” And David's answer is beautiful: “I am in deep distress. Let me fall into the hands of the Lord, for his mercy is very great” (1 Chron 21:12-13).

When Shadrach, Meshech, and Abednigo refused to bow down to the idols, they were to be thrown into a fiery furnace. They expressed their belief that God would rescue them from the fire. “But even if he doesn't” they said, “we still won't bow down to them.” We trust God will rescue us now. But even if he doesn't—even if our deaths should serve the greater purposes of God—we put our trust in Him.

Ask Jesus. Who, with sweat so thick it fell from his face like drops of blood, cried out to God “if there is any other way, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, I want what you want, O God.” I want what you want. And who would have thought—that in this the darkest hour in the history of the world, God would give birth to the greatest victory over the gates of hell, that in his death you and I might find life.

Lauren Daigle wrote a powerful song with these lines in the chorus: When you don't move the mountains I'm needing you to move, when you don't part the waters I wish I could walk through, when you don't give the answers as I cry out to you, I will trust, I will trust, I will trust in you.

Ask Job. You want an explanation? Oh I may not be able to explain it to you. The complexities of how I allow evil to exist in the world to accomplish my purposes is complicated. And even if I did explain these things, you don't really want an explanation. You want it to stop. But if it won't stop, if temptation, or suffering, or

trouble must come my way, give me reason to trust you. Whether given by your hand, or allowed in your wisdom, whether to teach me something about grace, or discipline to refine me, or genuine evil in which you join in my weeping and tell me to wait until that final day, whatever it is—here’s what I want: I want to trust you in this.

And so God says “I know the pain you are feeling, and I know the comfort you are needing (because I know everything). I have what it takes to give you everything you need (because I can do anything). I am able to decide well how and when to provide for you (because I am all wise). And here’s the kicker: I will do it. I got this. And I promise that all things—*all things*—will work together for good; because everything about me—who I am, what I know, what I do, *everything*—comes from pure goodness. So what are you afraid of? You want everything to turn out alright? It will, ultimately. I got this. I got you.

Trust me, my child. Trust me in this.”

“When I am afraid,” writes the Psalmist, “I put my trust in you” (Ps 56:3).

He is FOR you. You can trust Him. “The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance,” wrote the Apostle Paul, “that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost” (1Tim 1:15).

“The saying is trustworthy,” he says in another place, “for: If we have died with him, we will also live with him” (2 Tim 2:11).