

The Spiritual Practice of Trusting in God

A speech by Rick Hocker on the topic of trusting in God,
the main theme of his book, *Four in the Garden*.

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I remember the morning I ran out of food. I was a poor college student attending Cal Poly State University just a few miles from here. I had no money to buy food. When I poured the crumbs of my last box of cereal into my bowl, I said to myself, "Cool. God is on the line to feed me today." On that day, I had no one to rely on but God and I expected God to step up to the plate.

That morning, a student brought donuts to class. I know they aren't nutritious, but I saw them as God's provision. To be honest, I've always considered donuts as food from heaven. At lunchtime, a stranger asked me if I wanted his extra sandwich. When I said yes, he also gave me his apple. That night, a friend treated me to dinner. No one knew my need except for God, and God provided that day. Because I had focused all of my expectation on God, I experienced His provision in a greater way than I ever had before. I trusted God and He came through.

Have you ever wondered what the difference is between faith and trust? Faith is a belief. This belief emanates from the soul, more than from the mind. Trust is an action. We have faith in God, but how does that translate into action? Trust is the action of placing our confidence in God. It's not just a mental exercise; it involves our entire being.

In 2004, I had a back injury that left me bedridden for six months. I was in excruciating pain during that time. My doctors were no help. I had no income. My medical debts mounted. Life had collapsed on me. I could make no sense out of what I was going through. I was a prisoner in my own body, barely able to move. I prayed a lot. I couldn't do anything else, but pray. Lying in bed, I spent a lot of time staring at my bedroom ceiling. The ceiling and I became special friends, kind of like the volleyball Tom Hanks spoke to in the movie "Castaway."

I could see no way out of my predicament and I despaired. One morning, when I was without hope, God spoke to me. He said that I was mentally incapable of understanding His purposes behind my ordeal. That was His polite way of saying I was dense. He also said I would not be disappointed in the end. In fact, He repeated that promise three times just to make sure I got the message.

I took heart and chose to believe that God could create something worthwhile out my darkness, although I could not see how. I chose to trust. In one sense, I had no choice. In another sense, I did have a choice. I could have chosen to fear. I could have chosen despair.

Most of the time, God wasn't accessible to me during that ordeal. It felt as though He had withdrawn Himself on purpose. I sought God and He was not to be found, when I needed Him the most. So, I told the bedroom ceiling my fears and questions, because when you're mentally dense like me, you talk to ceilings. My progress was slow, but I did make a full recovery. I found work again and was able to pay off my debts. Looking back, I'm grateful for that experience because it changed me and taught me some deep lessons.

At one point, I had to face the reality that I might be permanently disabled, that I would never walk again. That terrified me. Could I trust God with that possibility? I realized I was setting myself up for potential disappointment. You see, I was trusting God for healing. God was asking me to trust Him with any outcome, including disability. We trust in the wrong things. We trust God for a job, a place to live, a breakthrough, a healing. God doesn't want us to place our trust in a specific outcome. He wants us to place our trust in Him and Him alone. We place our trust in a person, a person whom we believe will take care of us and has our best interests in mind. We trust God with all possible outcomes, not just the ones we want.

Once during prayer, I fell into a waking dream, a vivid trance. I found myself in a dark parking garage. I was tied to a pillar and two men were torturing me. The men forced me to swallow gasoline that burned my throat and insides. They shoved long nails up my nostrils and hot blood gushed out. I didn't know these men nor could I understand why they were doing this to me. I prayed that God would rescue me, but the torture continued. When God didn't show up, I began to doubt and despair. Eventually, someone entered the garage and shouted at the men, who ran away. The vision ended and I was shaken and deeply disturbed that God would put me through an experience like that. Then God said as clear as ever, "Do you trust Me with your life?" I have pondered that question ever since.

What God is asking us is: Can you trust Me with sickness? Can you trust Me with loss? Can you trust Me with humiliation? Can you trust Me with the thing

you fear the most? We believe that God loves us and has our well-being in mind. You won't like hearing this, but our well-being isn't high on His list. What *is* high on His list is our transformation. Well-being is fleeting, but our transformation has eternal significance. The process by which we are transformed is at odds with our well-being. The process is uncomfortable.

Transformation is the stretching of our souls to enlarge our capacity for more of God. More of His life and presence. More of His Spirit. More of His activity in our lives and inner being. Ephesians 3:17 expresses Paul's prayer that Christ may dwell in our hearts by faith. Two verses later, Paul ends his prayer with his request that we be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. God can indwell us, but He cannot inhabit us in all His fullness unless our souls are enlarged to contain it.

Do you know what a cistern is? A cistern is an underground reservoir for storing water. Friends of ours in Hawaii have a cistern underneath their house. Rainwater is collected in their cistern and they use this stored rainwater to water their yard and gardens. Each of us has a spiritual cistern within our souls. It is the space within us where God dwells. This cistern is like an elastic bladder than can be stretched and expanded to contain more of God's life within us. We enlarge our cisterns by choosing to trust God, especially when trusting is the most difficult, when life tempts us to doubt and fear.

We can be transformed by life or not. If we choose to trust God, then we are changed to more closely match His holy blueprint for our lives. If we don't trust, then the transformative effect doesn't touch us and the things we have gone through are for naught. We miss out and stay the same as before. This transformative power that is activated by trust is covered in more depth in *Four in the Garden*, the book I authored.

Some of the most spiritually beautiful people in the world have undergone suffering and been transformed by it. These people seem to have a stronger presence of being, a deeper understanding of life and self, and greater compassion than others. These people do not view suffering as bad, but see all of life as a means to experience God. They transcend the need to label their experiences, but focus instead on knowing God and grasping His fullness in their lives. The cisterns of their souls have been enlarged and filled to the brim with Living Water.

God is powerful enough to use anything in our lives to transform us, if we allow it. It is our trust in God that transforms us, not the event itself. At its most basic level, it is our struggle to remain in that state of trust that stretches and enlarges our souls, that increases our capacity for God's life within us, so that we may be filled with all the fullness of God.

I mentioned that when I was bedridden, God was not accessible to me. There are many reasons why we get disconnected from God. One reason is because God intentionally withdraws Himself from us. He does that to see whether we will seek him more earnestly or walk away. When the water dries up, will we put down deeper roots to seek new sources of water? Will we dig our cisterns deeper until we hit water again? If we choose to dig, then we will have deeper cisterns to hold more of His Spirit when times of infilling come.

I don't know about you, but my Christian life has been characterized by long stretches of drought and thirst. I'm like one of those tabletop sand gardens. You can drag that little wooden rake until your fingers cramp, but you're not going to find any water that way. My spiritual thirst is what propels me and motivates me to seek God and to keep digging my underground cistern. It worries me when I have no thirst because then I become apathetic and abandon the work beneath my house. If you're not spiritually thirsty, then ask God to revive your thirst. Spiritual revival starts with thirst, not with outpouring. What good is it for God to send rain when all we have are thimbles to catch the rainwater? It is our thirst for God that drives us to seek Him, to plead for his presence, to long for His Living Water, to keep digging our cisterns to hold the water He sends in response to our thirst.

Another way we get disconnected from God is because of fear. Fear is the enemy of trust. Fear contracts us. Trust opens us up. Fear looks inward. Trust looks outward to God. When we fully fear, we cannot trust. When we fully trust, we do not fear. Usually, we have a mixture of both, but one will be dominant. So how do we trust?

Picture yourself in the middle of an ocean. Imagine that you are terrified of drowning. So you panic and fight the water, clawing and thrashing and sucking water into your mouth. Your resistance makes you sink. Trust is best illustrated by the example of relaxing and floating on top of the water. But you're still afraid of drowning. Your breathing is rapid because you're fearful,

but you choose to relax and float in spite of your fear. Trusting in God is like floating in God. You let go and relax. You entrust your safety and security to God. You surrender your being to the vast ocean that is God.

Surrendering is difficult for us. We would rather cling to the edge of the pool or find some object we can grab on to, some raft or log or floating debris. Sometimes, we cling to our possessions or jobs or other people in order to stay afloat. I used to think it was spiritual to cling to God, but He has since told me that I'm not supposed to cling to Him. He holds on to us, not the other way around. We are to trust in His grip on us. He wants us to let go of our grip, to release our grip on all the things we cling to. That's really scary because if we let go, then what will hold us up? God will hold us up. What if God lets go and allows you to fall? Would God do that to you? He might, if He thinks you're ready. Because only when we are in freefall can we learn to fly.

So we need to trust the ocean that is God and relax and float. But what if it's stormy and the waves are crashing against us? We choose to trust God to keep us afloat and we choose to not give in to fear. Fear pulls us out of the present moment. Fear tells us all the horrible things that will happen to us. When we trust, we set our gaze on God and God anchors us in the present moment. In that moment, we have peace because we are trusting God. And we enter the next moment trusting God and staying in His peace. Fear is kept aside by doing this. Fear wants the center of attention, but we keep our attention on God. Staying in the present moment is important because that's the space where God dwells. When you focus on the past or future, God's active presence isn't there because they aren't real. The past and future are imaginings without living substance, like a static photo album. God dwells only in the present moment so it behooves us to remain there.

On one occasion, I climbed a tall hill to spend time with God. Somehow, I lost track of the time and it got dark very quickly. When I started down the hill, I couldn't see my way because the light had gone. The hill was treacherous, with jagged rocks and thorn-bushes. There was no path or trail. I had scaled the hill by zigzagging around the outcroppings and cacti. Now, I had to find my way down the hill in the darkness. I was afraid I would trip on the rocks and fall into the thorns. In those moments of fear, God told me to step and trust. Not seeing a thing, I took one step into the darkness and my foot landed without incident. I stepped again into the unknown and didn't fall. I stepped

and trusted, stepped and trusted. With each step, I marveled that nothing happened to me. I couldn't grasp how I bypassed all the big rocks and thorn-bushes. It seemed as though they weren't there. Eventually, I made it down to the road and I was amazed at God's protection.

This experience has become for me a vivid example of walking by faith, when I can't see where I'm going. I wrote a scene in my book based on this very experience. God didn't say He would protect me or promise to bring me to my destination. He only said, "Step and trust." And that's a present moment activity. We trust from moment to moment, with each step forward, believing God will be with us when our foot lands.

Trust involves our entire being. We entrust our entire selves to God, believing that He is trustworthy. Trust involves all our emotions. We entrust our entire humanity to God, with all our messy and conflicting emotions. By the way, trust is not an emotion. It's a decision we make in the midst of our emotions and, sometimes, in spite of them. Trust encompasses all outcomes. We trust God with whatever happens to us, even if it's not what we want. We will never trust perfectly, but the One in whom we trust is perfect and is able to fulfill His purposes for us because He is committed to that end.

Either God can be trusted or not. You have to decide this for yourself. It's important to figure this out because there's a huge difference between trusting in yourself and trusting in God, between a fear-driven life and a peace-driven life. If God can be trusted, then trust Him with all your heart, mind, soul and strength. God is trustworthy and faithful. He will see us through every situation, even when it's dark and we can't see our way.

David knew about trusting in God. Here is what he says in Psalm 27:

The Lord is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear?
The Lord is the stronghold of my life—of whom shall I be afraid?
Though an army besiege me, my heart will not fear;
though war break out against me, even then I will be confident.
For in the day of trouble he will keep me safe in his dwelling;
he will hide me in the shelter of his sacred tent and set me high upon a rock.
Though my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will receive me.
Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord.

Let's pray:

Lord, increase our thirst for You. Grant us holy desperation.
May we pant for You like a deer pants for water.
Cause us to dig deep and seek You until we find You.
Break the power of fear in our hearts
and help us to let go of the things we cling to.
Enable us to trust You with our entire being
and to trust You with all outcomes.
Thank You for your faithfulness and for loving us so fiercely.
Amen.

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