

EXODUS 16,17
HOW TO TRUST GOD?

How to trust God – that’s the theme of the sermon; if it was easy, we’d do it without any trouble whatsoever! There is no ABC of trust to which we can turn and switch it on and everything is fine and good. It doesn’t work that way. We have to learn to trust. Sir Alex Ferguson, the Manchester United retired manager had a team-talk at the start of one season and the theme was trust: there was a mix of some new players, and players that knew each other well and he wanted all of them to bond as a team. He had two questions for them to ask about trust: “how can I learn to trust the person sitting next to me? What can I do to make him trust me?” We learn to trust and if that is true of our relationships with other people, how much more is it true of our relationship with God. There is no quick solution, no ABC, but a relationship to learn!

The Bible shows us how to trust God by stories. Here are people learning to trust God; here are people getting it right; here are people getting it wrong! Exodus chapters 16 and 17 have three stories of Israel learning to trust God, but it started with them testing God. It was as if they were putting God on probation; they needed new evidence or more evidence before they would trust Him. They had already seen God deliver on His promises; they had seen God rescue them; they had seen God provide for them, but they wanted to see it all over again. God is to prove His worth all over again; “If He gets us out of this new mess, then we’ll consider trusting Him. In the meantime, faith and obedience are suspended” (par Motyer) Instead of trust there is a suspicion in Israel, that “God has proved Himself before, but this new situation might be too much for Him and we might be lost!”

In the story so far, Israel has been rescued from their slavery in Egypt; they were an oppressed people, slaves building cities for Pharaoh; their sons were killed in Pharaoh’s genocide. On Passover night, these people escaped and began their journey to the Promised Land. Even as the journey began, there were problems: they found themselves trapped between the impassable sea in front and the angry army of Pharaoh behind them; how could they escape? God provided the way: Moses raised his staff and the sea opened up in front of them and they walked across on dry land; their escape is complete and they are on their way to the Promised Land. They are going by the desert road, the roundabout way; the direct route is too dangerous and difficult; God leads them to the Promised Land and the people follow. Their problems are solved? It will all be easy from now on? Not quite! We have moved from “God the Saviour” to “God the companion”; God is with them as they travel; God will be with them every step of the way; He guides and leads them and provides for them; they learn to trust.

Chapters 16 and 17 have three stories in which the people learn to trust God, their trust is tested and their trust grows. Read all three of them and you’ll see that trust being tested in different ways and learning to grow. We’re going to look at the manna story in more detail in a second, but there is another water story (the people are thirsty and God gives them water out of a rock) and a story of a battle with their enemies which Joshua fights and over which Moses prays. In both of these situations, God provides for His people, He passes the test, He shows them that He is still there and is still able to save them. Little by little, the people learn to trust.

Manna: they need food. They are harking back: “*If only...*” (Exodus 16:3) Patiently, God promises that He will provide food for them to eat: “*I will...*” (Exodus 16:4) First of all, God promises that He will provide this food for them every day and that every day there will be enough. On the day before the Sabbath there will be twice as much

and on the Sabbath itself there will be none; it is the day of rest! In the morning, the people went out to find this flaky white substance on ground; “what is it?” they asked. It became known by that question: “manna”. It occurs naturally in Sinai; it is a sugary substance that comes from bugs; but God is seen as making this available to His people every morning. They celebrated this God-given substance by putting some in a jar later and keeping it in the Ark, kept as a reminder of God’s love that is new every morning. For 40 years, for their whole journey through the desert, God provided manna every morning, without fail.

Did the people trust Him? All they had to do was collect it and use it. But they have something to learn still; we see that in two ways. “*Moses said...*” (Exodus 16:19) They are keeping some overnight – what does that say? It says “God might not provide more tomorrow; we need to keep some back, just in case!” They were told not to keep it, but some did; it went mouldy, and was full of maggots, inedible, fit for the bin! There was new manna in morning anyway. “*Six days...*” (Exodus 16:26f) There would be none on the Sabbath, but they went out anyway; “perhaps the manna we’ve kept will go off today; we might need new manna; let’s go out anyway!” But there was none and the manna they kept over the Sabbath was good, just as God promised. God has said, God has promised, but the people behave in ways that demonstrate that they don’t trust God, not quite yet! Yet, every morning, just as God has promised, the manna is there; the people are fed.

How to trust God? Here’s the first thing: learn that God deserves to be trusted. There is no other place to start; “What can I do to make this person trust me?” In the Exodus experience, God has shown these people time and time again that He deserves to be trusted; He has kept His promises time and time again, He has shown great patience and faithfulness; He has rescued them, saved them, provided for them and will do so again and again because that is the kind of God He is. From where we stand, we can add all kinds of other examples of God’s love and grace to that picture, we have more reasons to trust God. Above all, we have Jesus. Jesus is the supreme demonstration of the love of God for us and for the world; in Jesus, God has kept His promises, has shown us His patience and faithfulness and has saved us completely. Not only that, but all the way through our experience of life, God has been with us, has loved us with a love that is new every morning and has helped us.

The first thing to do is to realise that God deserves to be trusted. It is the same in any relationship: trust doesn’t happen automatically, but grows when we realise that the person is good to trust. There are all kinds of stories of young people and who to trust and many of these stories about trusting the wrong people and the abuse of trust, either on the internet or in other places; so trust is not easy and straightforward. The difficulty with our experience of the world is that we so often see God through our experience of other people! Look at Jesus: here is someone to trust. His actions are good, loving and full of compassion; He is someone we can trust completely. It is easy to complain and sometimes we need to complain even to God, but then we need to realise that God deserves to be trusted. We have evidence aplenty of this; He has helped us through so many messy situations; He has provided for us in so many ways. This is not the last word, but has to be the first word; realise that God deserves to be trusted.

Then we should behave as if we trust God. This was the big test for Israel. They were told to trust, but they didn’t behave as if they trusted God; they didn’t do what He said and their actions betrayed a lack of trust! We have to think as if we trust God. Paul writes about his confidence in God who provides for him everything he needs, the One in whom He can do all things. Because God provides, Paul has everything he needs. I hear lots of people say that they believe in God, but they don’t behave as if

that faith mattered very much, if at all. Israel showed their lack of trust by not listening to what God had promised them or commanded them. We need to learn to behave as if we trust God and put that faith into practice. “We don’t need more faith; we need to put into practice the faith that we do have.” (Wordlive) we need to behave as if we trust God.

“Trust and obey, for there’s no other way, to be happy in Jesus, than to trust and obey.” It is a slightly simplistic view of life and faith, but there is no doubt that the story of the manna makes it clear: the people’s obedience to God is an expression of their faith. Trust and obedience are totally connected. To behave as people who trust God, one of the key markers is obedience. Jesus is Lord; God is King. It is a simple truth – they have authority over us and the most obvious way in which that authority is acknowledged is by our obedience. The law of land gives us an illustration: driving a car while holding and talking on mobile phone is illegal; it is not good advice that we can ignore or otherwise; it is the law of land to be obeyed. A red light means stop and again this is not good advice if want to heed it; it is the law of land with authority to back it up. Jesus’ word has authority and Jesus is to be obeyed. So when Jesus says “love God and love your neighbour” this is not good advice that we can take or leave; these are commands to be obeyed; God is to be loved with all our hearts; the way in which we treat other people is to be with love.

There are other markers of behaving as if we trust God: read the Bible and put it into practice. In our society, there is an increasing pressure to conform, and it is harder and harder to be different. There is a criticism of Christians that we are no different from the rest of the population, our standards and values are no different from the people who live around us. Yet the Bible teaches a radically different system of values from the values of the world. Listen to what God wants and the best way to do that is to read the Bible; we need to know what God wants. But reading is not enough: its teaching needs to shape the way in which we think and the way in which we behave; faith is seen by what we do. Prayer is sign of trust; we know we can’t handle life all on our own and all by ourselves, so we pray and ask God to help us.

How to trust God? There is no ABC answer to that question; it is a relationship to grow, develop, mature; it is something to learn. Learn that God deserves to be trusted: He has shown us enough evidence of that in Jesus; yet we are still sometimes blind and don’t see! Learn that God deserves to be trusted and then behave as if we are people who trust. One feeds off the other; the more that we behave as if we trust, the stronger will that trust become. These stories show us people learning to trust; there is no definition of trust, but there are stories of people learning to trust God; learning from what they see God do, from their experience that God is good, faithful and patient; learning how to behave as people who trust God. They made mistakes; they got it wrong, but they learned; they were never perfect, but they learned. Learn to trust; God deserves to be trusted.