

TRUSTING GOD



EVEN WHEN LIFE HURTS

JERRY BRIDGES

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Preface

When I was fourteen years old, my mother died suddenly, without warning. I was in the adjoining room and rushed in just in time to see her gasp her last breath. I was stunned and devastated. My older brother was away at school, and my dad was too stricken with grief himself to be able to help me. Worst of all, I did not know how to turn to God in times of trouble. I was alone in my adversity.

That was not the first time adversity had struck in my life, and it was certainly not to be the last. As the Scripture says, “Yet man is born to trouble as surely as sparks fly upward” (Job 5:7). All of us experience adversity at different times and in varying degrees throughout our lives.

Learning to trust God in adversity has been a slow and difficult process for me. It is a process that is still under way. But several years ago, in an effort to strengthen my own trust in God, I began a lengthy Bible study on the subject of God’s sovereignty in the affairs of His people. That study has helped me immeasurably, and it is the fruit of that study I now share with you.

During the time of the study, which actually covered a period of about four years, I encountered other believers who were struggling with some of the same issues I was: Does God actually control the circumstances of our lives, or do “bad” things just happen to us because we live in a sin-cursed world?

If God really does control the circumstances of our lives, why did He allow my friend to get cancer? Can I truly trust God when the going gets tough in different areas of my life?

This book, then, was born out of the results of addressing needs in my own life and realizing that many other believers have similar questions and doubts. It is written from the perspective of a brother and companion to all those who are tempted at times to ask, “Can I really trust God?”

Trusting God has been a difficult book to write. For one thing, I have become much more aware of the widespread and frequent occurrences of adversity around me. I had not realized as acutely as I do now the pervasive nature of suffering and heartache, especially among believers. As a result of my heightened perception of suffering around me, I found myself frequently asking, “Do I truly believe what I am writing?”

Another difficulty for me has been the realization that many of my friends have experienced far greater adversity than I have. Who am I to seek to write words of instruction and encouragement to them when I have not experienced the measure of pain they have? My answer to that question is the realization that the truth of God’s Word and the encouragement it is intended to give is not dependent upon my experience. I have not written this book about my experiences, which are not particularly unusual. I have written it as a Bible study about God and His sovereignty, wisdom, and love as they bear upon the adversities we all encounter.

Trusting God is written for the average Christian who has not necessarily experienced major catastrophe but who does frequently encounter the typical adversities and heartaches of life: the pregnancy miscarriage, the lost job, the auto accident, the rebellious son or daughter, the unfair professor in college. These events do not make the “front page” of our lives; indeed, they are often buried within a broken or confused heart. Because of

their low-keyness, they usually generate very little prayer support from our Christian friends.

I sincerely hope that none of the statements I make in the following chapters come across as glib and easy answers to the difficult problems of adversity and suffering. There are no easy answers. Adversity is difficult even when we know God is in control of our circumstances. In fact, that knowledge sometimes tends to aggravate the pain. “If God is in control,” we ask, “why did He allow this to happen?”

The purpose of this book is twofold: First, I desire to glorify God by acknowledging His sovereignty and His goodness. Second, I desire to encourage God’s people by demonstrating from Scripture that God is in control of their lives, that He does indeed love them, and that He works out all the circumstances of their lives for their ultimate good.

The reader will notice an abundance of quotations from other writers. This book, though, is not merely a synthesis of other people’s views. The basic convictions stated in these chapters are the result of my own personal Bible study done over a long period of time. I acknowledge, however, my indebtedness to other writers for affirmation and, in some instances, clarification of my understanding of some of these truths.

I want to express my appreciation to a number of people who have contributed to the writing of this book. Don Simpson, my friend as well as editor, encouraged me, helped me, and sometimes challenged my conclusions as we worked through these chapters together. Dr. J. I. Packer graciously agreed to review some of the key chapters to check their theological accuracy — though he should not be held responsible for the final results. Jessie Halsell performed the very necessary and challenging task of transforming my handwritten pages to a typed manuscript. A special word of appreciation must go to Grace Peterson, a “senior saint,” for her colaborship in prayer.

Although a number of friends prayed for me during the eleven months of writing, Grace was always available when I sensed the need for that extra push of prayer to get over a difficult hurdle. Finally, I want to pay tribute to my first wife, Eleanor, now with the Lord, who herself experienced major adversity, even as I was writing this book, for her love and the sacrifices she made to allow me the time to study and write.

Can You Trust God?

*And call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you,
and you will honor me.*

PSALM 50:15

The letter did not bring good news. A close relative, very dear to me, had just learned she had bone cancer. Malignant cells from a previous bout with cancer had lain dormant for eight years before invading the skeletal parts of her body. One hip was already almost destroyed; the doctor was amazed she was still able to walk. Such incidents are all too common these days. In fact, during the writing of this chapter I had seven friends, all with cancer, listed on my “urgent” prayer page.

But cancer or other physical ailments are obviously not the only source of anxiety. Over lunch a few weeks ago a businessman friend confided that his company is perilously close to bankruptcy; another friend experiences heartache over a spiritually rebellious teenager. The truth is all of us face adversity in various forms and at different times. A best-selling book by a secular psychiatrist put it very well with this simple opening statement: “Life is difficult.”

Adversity and its accompanying emotional pain come in many forms. There may be the heartache of an unhappy

marriage or the disappointment of a miscarried pregnancy or grief over a spiritually indifferent or rebellious child. There is the anxiety of the family breadwinner who has just lost his job and the despair of the young mother who has learned she has a terminal illness.

Others experience the frustration of dashed hopes and unfulfilled dreams: a business that turned sour or a career that never developed. Still others experience the sting of injustice, the dull ache of loneliness, and the stabbing pain of unexpected grief. There is the humiliation of rejection by others, of demotion at work, and, worst of all, of failure that is one's own fault. Finally there is the despair of realizing that some difficult circumstances — a physical infirmity of your own or perhaps a severely handicapped child — will never change.

All of these circumstances and scores more contribute to the anxiety and emotional pain we all experience at various times and in varying degrees. Some pain is sudden, traumatic, and devastating. Other adversities are chronic, persistent, and seemingly designed to wear down our spirits over time.

In addition to our own emotional pains, we often are called upon to help bear the pain of others, either friends or relatives. None of the illustrations I've used in the preceding paragraphs are just imaginary. I could put names alongside each one. Most of them are on my personal prayer list. When friends and loved ones hurt, we hurt.

On a larger scale, we read in our daily newspapers or see on the evening news instances of grief, heartache, and pain on a massive scale. War, terrorism, earthquakes, famine, racial injustice, murder, and exploitation occur daily in various parts of the world. The threat of a nuclear holocaust hanging over our heads has caused this period of history to be called the age of anxiety. In such days when massive crises appear on our television screens almost daily, even the Christian is tempted to

ask, “Where is God? Doesn’t He care about the thousands who are starving in Africa or the innocent civilians who are being brutally murdered in many war ravished countries around the world?”

On a much smaller scale, those whose lives are free from major pain still experience the frequently frustrating or anxiety-producing events of daily life, which momentarily grab our attention and rob us of our peace of mind. A long-planned vacation has to be cancelled because of illness, the washing machine breaks down the day company arrives, your class notes are lost or stolen the day before a major exam, you tear your favorite dress on the way to church, and on and on. Instances of this magnitude are numerous. Life is full of them.

It is true that such mundane events are only temporary and pale into insignificance alongside the truly tragic events of life. Yet, for most of us, life is filled with such little events, little frustrations, little anxieties, and little disappointments that tempt us to fret, fume, and worry. One author has aptly captured the flavor of how such little frustrations can cause us to doubt God in a devotional book for high schoolers entitled, *If God Loves Me, Why Can’t I Get My Locker Open?* We may smile a little at the scene such a title brings to our imagination, but the fact is, this is the plane of adversity on which many of us live each day. And it is in the crucible of even this minor level of adversity that we are tempted to wonder, “Can I trust God?”

Even when life seems to be going our way and our daily path seems pleasant and smooth, we do not know what the future holds. As Solomon said, “[We] do not know what a day may bring forth” (Proverbs 27:1). Someone has described life as like having a thick curtain hung across one’s path, a curtain that recedes before us as we advance, but only step by step. None of us can tell what is beyond that curtain; none of us can tell what events a single day or hour may bring into our lives. Sometimes

the receding curtain reveals events much as we had expected them; often it reveals events most unexpected and frequently most undesired. Such events, unfolding in ways contrary to our desires and expectations, frequently fill our hearts with anxiety, frustrations, heartache, and grief.

God's people are not immune from such pain. In fact it often seems as if theirs is more severe, more frequent, more unexplainable, and more deeply felt than that of the unbeliever. The problem of pain is as old as the history of man and just as universal. Even creation itself, Paul tells us, has been subjected to frustration and groans as in the pain of childbirth (see Romans 8:20-22).

So the question naturally arises, "Where is God in all of this?" Can you really trust God when adversity strikes and fills your life with pain? Does He indeed come to the rescue of those who seek Him? Does He, as the text at the beginning of this chapter affirms, deliver those who call upon Him in the day of trouble? Does the Lord's unfailing love surround the person who trusts in Him (see Psalm 32:10)?

Can you trust God? The question itself has two possible meanings before we attempt to answer it. Can you *trust* God? In other words, is He dependable in times of adversity? But the second meaning is also critical: Can *you* trust God? Do you have such a relationship with God and such a confidence in Him that you believe He is with you in your adversity even though you do not see any evidence of His presence and His power?

It is not easy to trust God in times of adversity. No one enjoys pain, and when it comes, we want it relieved as quickly as possible. Even the apostle Paul pleaded with God three times to take away the thorn in his flesh before he finally found God's grace to be sufficient. Joseph pleaded with Pharaoh's cupbearer to "get me out of this prison" (Genesis 40:14). And the writer of Hebrews very honestly states, "No discipline seems pleasant

at the time, but painful” (Hebrews 12:11).

During the time I was working on this chapter I experienced one of those periods of adversity when I found it difficult to trust God. Mine happened to be a physical ailment that exacerbated a lifelong infirmity. It came at a very inconvenient time and for several weeks would not respond to any medical treatment.

During those weeks, as I continually prayed to God for relief, I was reminded of Solomon’s words,

Consider what God has done:
Who can straighten
what he has made crooked?
(Ecclesiastes 7:13)

God had brought a “crooked” event into my life, and I became acutely aware that only He could straighten it. Could I trust God whether or not He straightened my “crook” and relieved my distress? Did I really believe that a God who loved me and knew what was best for me was in control of my situation? Could I trust Him even if I didn’t understand?

Further, could I encourage others to trust Him when they are in the throes of emotional pain? Is the whole idea of trusting God in adversity merely a Christian shibboleth that doesn’t stand up in the face of the difficult events of life? Can you really trust God?

I sympathize with those who find it difficult to trust God in adversity. I have been there often enough myself to know something of the distress, the despair, and the darkness that fills our souls when we wonder if God truly cares about our plight. I have spent a good portion of my adult life encouraging people to pursue holiness, to obey God. Yet, I acknowledge it often seems more difficult to trust God than to obey Him.

The moral will of God given to us in the Bible is rational and reasonable. The circumstances in which we must trust God often appear irrational and inexplicable. The law of God is readily recognized to be good for us, even when we don't want to obey it. The circumstances of our lives frequently appear to be dreadful and grim or perhaps even calamitous and tragic. Obeying God is worked out within well-defined boundaries of God's revealed will. Trusting God is worked out in an arena that has no boundaries. We do not know the extent, the duration, or the frequency of the painful, adverse circumstances in which we must frequently trust God. We are always coping with the unknown.

Yet it is just as important to trust God as it is to obey Him. When we disobey God we defy His authority and despise His holiness. But when we fail to trust God we doubt His sovereignty and question His goodness. In both cases we cast aspersions upon His majesty and His character. God views our distrust of Him as seriously as He views our disobedience. When the people of Israel were hungry, "they spoke against God, saying, 'Can God spread a table in the desert? . . . Can he supply meat for his people?'" The next two verses tell us, "When the LORD heard them, he was very angry . . . for they did not believe in God or trust in his deliverance" (Psalm 78:19-22).

In order to trust God, we must always view our adverse circumstances through the eyes of faith, not of sense. And just as the faith of salvation comes through hearing the message of the gospel (see Romans 10:17), so the faith to trust God in adversity comes through the Word of God alone. It is only in the Scriptures that we find an adequate view of God's relationship to and involvement in our painful circumstances. It is only from the Scriptures, applied to our hearts by the Holy Spirit, that we receive the grace to trust God in adversity.

In the arena of adversity, the Scriptures teach us three

essential truths about God — truths we must believe if we are to trust Him in adversity. They are:

- God is completely sovereign.
- God is infinite in wisdom.
- God is perfect in love.

Someone has expressed these three truths as they relate to us in this way: “God in His love always wills what is best for us. In His wisdom He always knows what is best, and in His sovereignty He has the power to bring it about.”

The sovereignty of God is asserted, either expressly or implicitly, on almost every page of the Bible. While doing the Bible study preparation for writing this book I never felt I completely finished compiling the list of verses on the sovereignty of God. New references to it kept appearing almost every time I opened my Bible. We are going to look at many of these passages in later chapters, but for now consider just one:

Who can speak and have it happen
if the Lord has not decreed it?
Is it not from the mouth of the Most High
that both calamities and good things
come? (Lamentations 3:37-38)

This passage of Scripture offends many people. They find it difficult to accept that both calamities and good things come from God. People often ask the question, “If God is a God of love, how could He allow such a calamity?” But Jesus Himself affirmed God’s sovereignty in calamity when Pilate said to Him, “Don’t you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?” Jesus replied, “You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above” (John 19:10-11). Jesus

acknowledged God's sovereign control over His life.

Because God's sacrifice of His Son for our sins is such an amazing act of love toward us, we tend to overlook that it was for Jesus an excruciating experience beyond all we can imagine. It was for Jesus in His humanity a calamity sufficient to cause Him to pray, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me" (Matthew 26:39), but He did not waver in His assertion of God's sovereign control.

Rather than being offended over the Bible's assertion of God's sovereignty in both good and calamity, believers should be comforted by it. Whatever our particular calamity or adversity may be, we may be sure that our Father has a loving purpose in it. As King Hezekiah said, "Surely it was for my benefit that I suffered such anguish" (Isaiah 38:17). God does not exercise His sovereignty capriciously but only in such a way as His infinite love deems best for us. Jeremiah wrote,

Though he brings grief, he will show
compassion,
so great is his unfailing love.
For he does not willingly bring affliction
or grief to the children of men.
(Lamentations 3:32-33)

God's sovereignty is also exercised in infinite wisdom, far beyond our ability to comprehend. After surveying God's sovereign but inscrutable dealings with His own people, the Jews, the apostle Paul bows before the mystery of God's actions with these words:

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and
knowledge of God!
How unsearchable his judgments,

and his paths beyond tracing out!
(Romans 11:33)

Paul acknowledged what we must acknowledge if we are to trust God. God's plan and His ways of working out His plan are frequently beyond our ability to fathom and understand. We must learn to trust when we don't understand.

In subsequent chapters we will explore these three truths — the sovereignty, love, and wisdom of God — in greater detail. But the primary purpose of this book is not to explore these wonderful truths. The primary purpose is for us to become so convinced of these truths that we appropriate them in our daily circumstances, that we learn to trust God in the midst of our pain, whatever form it may take. It does not matter whether our pain is trivial or traumatic, temporary or interminable. Regardless of the nature of the circumstances, we must learn to trust God if we would glorify God in them.

But there is one final thought before we begin our studies on the sovereignty, love, and wisdom of God. In order to trust God we must know Him in an intimate, personal way. David said in Psalm 9:10, "Those who know your name will trust in you, for you, LORD, have never forsaken those who seek you." To know God's name is to know Him in an intimate, personal way. It is more than just knowing facts about God. It is coming into a deeper personal relationship with Him as a result of seeking Him in the midst of our personal pain and discovering Him to be trustworthy. It is only as we know God in this personal way that we come to trust Him. As you read and study the following chapters and as you relate what you are learning about God to your own situations, pray that the Holy Spirit of God will enable you to get beyond the facts about God so that you will come to know Him better, and so be able to trust Him more completely.