

WHO DO YOU TRUST?

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Genesis 12:1-9 & Romans 4:13-25

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George Armstrong Custer entered the Civil War as a second lieutenant in the Army of the Potomac under Maj. George B. McClellan. Having graduated last in his class at West Point, he was determined to distinguish himself in battle—and did so at the First Battle of Bull Run and at Gettysburg. A gifted self-promoter, he cultivated friendships among the officer corps and rose quickly, becoming the youngest man ever to achieve the rank of general at just 23.

When the war ended, he was sent west to join General Hancock in the Plains Indian Wars. Arrogant, vain, and impulsive, he soon discovered that his Civil War experience ill-prepared him for this new kind of fighting. After several poor decisions and costly defeats, he was demoted to captain, though he later regained rank as a lieutenant colonel and was placed in command of the newly formed 7th Cavalry.

Rumors of gold along the Big Horn River sparked a rush of prospectors, and the U.S. government ordered the Sioux to withdraw from the area and return to their reservation. But it was hunting season, and with winter approaching, many Native families feared they would not survive if they abandoned the hunt too early.

Some Sioux bands returned quietly, but the charismatic Sitting Bull persuaded many more to remain and resist the army's attempt to seize their sacred hunting grounds. When the army heard of this growing resistance, they attacked what they believed was a hostile encampment at Sand Creek. In reality, the warriors were away hunting. The attack fell instead on women, children, and the elderly—150 of whom were killed in what Congress later condemned as a shameful and wanton slaughter.

When word of Sand Creek reached Sitting Bull, he convinced the Cheyenne to join the Sioux, and together they gathered at a large village near the Little Big Horn, a tributary of the Big Horn River.

Hancock, hearing of the buildup, sent Custer ahead to investigate. He planned to follow with the main force, join Custer, surround the village, and drive the Indians back to the reservation. Army intelligence estimated no more than 180 warriors in the camp—a simple assignment, or so it seemed.

Custer reached the area knowing Hancock was still days behind him. Ever hungry for glory, he decided to attack the village before Hancock arrived.

His six Crow scouts warned him against such rashness. They had seen a huge pony herd, smoke from many morning fires, and Sioux scouts shadowing Custer's column. The village, they said, was the largest they had ever seen. Custer dismissed their warnings as exaggeration.

A few hours later, Half-Yellow-Face, the senior scout, brought Mitch Boyer—a half-Sioux, half-French veteran scout—to interpret. He told Custer, “If you make this attack, you and I are going home today by a road we do not know.” Custer ignored him.

Finally, Boyer himself reinforced the scouts’ reports: hundreds of ponies, many fires, unmistakable signs of a massive encampment. When Custer brushed him aside, Boyer quietly moved the scouts back to the supply train, away from what he believed was a suicide mission.

Not long after, Custer’s men encountered Sioux scouts who fled back toward the village. Fearing the warriors would escape and believing there were only about 180 of them, Custer ordered an immediate attack.

When he crested the ridge overlooking the Little Big Horn, he did not see 180 warriors. He saw a column of roughly 1,000 Native fighters, many armed with modern repeating rifles. What he could not see were another 1,000 Sioux and Cheyenne warriors moving into position to strike from both flanks, cutting off any hope of retreat.

Sitting Bull had learned the lesson of Sand Creek.

Custer and all 200 of his men were killed in what became known as the Battle of the Little Big Horn.

The deaths—200 soldiers and about 40 Native Americans—might well have been avoided had Custer trusted his scouts, who warned him three times not to go forward with his plan.

TRUST AND RIGHTEOUSNESS

“He/she has trust issues.”

You’ve probably heard that phrase. It’s often used when we talk about relationships that are struggling. A couple, parents, or children may be having trouble trusting someone—a partner, a sibling, a parent or child, a co-worker, a boss, or an employee—and the relationship becomes stuck, unable to move forward.

In psychology, “trust issues” refers to a pattern of difficulty believing that others will act in a reliable, honest, or safe way. It’s not a clinical diagnosis but a descriptive phrase for a cluster of thoughts, emotions, and behaviors that make it hard for a person to form or maintain secure relationships.

And at some point, in our lives, we all experience trust issues at one level or another. Maybe we’ve been hurt when someone we confided in betrayed our trust. Or maybe we were treated badly, bullied, punished unfairly, or disciplined inconsistently as a child. Maybe we were the victim of abuse, infidelity, manipulation, or broken promises.

Whatever our past experience, a lack of trust results in a fear of being hurt, betrayed, or abandoned. We become suspicious of others’ motives, even without evidence. We have

difficulty relying on others, and we become hypervigilant, constantly looking for signs of danger or dishonesty.

Modern psychology tells us that these patterns can show up in friendships, romantic relationships, workplaces, and even spiritual communities.

So, given all of that, imagine how Abraham must have felt when God said, “Hey, Abraham, I want you to pack up your business, your family, even the distant relatives, your servants, and everything you own, and start walking west. I’ll tell you when to stop.” It would be understandable, would it not, if Abraham had at least some small doubts—some trust issues, if you will.

But he doesn’t! He doesn’t seem to have any issues at all. He decides to trust God and do what God asks of him. He gathers his entire family, the whole clan of them, and everything they own, and at the age of 75, he leads them, like a wagon train without the wagons, into the setting sun.

Now, of course, the story doesn’t end there. This is only the beginning. The story of Abraham and his journey to what would become the Holy Land takes up 14 chapters of the book of Genesis. It is the theological hinge of the Torah that introduces the themes of covenant, promise, land, blessing, and the identity of Israel. It is, quite literally, the foundation upon which Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are all built.

We are not at all surprised, then, when Paul, in his letter to the Roman Christians, reaches back to the story of Abraham to illustrate for them what true faith looks like.

Unfortunately, when we start translating from Hebrew (Genesis) to Greek (Romans) to English, we run into some lack of clarity about the words **FAITH**, **BELIEF**, and **TRUST** that we need to unpack.

UNDERSTANDING FAITH, BELIEF, AND TRUST

Let’s work through that lack of clarity step by step.

1. In Genesis 12, Abraham obeys God’s call, gathers his household, and heads west.
2. In Genesis 15, that obedient trust is interpreted theologically: “Abraham believed the Lord, and God reckoned it to him as righteousness.”
3. Paul later returns to this in Romans 4, and the same passage is echoed in Galatians 3 and James 2 because it is central to understanding faith.

The challenge comes in translation, especially with the word **BELIEVING**. In the original Greek, Paul uses *episteusen*, a verb form related to faith. English has no natural verb form of *faith*, so translators often use *believed*. But in modern English, *belief* can sound thin, as though it means nothing more than agreement with an idea.

That is why the distinction matters. I can believe that two and two are four. I can believe that my wife loves me. I can even say I believe someone could push me across Niagara Falls in a wheelbarrow on a tightrope. But faith goes further than mental agreement.

Faith is when I actually get into the wheelbarrow.

Do you see the difference? Belief by itself may ask nothing of me. Faith, however, involves trust, and trust leads to action. To get into the wheelbarrow—literally or metaphorically—is to place myself in the hands of another. That is why faith is not merely believing something about God; it is trusting God enough to act.

In ancient Hebrew thought, faith and trust are deeply bound together. That helps us hear Paul's point more clearly.

So, a clearer rendering of Paul's message to the Romans might be this: "Abraham **trusted** the Lord, and the Lord reckoned his **trust** as righteousness." In this sense, righteousness is not merely correct belief; it is a life of trust in God.

For God, a righteous person is one who trusts God and lives according to what God has spoken through the prophets and through his Son, Jesus Christ. That trust is expressed in qualities such as:

- kindness
- love
- gentleness
- generosity
- empathy

These are the marks of a truly righteous person: someone who trusts the Lord. And as Christians, we trust God as God is revealed to us in Jesus Christ.

FAITH = TRUSTING AND DOING

The website RealityPathing.com tracks and collects true stories of people showing compassion and charity to others in need. Sarah's story may not be typical, but it is certainly illustrative of a person who could be described as righteous because she trusts God and acts in faith.

In a bustling city known for its fast pace and towering skyscrapers, Sarah, a university student, encountered a homeless man named David on her way to class. He had been sitting in the same place on the sidewalk every morning for a few days, and now, as the weather was turning chilly, she could see that he was cold and alone. The next day, instead of hurriedly passing by Sarah took a moment to talk with David, and she offered him a spare coat from her closet. This simple act resonated deeply with David, who had been feeling invisible.

Now David wasn't just the homeless guy sitting on the street. He was David, a person with a story to tell. So, each day Sarah brought David a coffee and a roll and listened to his story. Days turned into weeks, and Sarah continued to visit David. She brought him sandwiches, shared her own stories, and learned about his struggles. He was a veteran who had never adjusted to civilian life. Suffering from PTSD, he began to self-medicate with alcohol and OxyContin. His family had abandoned him, friends had begun staying away, and he blamed himself for throwing away everything he loved and valued. He had managed to dry out and get off drugs through therapy and an AA meeting especially for homeless people.

"And that's me," he told her. "Homeless and alone, and it's all my fault." Sarah says she remembered her Sunday School lessons and the sermons she heard in her home church, messages about how Jesus tells us to reach out to the poor and those in need. So, over time, she organized a fundraiser to help David get back on his feet. She got him into free therapy at the university and helped him find stable housing. Eventually, with the support of her church, her classmates, and her community, they raised enough money for David to find a small apartment and secure a part-time job.

It would have been easier for Sarah simply to keep walking past David or to give him a note with the address of the local homeless shelter. But easy was not what she was after. She saw in David an opportunity to be a righteous woman, a woman who trusted in the teachings of Jesus Christ and acted on them.

She saw a way to get in the wheelbarrow.

May we all be as faithful as she was.

AMEN