

# Trusting in God

BAQIR GHUBARI BUNAB

Translated by Mahdi Rastani

## Abstract

In this article, we will examine the concept of trusting in God (*tawakkul*) as an important means of coping with difficulties, despair, and disappointment and of avoiding symptoms such as stress and depression. The focus of this paper is to find a method to measure the amount of trust one has in God. Therefore, as a prerequisite, we will define this concept, explain its fundamental elements, discuss the psychological effects of trusting in God, and expound on its relationship with the reference, source of control, and primary and secondary control theories. Moreover, we will examine situations in which people tend to rely on God. Finally, the psychological methods and techniques that are instilled within the concept of trusting in God will be mentioned and elaborated on.

Difficulties and hardships threaten individuals all over the world today. Stress and depression are amongst the most common issues that our youth deal with. Psychologists use many different methods

including those based on Behaviorism, Cognitive theory, Psychotherapy, and Logotherapy to try to help people overcome these odds. My experience in consulting many patients has shown that trusting in God is not only a central factor in gaining hope and enhancing one's confidence, but also greatly effective in lowering stress and depression and curing many mental illnesses. The clinical interviews we have done with students from various fields of studies in the consulting office of the University of Tehran is strong proof for such a claim. My colleagues and I believe that this concept can be utilized by psychologists and psychiatrists to create mental tranquility for individuals and the society as a whole. In order to observe the effects of trusting in God from a scientific point of view, first we must design a method by which we can measure the amount of trust one has in God, and then examine its effect on elements like confidence, stress, depression, and other mental and emotional factors. Along this line, in this paper, we have strived to come up with a design that would lead to creating such a method. The following is a summary of the efforts that have been made in this regard.

### **The Meaning of Trusting in God**

In regard to the meaning of trusting in God, we must shed light on a few points:

1. This concept has to do with the relationship between an individual and God; it effects one's actions and illustrates how strong this relationship is. Even though one's relationship with God is also manifested in his supplications and many other *wajib* or *mustahab* acts, when it comes to trusting in God, a certain aspect of this relationship is shown, which originates from one's belief in God's unlimited power, wisdom, and beneficence. It is this belief that makes trusting in God different from the other manifestations of this

relationship. Trusting in God is so important from the mystical point of view, because trust is fundamental to all close friendships and relationships. It is because of this that God likes those who have trust in God and rely on Him. The Quran says,

Indeed Allah loves those who trust in Him. (Quran  
3:159)

2. When trusting in God, the individual also believes in the promises that God has given in the Quran. He believes that God will do as He pleases, and to oppose Him and work against him will not stop God from carrying out what He wills. A prerequisite of practicing trust in God is to distinguish between one's responsibility and God's responsibility. In other words, one must understand to what extent he is responsible and from what point on is he no longer responsible, but is rather required to leave things to God.

3. It is also necessary to know which issues trust in God applies to and which issues does it not cover. And for this, we must explain two points:

3.1. One must strive to manage matters and make effort to reach the intended goal as long as he is able to do so. Thus, there is no contradiction between making effort and relying on God. One can rely on God, but also make effort to reach the result he wants when possible by following the correct causes. Despite the fact that trusting in God means to no longer manage matters, it does not mean to neglect the chain of causes. Instead, it means to leave matters that are not in our control.

3.2. One must believe that his efforts will only be helpful if it is in accordance with God's will. In other words making effort is necessary, but it is not the only factor that plays a role here, rather

his efforts must also be compatible with God's will in order to reach the intended results.

Taking what was said above into consideration, trusting in God may be defined as follows:

Trusting in God is a type of relationship between an individual and God in which the individual is always aware of God in his actions and asks for God's assistance in reaching his intended goals, due to his belief in the unlimited power, wisdom, beneficence, and mercy of his Lord. At the same time, the individual utilizes the materialistic and spiritual causes that are at his disposal to reach his goal, knowing that his success is contingent upon God's will. Therefore, he relies on God in reaching his goal and is sure that God's will is always in his best interest.

## **The Fundamental Elements of Trusting in God**

### **1. Attributing Events to God**

Trusting in God and attributing the events that take place to Him brings about mental and inner peace, to such an extent that the individual is relieved of all stress and anxiety and can easily move towards his goal.

One of the qualities of a person that trusts in God is that when things are going well, he does not feel too happy and when they are not, he does not have extreme anxiety and stress. Instead, he makes the effort he can and leaves the result to God. Such a person is confident that God will help him in this path. A good analogy would be a person that has taken refuge in a palace or fort. One who trusts in God has taken refuge in God from the many difficulties that he cannot face on his own. Now that he is in the safe fort, there is no reason for him to be worried.

## 2. Understanding the Purpose behind Events

A believer is confident that there is a purpose and reason behind the events that take place in his life, and this helps him maintain his mental and emotional balance. After making his best effort in reaching the intended goal, he will not be disappointed if the goal is not achieved; rather, he is always sure that what happens is in his best interest. One who trusts in God believes in what He says in the Quran:

Yet it may be that you dislike something while it is good for you, and it may be that you love something while it is bad for you, and Allah knows and you do not know. (Quran 2:216)

## 3. Having Hope in God

Another aspect of trusting in God is that the individual has hope in God's mercy and grace during difficult times. Having hope in reaching salvation and comfort and being relieved from difficulties and hardships are results of trusting in God. The individual believes in the promises God has made in the Quran in regard to assisting his servants and helping them. Therefore, he does not give up in difficult situations. There are many instances in the Quran where God has intervened in difficult situations to help those who have trusted in him. The following verses are an example of such interventions:

And Job, when he called out to his Lord, "Indeed distress has befallen me, and You are the most merciful of the merciful." So we answered his prayer and removed his distress, and We gave him [back] his family along with others like them, as a mercy from Us, and an admonition for the devout. And Ishmael, Idris, and Dhu al-Kifl each of them was among the patient. We admitted them into Our mercy. Indeed they were among the righteous. And the Man of the

Fish, when he left in a rage, thinking that We would not put him to hardship, then he cried out in the darkness, “There is no god except You! You are immaculate! I have indeed been among the wrongdoers!” So, We answered his prayer and delivered him from the agony; and thus do We deliver the faithful. (Quran 21:87-8)

#### 4. Playing an Active Role

When closely studying Quranic verses and the sayings of the Prophet (s) and his household (a), we find that trusting in God has no contradiction with making effort to reach the goal. In fact, it is a means of making effort.

When instructing the believers to perform “Prayer of Fear” in the battlefield, the Quran commands a group of them to pray behind the Imam, while the other group defends against the enemy so that they will not be attacked. In this regard, the Quran states,

When you are among them, leading them in prayers, let a group of them stand with you carrying their weapons. And when they have done the prostrations, let them withdraw to the rear, then let the other group which has not prayed come and pray with you, taking their precautions and [bearing] their weapons. The faithless are eager that you should be oblivious of your weapons and your baggage, so that they could assault you all at once. But there is no sin upon you, if you are troubled by rain or are sick, to set aside your weapons; but take your precautions. Indeed Allah has prepared for the faithless a humiliating punishment. (Quran 4:102)

In another verse, when Prophet Job (a) is sending his children to Egypt in order to meet the governor, i.e. Prophet Joseph (a), he instructs them as follows:

And he said," My sons, do not enter by one gate, but enter by separate gates, though I cannot avail you anything against Allah. Sovereignty belongs only to Allah. In Him I have put my trust; and in Him let all the trusting put their trust. (Quran 12:67)

As one could observe, in the above-mentioned verses, the required steps to reach the specific goal are taken. However, the final result is left to God's will. Also, the sayings of the Prophet (s) and the Imams (a) encourage believers to make effort in the path of reaching their goal, and relying on God at the same time in regard to the final result. It is narrated that an individual visited the Prophet (s). The Prophet (s) asked, "What did you do to your camel?" The man replied, "I relied on God and left it untied." The Prophet's answer was

Tie your camel and rely on God at the same time.  
(Fayd Kashani n.d., 7:426)

## **The Results of Trusting in God**

Trusting in God may have many positive effects on one's social and personal life. The following are only some of these positive results:

### **1. Mental Tranquility and Inner Peace**

One of the greatest effects of trusting in God is the mental tranquility and peace of mind that it brings along. When Prophet Moses (a) led his people in their escape from the pharaoh, the pharaoh's army was able to reach them early in the morning. His people were extremely tired as they had been walking for a long time, unlike the pharaoh's

troops. At this point, his people were frightened and had lost hope, but he calmed them, because God was with him.

The Quran speaks of this critical moment:

When the two hosts sighted each other, the companions of Moses said, "Indeed we have been caught up." He said, "Certainly not! Indeed my Lord is with me. He will guide me. (Quran 21:61-2)

The greatest model of reliance on God, the Prophet (s), portrayed a beautiful instance of trusting in God in the story of his emigration to Medina. The Quran reports,

If you do not help him, then Allah has already helped him when the faithless expelled him, as one of two [refugees], when the two of them were in the cave, he said to his companion, "Do not grieve; Allah is indeed with us." Then Allah sent down His composure upon him, and strengthened him with hosts you did not see, and He made the word of the faithless the lowest; and the word of Allah is the highest; and Allah is all-mighty, all-wise. (Quran 9:40)

## 2. Strength and Power

Another result of relying on God is gaining strength and power. This meaning is mentioned in a saying from the Prophet (s):

One who wishes to be the most honored amongst people should be God-wary. And one who wishes to be the strongest of them should rely on him, and one who wishes to be the richest of them, should have more trust in what God has than what he has in his own hands."(9)

Quoting Prophet Noah (a) in the Quran, God says,

And should their aversion be hard on you, find, if you can, a tunnel into the ground, or a ladder into sky, that you may bring them a sign. Had Allah wished, He would have brought them together on guidance. So do not be one of the ignorant. (Quran 71:10)

This type of endurance was also seen from Prophet Hud (a) in his mission. The Quran quotes him as saying,

I call Allah to witness and you too be [my] witnesses that I repudiate what you take as [His] partners besides Him. Now try out your stratagems against me, together, without granting me any respite. Indeed I have put my trust in Allah, my Lord and your Lord. There is no living being but He holds it by its forelock. Indeed my Lord is on a straight path. (Quran 11:54-6)

Another example of such braveness which stems from one's reliance on God is the way Prophet Shu'ayb (a) confronts the individuals that have gone astray amongst his people.<sup>1</sup>

### 3. Protection of Honor

Another effect of trusting in God is being respected and honored amongst people. One who relies on God never begs people for his needs; therefore, his honor is always protected, as God who is the most honored will not allow one who takes refuge in him to be disrespected. The Quran states,

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<sup>1</sup> See Quran 8:88-9.

And put your trust in the Majestic, the All-merciful.  
(Quran 26:217)

And in another verse, we read

Those who trust in God will find Him Majestic and  
All-wise. (Quran 8:49)

In most commentaries, it is mentioned that because God is majestic and honored, he will not let a believer that trusts in him to be dishonored.

Using a beautiful analogy, Imam Sadiq (a) says,

إِنَّ الْغِنَى وَالْعِزَّ يَجُولَانِ، فَإِذَا ظَفَرًا بِمَوْضِعِ التَّوَكُّلِ أَوْطَنَا

Needlessness and honour wonder around, until they  
find a place that there is trust in God; there they  
reside (Kulayni 1407AH, 2:65).

Other results of having trust in God are being pleased with life and optimistic about the future.<sup>1</sup>

### **Psychological Roots of Trusting in God**

When we observe the studies done in regard to one's control over the circumstances he is dealing with in life, we can comprehend the concept of trusting in God easier. One of the prominent theories in this regard is the Primary Control theory, as opposed to the Secondary Control theory (Rothbaum, Weisz and Snyder 1982), (Band and Weisz 1998).

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance Quran 15:56; 12:83, 87; 21; 83-8.

Primary control takes place when individuals try to take matters into their own hands. The individual believes that he can change the situation in order to reach his goals, so he tries to change the environment and circumstances to fit his personal desires and needs. This control reaches its climax when he practically makes decisions and carries them out at the planned time.

Secondary control, however, only comes into the picture when primary control is not possible; it is only applied to help the individual adapt to a situation that cannot be changed. When individuals are dealing with circumstances that cannot be changed or reversed, they utilize methods of secondary control to cope with their situation. The main methods of secondary control are as follows:

#### 1- Vicarious Control

In this method, the individual tries to find people who can make a change in his situation and strives to work with them. The individual feels strong because when he is on the same side with the people that have the power to turn things around for him. He tries to encourage the influential people to make changes that are beneficial to him, and, as a result, he feels that matters are under control. In other words, he himself may not have the required power, but he utilizes the powers of others to keep the situation under control.

This theory is similar to having trust in and relying on God, in the sense that when matters are out of control, the believer knows that God will make things easy for him and will not leave him in difficult situations. This certainty comes from the trust he has in God's power and the relationship he has established between himself and God. Knowing this makes the believer incredibly strong and determined and leaves no room for depression or worries. It is through such belief that when Prophet Noah (a) faces all types of threats and problems

from his people, instead of feeling weak, he replies with all strength and confidence:

O people! Even if my belief and my preaching of the revelation of God seem strange to you, I put my trust in Him. Unite yourselves and seek help from your idols. You should not regret what you want to do, but should execute your plans against me without delay. (Quran 10:71-2)

This braveness, strength, and confidence stems from Prophet Noah's (a) trust in God and His power.<sup>1</sup>

In order to better understand this aspect of trust in God, we will review some of recommended *dhikrs* that relate to putting one's trust in God:

I put my trust in the Living One who does not die. (Majlisi 1403AH, 73:249)

I put my trust in in the All-Powerful, the All-Dominant, the Sublime, the Most High. (Majlisi 1403AH, 95:81)

I put my trust in the All-Powerful, the All-Dominant, the Sublime, the All-Embracing (Majlisi 1403AH, 95:67)

There is no power except in Allah; I put my trust in Allah. (Majlisi 1403AH, 69:49)

In all of the above statements, when the believers speak of who they rely on, they mention certain attributes, such as the Living, the All-Powerful, the All-Mighty, the Sublime, and the Most High. This shows that these believers view themselves connected to a source of power

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<sup>1</sup> See also Quran 11:53-7.

that surpasses all natural forces; a source that empowers them to have control over their affairs. This is why the Prophet (s) once stated,

One who wishes to be the strongest of people should rely on God. (Tabarsi 1965, 18)

## 2- Interpretive Control

Individuals that use interpretive control try to endure situations by interpreting them in a certain way. They try to understand why certain events take place for them, and by recognizing the purpose behind those events, they feel in control of the situation and are able to cope with it easier. Therefore, people who have had a painful and agonizing experience, such as losing a family member or a part of their body, usually strive to give purpose to their loss. Doing so gives them a better chance to adapt to the new circumstances.

Lately, we carried out an experiment in which students dealt with hypothetic critical situations (such as losing a family member or being diagnosed with a rare disease). They were asked to have their thoughts and feelings written down. Many of them wrote, "I will struggle to figure out the purpose behind this incident. If I am able to do so, a noticeable portion of my distress and sadness will no longer remain."

The interviews that I personally carried out in the consulting office of the university clearly showed that discovering the purpose and reason behind such incidents gives the individual the strength to cope with them.

People from different cultures and backgrounds employ this method. For instance, the great Islamic scholar, Shahid Thani (d. 954 A.H), wrote the book *Musakkin al-fu'ad 'inda faqd al-ahibba wa al-awlad* (Soother of the Heart at the Loss of Friends and Children). Dr. Viktor

Frankl presented his Logotherapy theory after losing all of his family members on concentration camps in Germany.

Because a believer knows that all incidents are willed by God, he is sure that there is a good reason to every incident that takes place in his life.

Researchers believe that normal individuals embrace both primary and secondary control to keep things under control and maintain their hope in the future (Rothbaum, Weisz and Snyder 1982).

It is clear how these theories could be linked to the concept of trusting in God, because one who trusts in God also embraces vicarious control by linking with the power and will of God. In other words, a believer knows that by being on God's side, he will be able to overcome the vicissitudes of life.

On the other hand, interpretive control is also linked to this concept, as the believer always keeps God's will and wisdom in the picture. Therefore, no matter what awful incident takes place for him, he is able to give purpose to it and consider it to be in his best interest. In this respect, God says in the Quran,

You may not like something which, in fact, is for your good and something that you may love, in fact, may be evil. God knows, but you do not know.  
(Quran 2:216)

Observing the connection between primary and secondary control and their practical methods are very useful and have been discussed by researchers. However, very little empirical research has been done pertaining to the concept of trusting in God and its different aspects. This is why we have made special effort in this field.

## **An Outline of the Experiment**

This outline can be traced back to the Islamic sources, mainly Quranic verses and the teachings of the Ahl al-Bayt (a). My personal experience in reacting to stressful and critical situations has contributed to the establishment of this experiment. Also, the lengthy interviews done with students and teachers from the universities and Islamic seminaries have helped create an outline for such an experiment.

Comparing the concept of trusting in God that has been explained in commentaries of the Quran and books on ethics with other psychological theories has brought the author to the conclusion that this concept is clearly linked to the attribution styles and control theories (Primary Control vs. Secondary Control). With this in mind, we developed an outline for the experiment at the University of Tehran. The final result was a research project that is currently being examined at the Islamic Researches Group.

Below we will briefly explain the different aspects of this research.

## **Goals of the Experiment**

The main goal of this experiment is to establish a method by which it is possible to measure the amount of trust one has in God. This method, however, will only be used in psychological researches and experiments.

There are also other goals in this research:

- 1- Recognizing the situations and circumstances in which trust in God manifests itself most.

Critical moments when normal solutions are no longer beneficial is a good example. Instead of despair, one may rely on God and ask Him for assistance. Another example is dilemmas in which one is not sure

of the consequences of his decision, but by trusting in God, one can put away all doubts and decisively take a path.

We were able to accumulate this information during the interviews that were carried out. Researchers are still assessing this information to present the final result.

2- Observing the effects of trusting in God in lessening stress and depression amongst students.

### **Methods of Accumulating Information**

In the first step, in order to understand the scope and aspects of this concept, all related Quranic verses were studied based on the commentaries of Allamah Tabataba'i and Yusuf 'Ali. Then to have a better understanding of the verses and observe the situations in which Muslims had trust in God, the traditions in this field were also examined.

In the second step we carried out interviews with people who trust in God from among instructors of universities and Islamic seminaries to understand the situations in which people tend to rely on God and what people understand from the concept of having trust in God.

In the third step, a total of 45 situations were recognized that students would be interviewed about. During the interviews, the students were asked to explain their thoughts, emotions and feelings in these circumstances.

Two groups of students would take part in the experiment. The first group would be given a paper that simply described the situation they were hypothetically dealing with, whether it was losing a family member, being diagnosed with a rare disease, making a critical decision, being attacked by an enemy, or having their family taken captive. After writing their thoughts and emotions, the researchers

would categorize the answers into one of the following categories: asking other people for help, utilizing material causes, staying immobilized and in despair, trusting in God without taking action or trusting in God and making the required effort.

The second group of students were given a form with information pertaining to psychological methods of confronting such situations. The form read,

People have different thoughts, feelings, and reactions when they face difficult situations:

1. Relying on oneself to solve the problem or change the situation
2. Utilizing possibly effective causes to change the situation
3. Relying on friends and family to make things better
4. Trying to interpret and understand the situation in order to cope with it
5. Trusting in God and His will
6. A combination of some of the above options

Interviewees of this group were asked to read the different situations and choose an option themselves. Both experiments consisted of the same situations and stories, and the forms were also given out at the same time.

The result was very surprising. There was a great difference between the two groups and their answers. The group that was provided with psychological information had chosen the option of trusting in God in many cases, while the other group's answers were of great diversity.

Another point was that the students tended to trust in God rather than relying on themselves or friends in more difficult situations.

The third point understood from the experiment was that the answers differed depending on the person's character and qualities. For example, the answers given by females were different from that of the male interviewees.

Fourthly, observing the answers showed that there were two understandings of having trust in God. In the first, the individual would simply have trust in God without striving and making effort to solve the problem, while in the second, alongside relying on the divine power, the individual would also take action to change the situation as much as he possibly could. When individuals embracing the second understanding would reach a point where making effort was no more useful, instead of feeling despair, they would then take refuge in God.

Another interesting result was that the students that tended to have trust in God were less stressful when they confronted the situations and had more hope in the future. Many other results were derived from the experiment, which we will leave for another opportunity to elaborate on

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