

AND NOW THESE THREE REMAIN:
FAITH, HOPE & LOVE

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1.

What is Biblical Faith?

We are familiar with Paul's eloquent description of Christian love in his letter to the Corinthian church (1 Corinthians 13:4-7) in which he lays out the image of Christ fully formed in the character of a mature Christian. Less known and quoted, however, is the conclusion of this section where he sets in order the spiritual steps that both lead and enable the disciple of Christ to reach this spiritual maturity.

But now faith, hope, love, abide these three;
but the greatest of these is love.
- 1 Corinthians 13:13

This study explains more fully what the Bible teaches about faith, hope, and love so we can learn to abide in these, and in doing so reach a greater measure of spiritual maturity so desirable in Christ.

The first step, faith, is both a large and a small subject. Large in the sense that so much has been and can be said about it. Small because each of us has our own individual and intimate sense of what faith is for us. Faith is like the sun: vast and beyond human grasp but still personal as each senses its heat on one's face on a hot summer afternoon.

WHAT FAITH IS NOT

I suppose a good way to begin this subject is by reviewing some misconceptions about faith. In other words, what faith is not.

Throughout the Bible we read about many who claimed to be religious and holy and thus people of faith, but did not know the first thing about faith. These people and their attitudes live on today as examples of what faith is not.

Faith is Not Religious Heritage

The Pharisees (a strict sect of religious lawyers and teachers in Israel at the time of Christ) were indignant with Jesus when He accused them of being sinful. They answered that they were "sons of Abraham" (John 8:39) and this religious and cultural heritage was all that they needed to be justified before God, not repentance, obedience or faith. We take on the same attitude when we rest our confidence in our religious heritage rather than in faith. Some think that being part of a religious group for a long time is good enough. Identification or association with a particular church for several generations is not the same thing as faith.

Faith is Not Indoctrination

The Jews knew the Law, they knew the rules, traditions and arguments. However, Paul says that they did not achieve righteousness ("because they did not pursue it by faith" - Romans 9:32). Memorizing Scripture is helpful to build faith, but it is not the same as having faith; knowing and arguing about different points of doctrine successfully is important but is not a substitute for faith. Indoctrination is a means to acquire faith, but the practice and the expertise of knowing the theory of our religion is not in itself faith.

Faith is Not Comfort

Some people confuse familiarity with faith. The number two stumbling block in bringing people to Christ is their comfort with their religion. The number one impediment is sin and the love of sin (John 3:19).

Feeling at home with a certain set of ideas, rituals, traditions, or comfort with a certain meeting place and group of people is not faith. It is emotion, it is familiarity, but it is not faith. The Jews drew great comfort from their traditions and through the excesses of the Pharisees, turned their comfortable traditions into inflexible laws that eventually overshadowed the reason for the traditions which was the honoring of God Himself.

Faith is Not Self Righteousness

The Jews understood that God was real and that there was a link between God and man. With time they came to believe that their own self-righteousness was their link with the Lord, their way to view the invisible God (i.e. I am righteous therefore my vision of God is right as well). Again, Paul explains that their mistake was substituting self-righteousness for faith (Romans 9:30-32). We fall into the same subtle trap when we assume that we can substitute a level of morality or a general niceness about ourselves into faith. Some think that a well-kept lawn, a successful marriage, a meaningful career or healthy children are the same thing or as good as faith. It is not that we deny faith, we merely transform faith into a nice lifestyle (the American dream) and for us, living the good life becomes our faith.

WHAT FAITH IS

Enough about what faith is not, let us look at some concrete things that the Bible identifies as faith. To begin with, faith is a composite of several different factors. It is like a puzzle that you put together one piece at a time in order to reveal the final image. The key pieces are the following:

A. Faith is Specific Knowledge

So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.
- Romans 10:17

When the Bible talks about faith it does so in both objective and subjective terms. When the Bible refers to "The Faith" it is talking about a body of specific religious information formulated and given by Jesus and later disseminated by His Apostles and then recorded in the New Testament. When Paul says, "There is one faith" (Ephesians 4:5) he refers to information. When Jude says, "[...] continue earnestly for the faith once delivered to the saints." (Jude 3), he is talking about the knowledge and information concerning Christ given by God once and for all to the church.

In other instances, the Bible talks about faith as a subjective experience, something that one possesses or expresses that in certain instances produces results of some kind. We usually refer to this as "belief" or "trust." In Galatians 3:22-23 Paul uses both terms in the same sentence.

²² But the Scripture has shut up everyone under sin, so that the promise by faith (belief/trust) in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. ²³ But before faith (the faith - information/knowledge) came, we were kept in custody under the law, being shut up to the faith (information/knowledge) which was later to be revealed.

In this passage Paul is saying that you cannot have faith (belief) until you have the faith (information/knowledge).

So before it becomes or does anything, faith is specific knowledge and information given to us by Christ contained in the Bible.

B. Faith is an Act of the Will

Knowledge by itself is not faith. It must be acted upon in order to become faith. Our will must respond to the knowledge we read about in Scripture in two specific ways for faith (belief) to emerge from the words of Christ:

1. We must accept the information as being true. This is what we refer to as believing.

"[...] he who comes to God must believe that He is."
- Hebrews 11:6

Our will must decide that what we have heard from Christ is true.

2. We must act upon or respond to the information given. Faith is born when we believe as true and respond to the words of Jesus as He instructs us to do so.

In Acts 8:26-38 Luke tells the story of Philip and the Eunuch. (The Eunuch, a convert to Judaism was reading Scripture while traveling in his carriage. He invites Philip to join and teach him regarding the passage he was reading in Isaiah referring to the coming Messiah.) The Eunuch had information but did not understand it.

³⁰ Philip ran up and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and said, "Do you understand what you are reading?" ³¹ And he said, "Well, how could I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. ³² Now the passage of Scripture which he was reading was this:

"He was led as a sheep to slaughter;
And as a lamb before its shearer is silent,
So He does not open His mouth.

³³ "In humiliation His judgment was taken away;
Who will relate His generation?
For His life is removed from the earth."

³⁴ The eunuch answered Philip and said, "Please tell me, of whom does the prophet say this? Of himself or of someone else?"

- Acts 8:30-34

Philip provides him with specific information relating to Christ (the link/the window) that clarifies this knowledge.

Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him.

- Acts 8:35

At this point the only thing that the Eunuch has is specific information, he must accept it as true (his confession) and act or respond to it (his baptism) in order for the information to become faith.

³⁶As they went along the road they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?" ³⁷[And Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." And he answered and said, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God."] ³⁸And he ordered the chariot to stop; and they both went down into the water, Philip as well as the eunuch, and he baptized him.

- Acts 8:36-38

In the book of Acts we read that on the day of Pentecost Peter preached the specific information regarding Christ's death and resurrection to a large crowd gathered at the temple for this feast. The people who heard his sermon then asked Peter what they had to do. This was an acknowledgement that they believed and accepted as true what he had told them (that Jesus was the Messiah, etc.). Now they wanted to know how they were to respond to this information that they believed (how were they to express their faith?). Peter answers that they should repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins and the reception of the Holy Spirit.

³⁷Now when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brethren, what shall we do?" ³⁸Peter said to them, "Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

- Acts 2:37-38

The confusion in much of the religious world stems from the idea that man is not able to make a proper act of will. According to most popular

Christian teaching on this matter God offers salvation without an act of will on the part of man. God simply chooses different ones for salvation, and they accept His choice by understanding and repeating certain words, "I accept Jesus as my personal savior" etc. or the parents substitute their faith on behalf of their infant child so that the baby becomes a candidate for baptism.

We need to realize that God has provided "specific information" as to how people are to express their belief in response to His Word (the faith), and that is through repentance and baptism.

Faith, therefore, is produced when we exercise our will (not in any old way), but when we exercise our will through belief and obedience in accordance with the words of Christ. One clear example of this is found in the gospel of Mark:

He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned.
- Mark 16:16

He who has believed = Accepted as true

- and has been baptized = An act of the will to express belief
- Belief + Baptism = Salvation

C. Faith is Feeling

I know that we do not like this idea because we would prefer to keep religion neatly stored in our minds and not let it get to our hearts. But faith produces feelings about what we have decided and done regarding the knowledge given to us by Christ.

1. We Feel Assurance

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

- Hebrews 11:1

Assurance is a feeling. The author says that faith produces a feeling of security and assurance about things we do not see but are convinced that we will receive. I have acted upon the words of Christ and the result in my life is that I feel confident (confidence is a feeling is it not?) about the future and the unseen promises of God.

2. We Feel Determination

¹³ Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

- Philippians 3:13-14

In opposition to the evidence to the contrary (sin, death, sorrow, disbelief) I am determined to press on to eternal life. The reasons to persevere may be kept in one's mind, but the experience of persevering is felt through determination. Faith creates a determination in me that moves me to persevere, to press on despite the opposition I may encounter in this largely unbelieving world.

3. We Feel Joy

From beginning to end, the revelation of the Word (the good news, the gospel) has created faith, and that faith has produced joy, and joy is a feeling is it not?

But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people;

- Luke 2:10

Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy in the faith,
- Philippians 1:25

So, faith begins as information processed by our wills into belief and action, and is then experienced as confidence, perseverance and joy.

SUMMARY

You will note that I have not talked about what faith motivates us to do, how long we must be faithful, how to renew our faith or share it with others. What I have tried to do is to eliminate some false ideas about faith:

- It is not my father's religion or traditions.
- It is not simply doctrine or information.
- It is not religious habit.
- It is not personal goodness.

Faith has these elements, but it is not these things. In the place of these we have learned that biblical faith:

- Begins with the words and teachings of Jesus.
- Comes to life when an individual believes these words as true and responds to them.
- Is continually experienced because it produces confidence, perseverance and a joyful heart and, as we will see in the next few chapters, also produces hope and love.

I pray that if your notion of faith was incorrect, you will discard it today and respond to the faith given to us by Jesus in the Bible: that you will believe, that you will obey in repentance and baptism, that you will continue in this belief in order to experience the assurance, strength and joy that only comes with true biblical faith.

2. What is Biblical Hope?

In the previous chapter I said that faith was made up of three elements:

1. Precise knowledge: the words of Christ in the Bible.
2. An act of the will in responding to this knowledge in belief and obedience.
3. The experience of joy, determination and confidence or hope.

In this chapter I would like to more closely examine the idea of hope, the natural outgrowth of a sincere faith.

WISHING AND HOPING

Back in the 1960's a singer named Dusty Springfield recorded a song entitled "Wishing and Hoping." It was about a girl who was wanting a boy, who was ignoring her, to notice and care for her. I think this is how the world interprets the idea of hope. It is just another word for wishing or dreaming about something. For example, "I hope I win the lottery," or "I hope it is nice for the picnic," or "I hope you will have a great vacation." For most people hope is seen as a fond gesture of goodwill or the expression of an unfulfilled desire. The English word hope, however, has a much narrower meaning. According to Webster's Dictionary, hope means "...a confident expectation that a desire will be fulfilled."

When the Bible uses the word hope it uses it in this sense. In the earliest times the Hebrew word for hope in the Old Testament was a word that meant a cord or an attachment, signifying that a person was attached in safety. By the time the book of Job was written (1400 BC) this word included the sense of longing and expectation. When David and Solomon expressed this idea in their writings they included all three concepts of security, desire and waiting.

- **David:** "My flesh also shall rest in hope."
(Psalm 16:9)
- **Solomon:** "The righteous has hope in his death."
(Proverbs 14:32)

New Testament writers used the word hope in only one way and that was to express the idea that one anticipates (usually with pleasure) what one waits for. In the world, the general use of the word hope is akin to wishing or dreaming for something. The writers of the Bible, however, used the word hope when they wanted to convey that someone had a confident expectation of a future blessing of some kind.

EARTHLY HOPE VS. HEAVENLY HOPE

There is one important difference with the meaning of the word hope that is in Webster's Dictionary and the meaning of the work hope

contained in the Bible. The hope in Webster's is based on the idea that one is relatively sure that things are going to work out. For example, you have worked hard in your math class, done well on the assignments and all of the previous tests, therefore, you hope for success in the final. Based on what you know, your hope to pass the exam is well founded. Of course, you could have an accident on the way to the test, or a bad night before the exam or the teacher decides to ask questions based on obscure material not really covered in class. In other words, the hope referred to in Webster's is relative, that is why they call it hope, you are pretty sure but not one hundred percent sure.

When the Bible mentions hope, however, it is talking about something that is one hundred percent sure! The Bible uses the term hope when it refers to something that is not yet present or visible but is certain to take place. Webster's uses the term hope when it refers to something not yet present or visible, but pretty sure. See the difference?

Pretty sure vs. one hundred percent sure!

Why This Difference?

The difference between the two concepts of hope is based on the issue of guarantee. In the world only human strength, intelligence and honor can guarantee what is hoped for. Since there is a limit to these things, there is only a limited guarantee for our hope (a limited guarantee because you never know).

In the Bible, God is the one Who guarantees what we hope for, and since there are no limitations on God, there is no limit on His guarantee for what we hope for. Our hope, therefore, is sure.

The psalmist describes this truth so simply in Psalms 71:5:

For You are my hope;
O Lord God, You are my confidence from my youth.

God is the foundation, guarantor and provider of all we hope for, so the odds of us receiving what we hope for in Christ are one hundred percent.

The Things We Hope For

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

- Hebrews 11:1

The Hebrew writer tells us that faith produces a feeling of confidence that we will receive the things we hope for and the things we confidently expect to receive. Herein lies another difference between Webster's hope and the hope spoken of in the Bible. Hope in this world is for things we do not have now but expect to have in the future... maybe (i.e. good health, prosperity, etc.).

Biblical hope, on the other hand, is certain because God not only guarantees it but has already given to us the things we hope for, we simply do not see all of them yet. This is what the author of the Hebrew letter is getting at in this passage. By faith we accept as true that God has already given us the things we hope for, but are unseen for the moment. A good example of this phenomenon takes place at Christmas. We have the presents, they are all under the tree, our names are on the boxes, they are ours, but we have to wait until Christmas morning in order to unwrap and actually see them. Paul talks about this in Romans 8 and Ephesians 1:

²⁴ For in hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for who hopes for what he already sees? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it.

- Romans 8:24-25

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ
- Ephesians 1:3

Note that in Ephesians 1:3, Paul says that every spiritual blessing has already been given. Everything that we can ever hope for (forgiveness, peace, freedom from condemnation and punishment, eternal life, spiritual power, and character), all of these and more have already been given to us.

Some of these things we already perceive in ourselves, and some we do not, but the point that the Bible makes is that we already possess them, that is why our hope is secure.

HOW TO OBTAIN HOPE

Webster's does not explain it, but the way to have hope in this world is through effort. Work hard, prepare, invest, hope for the best. For example, the student who is lazy, never does homework, pays little attention in class, and refuses any attempt to get help cannot have real hope to pass the final. He can wish or dream, but he cannot have hope because hope is confident expectation based on effort or some guarantee.

The Bible explains that biblical hope is not obtained through effort but through faith in Jesus Christ. I have explained this in the previous chapter but briefly, here is how that works. Faith is produced when a person:

1. Believes as true that Jesus is the Lord and Savior (Mark 16:16).
2. This belief leads one to respond to Him in obedience expressed in repentance and baptism (Acts 2:37-38).

3. As a Christian this person will receive all the spiritual blessings promised by God to those who believe (Ephesians 1:3).

None of us have worked or prepared in such a way that will guarantee that we will receive these blessings. We are all like the student who has neglected his studies and has no chance to pass the test through skill or effort. God, however, has abolished the test and guarantees the rewards to all those who believe and obey Christ, something that everyone is able to do.

We have hope because through Jesus Christ we possess all the heavenly blessings. We may not see all of them yet, but our names are on every one of them and God is saving them for us until the appropriate time (when He comes and we are resurrected like children awakened to finally open the gifts awaiting us).

SUMMARY

Do you have hope about heaven? I don't mean, "Well, I am pretty sure about heaven" or, "I think so/I hope so." I mean the 100% absolutely sure kind of hope that the Bible talks about. You have this hope if you have obeyed Jesus Christ and are faithful to Him. Rejoice in this hope, launch out on it, be courageous in it because you already have everything you hoped for.

If, on the other hand, you do not have this kind of hope, why not secure it today? Why not attach yourself with that cord of safety (like the Old Testament writers used to say) to the Lord today by confessing your faith in Him, repenting of your sins, and being baptized in His name? It is in this way that your biblical faith will lead you to biblical hope and the joy that this hope will produce in your heart.

3.

What is Biblical Love?

In I Corinthians 13:13 Paul summarizes the essence of the Christian life: the pursuit of faith, hope, and love.

But now faith, hope, love, abide these three; but the greatest of these is love.

In the previous chapters I have reviewed with you the first two concepts of faith and hope. Faith, I said, was a mix of three elements:

1. Knowledge that comes from the words of Christ found in the Bible.
2. A decision to accept as true and obey those words.
3. The ongoing experience of joy, perseverance and confidence based on our knowledge, belief, and obedience of Christ's words.

Hope, we discovered, was an experience produced by faith. It was the absolute certainty that we will receive what God has promised us because:

1. God guarantees it.
2. He has already given it to us in Christ.

In this final section I want to review some of the reasons why Paul says that love is greater than faith or hope.

BACKGROUND

In the English language the word love is an all-purpose kind of word that describes the various levels of fondness that we have for different things. For example, "I love my dog" or "I love the sport of football" or, "I love my mother." You will note that the same word, love, is used to describe how one feels about very different things.

The New Testament was written in the Greek language and the Greeks, unlike the English, had a variety of words to express the different feelings of love. For example:

Phileo

This was the most common word for love or affection and the various words that come from this word show this (e.g. philos - love for a friend; philema - a kiss; philosophia - a love of knowledge; Philadelphia - a love of brother; philoxenia - a love of strangers or hospitality). It was a word that denoted the attraction of people to one another in a non-sexual way. This word also served to express a fondness for things and a concern for hospitality but was not a word used in a religious context.

Stergo

The word stergo was used to describe the affection between parents and children. At times it served to describe the love that the nation had for its ruler, and on occasion was put into use as a way to describe the affection that a dog had for its master. It was, however, rarely used in the New Testament.

Eros

The word eros denoted the craving and sensual longing between the sexes. It was the word the Greeks used when describing the state of ecstasy that leaves behind all will, reason and discretion. The Greek god

of love bore the same name. Much of the sexuality in pagan religion was based on the idea that one could commune with the gods when reaching a state of sexual ecstasy. This is what the pagan orgy and practice of sex with temple prostitutes was all about. The word eros also referred to the pleasure one experienced from the arts, sports, etc.

Agape

In ancient Greek literature this word was used infrequently (only one reference is found outside the Bible). It meant to welcome or to be generous with. It was used to describe the attitude that parents would have with an only child. Like many other ideas, the Bible writers took this rather bland and obscure word and injected it with very special meaning to describe God's attitude towards us, and then in time, our attitude toward God and other people.

In the New Testament, therefore, when we see the word "love" it is almost always the English translation of the Greek word agape that the writers chose to describe Christian love because it was different than phileo, stergo or eros.

WHY IS IT BETTER THAN FAITH OR HOPE?

In the passage we have been examining, Paul urged the church to pursue faith, hope and love, but then says that love is the greatest. Why would love be the greatest? After all, without faith we could not be saved and without hope we would be miserable. Why then would Paul say that love is the greatest? Here are three reasons why the Apostle would claim this:

1. Love is a Godly Quality

Love is something that existed before faith or hope. It is part of God's nature.

The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love.
- I John 4:8

God does not need faith because His word is truth (John 17:17). Man needs faith but God does not because He already knows everything. Man lives on hope because hope supports his yearning to be out of his sinful body and with God (Romans 8:24-25). But God is not hopeful, He is the one who possesses everything, who gives everything, who guarantees everything. He does not need hope to sustain Himself. Faith and hope are things that God has provided for man, to save and sustain him. Love, however, is a characteristic that belongs to God and was present long before there was any need for faith or hope. It is greater because, like God, it is eternal in nature.

2. Love is Powerful

What moved God to create the world? What moved God to save the world? What moved Jesus to die for his friends?

Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends.

- John 15:13

It is this agape type of love that is different from friendship, family or sexual love. Love has power because power is needed to treat others in a way that blesses only them and not self. Power is required to bestow favor on one who is unworthy of it or to love those who do not love you or are not appealing to you. Only something powerful can move a person to sacrifice self for someone else and care for those who can give nothing in return.

Love is greater than faith or hope because love has the power to create, regenerate and sustain not only the one who expresses it but the one who receives it as well. Yes, we are saved by faith and sustained by hope, but that salvation would not have been possible if "[God] had not loved us first." (I John 4:19).

3. Love Produces Light

In John 13:35 Jesus said,

"By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love (agape) for one another."

The love that we have, first and foremost for one another as Christians, will be the initial light that will display Christ to the world. People are not won over by our great faith or confidence. They are drawn by the love that they see Christians sharing in the church and then as they experience it themselves. People who see us helping each other, supporting each other and sacrificing for one another are drawn to the love that they see in us.

Love is the greatest because it is the thing in this world that most resembles, represents and reflects the true God and His very real presence in the world. When Jesus talks about light and salt (Matthew 5:14), He is not referring to faith or hope, He is describing the effects of love.

The power of the gospel is not simply religious information about Christianity, it is the love story about Jesus dying for sinners like you and me. The power of our Christian life is not about how much we believe or how convincing we can be in a religious argument. It is the witness of our loving attitude toward one another in Christ, and our love for those who have not yet known Christ. The power of the gospel brings people to Christ, but it is the light of our love that makes them love the Lord and each other as well.

So, we get to the question:

WHAT IS LOVE?

In the world, love is about feelings: feeling close and secure to parents and family; feeling intimacy and trust with friends; feeling concern and appreciation for things of beauty, strangers, the nation, a cause or a feeling of sexual passion. The Bible does not condemn these feelings,

they are a natural part of the human experience. But when the Bible talks about love it talks about something that goes beyond feelings. That is why it uses a special word to describe love.

In the Bible, love is:

1. **A characteristic of God:** A generosity, a graciousness, a kindness not based on feelings but on principle. A holy and perfect God is kind, generous and welcoming.
2. **A creative power:** Love based on feeling takes, needs and searches for satisfaction. Biblical love empowers others to life, to love and to joy.
3. **A bright light:** Human love eventually fades because of death or loss of interest. Biblical love becomes brighter and brighter because the source that powers it in our hearts is God Himself.

To make sure that we would not misunderstand this greatest of all things, God demonstrated this love in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus, as a human, experienced all of the feelings of human love, but because He was God He also demonstrated agape/love for all to see. We witnessed this love in His godly character, in His holiness, purity and knowledge, His creative power in miracles, and the bright light of His mercy, kindness and sacrifice on the cross.

If God is love and Jesus is God, then Jesus is love. When I see Jesus I not only see the Father, but I see what love is as well.

SUMMARY

In this brief study I have tried to share with you the great triad of the Bible: faith, hope and love. Love is the greatest of these because it is first and it will be last. Long after faith and hope are no longer necessary, love will still be part of our heavenly experience. As a matter of fact, it will be the sum total of our heavenly life, loving God as He loves us forever.

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