

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 3 – Chapter 2 – Part 3

FAITH: ITS DEFINITION SET FORTH, AND ITS PROPERTIES EXPLAINED

In this chapter Calvin begins to more clearly define faith. As we shall see, this matters to Calvin because faith in Jesus Christ is what saves.

Summary: In the last two lessons on Chapter 2, Calvin makes it clear that faith has content (knowledge of Jesus Christ), which we receive through the New Testament (Gospel), which is made alive in us through the Holy Spirit and that there are different aspects of faith. In this lesson we continue our examination of faith.

Calvin begins with an eloquent description of the struggle of faith. *“...the Godly heart feels in itself a division because it is partly imbued with sweetness from its recognition of the divine goodness; partly grieves in bitterness from the awareness of its calamity (God’s judgment); partly rests upon the promises of the gospel; partly trembles at the evidence of its iniquity (sin); partly rejoices at the expectation of life, partly shudders at death”* (pg. 564). Calvin clearly understands that as human beings we are not capable of perfect faith. We will always have doubts. Even so, he tells us that *“...faith ultimately triumphs over those difficulties which besiege and seem to imperil it”* (pg. 564). And that *“...the godly mind, however strange the ways in which it is vexed and troubled, finally surmounts all difficulties, and never allows itself to be deprived of assurance of divine mercy”* (pg. 566). The most doubt can do, Calvin says, is to harass and wound, but cannot penetrate deep inside because faith is our shield.

The discussion of faith continues with Calvin’s examination of what it means to “fear the Lord.” Just as with election (God only chooses some to have faith), the concept of fearing God is one that seems, to many of us, to be a relic of the past. In other words, how can we understand ourselves loved by God and at the same time fearful of God. Calvin offers several insights. First, fear is not meant to deprive us of the *“full assurance of God’s mercy”* (pg. 568). Second, fear is also reverence. The reverence we experience *“whenever we come into the presence of God’s majesty...”* (pg. 569). Third, fear is meant to makes us cautious in our moral choices, because there are consequences for inappropriate behavior.

At this point, Calvin offers us several reasons why our faith, even mingled with fear and reverence, will not fail us. First, it will not fail us because we have been made one with Christ. *“For we await salvation from him not because he appears to us afar off, but because he makes us, engrafted into his body, participants not only in all his benefits but also in himself...Christ is not outside of us but dwells within us”* (pg. 570). Second, it will not fail us because it is based on a promise of God. *“Nevertheless, faith properly begins with the promise (of God’s mercy), rests in it, and ends in it. For in God, faith seeks life; a life not found in the commandments or...penalties, but in the promise of mercy, and only in a freely given promise”* (pg. 575). Third, faith will not fail because we can find God’s grace laid out for us in scripture. Fourth, faith will not fail us because it is based on *“...the testimony of God’s love for us (meaning in what Jesus has done)”* (pg. 579). Finally, faith will not fail because it is a gift of the Spirit. In fact, faith is *“a manifestation of God’s power”* (pg. 583).

As Calvin ends this section on the perseverance of faith, he takes on those who see our salvation as being questionable even when faith is present (pg. 587). He does so by quoting the Apostle Paul from Romans 8. *“I am surely convinced that neither angels, nor powers, nor principalities, nor death, nor life, nor things present, nor things to come...will separate us from the love by which the Lord embraces us in Christ.”* And *“For there he (Paul) is discussing those benefits which come to all believers in common from faith...”* (pg. 587). Thus we all ought to live with the joy of knowing God’s love for us never ends.

Reflections: One of my great memories of childhood was watching the very first spacewalk, and then building a model of that event. It was an amazing thing to watch as a human being, attached only by an umbilical cord, hovered out in space. That image is one that always comes to mind when I think of this part of Calvin’s work; that the Spirit is our umbilical cord that keeps us attached to God even when we drift off. It is our assurance that God will never let us go.

Questions:

1. Have you ever struggled with your faith? If so, how have you sustained it?
2. Which of Calvin’s reasons for faith not failing us, do you find most appealing, and why?
3. What does the assurance of God’s eternal love for you mean to you?