

John Calvin for Everyone  
The Institutes of the Christian Religion  
Book 3 – Chapter 2 – Part 4

FAITH: ITS DEFINITION SET FORTH, AND ITS PROPERTIES EXPLAINED

In the last three lessons, all 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, that there are different aspects of faith and that God will not allow our faith to fail. In this lesson, we continue our examination of faith, by looking at the relationship between faith, hope and love. 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:** Calvin wants to make clear that faith is the foundation for both hope and love. He uses Hebrews 11 to defend this view *“Faith is the substance of things to be hoped for, the indication of things not appearing”* (pg. 588). Thus for Calvin, it is faith that is the foundation for everything; it is the “substance” of all that God has done for us. This is so because, *“...the things pertaining to our salvation are too high to be perceived by our senses, or seen by our eyes, or handled by our hands; and that...we do not possess these things in any other way...”* than through faith (pg. 588). Thus faith allows us to see the content of God’s work for which we hope and becomes the foundation of the love for which we yearn. Faith offers us then, *“...a sure possession of those things which God has promised us”* (pg. 588).

Even so, Calvin wants us to see that faith needs hope as surely as hope is dependent upon faith. *“Accordingly, in brief, hope is nothing else than the expectation of those things which faith has believed to have been truly promised by God (grace, salvation, etc.). Thus, faith believes God to be true, hope awaits the time when his truth shall be manifested; faith believes that he is our Father, hope anticipates that he will ever show himself to be a Father toward us; faith believes that eternal life has been given to us, hope anticipates that it will sometime be revealed; faith is the foundation upon which hope rests, hope nourishes and sustains faith”* (pg. 590). He will go on to say that hope strengthens, refreshes and sustains faith that it might not fail.

In terms of love, Calvin believes that it is faith that allows us to experience God’s love just as faith gives birth to hope. He writes, *“...for it is faith alone that first engenders love in us”* (pg. 589). This love is created by faith because we believe that we are loved by God such that we are forgiven, empowered to do good, and are given eternal life, all as free gifts. We are not given them because we have merited them by being good people. But we are given them because God freely loves us and so we are drawn into loving God in return.

Calvin spends so much time writing about faith because it was critical to his argument that we are saved by grace through faith and not by works. The medieval Roman Catholic Church argued that salvation came only through “merit” earned by good works; mainly meaning participation in the sacraments and/or the purchasing of indulgences (sort of get out of purgatory for a fee cards). Thus, if people were to take hold of Calvin’s belief in the power of faith they needed to know what faith was and how faith operated.

**Reflections:** I am not sure how many weddings I have done in my ministry career, but at most of them I read the great passage on love, in 1 Corinthians 13, where Paul writes, “Now faith, hope, love abide these three, but the greatest of these is love.” It is this love, this love that God has for us that allows our faith to grow and respond to God’s love. In a sense this is all of God. It is God who creates faith, who gives us hope and who showers us with love. They are all gifts for us to enjoy.

**Questions:**

1. What do you think of Calvin’s contention that faith is the foundation of both hope and love?
2. How has hope sustained your faith?
3. How have you experienced the love of God in your life?