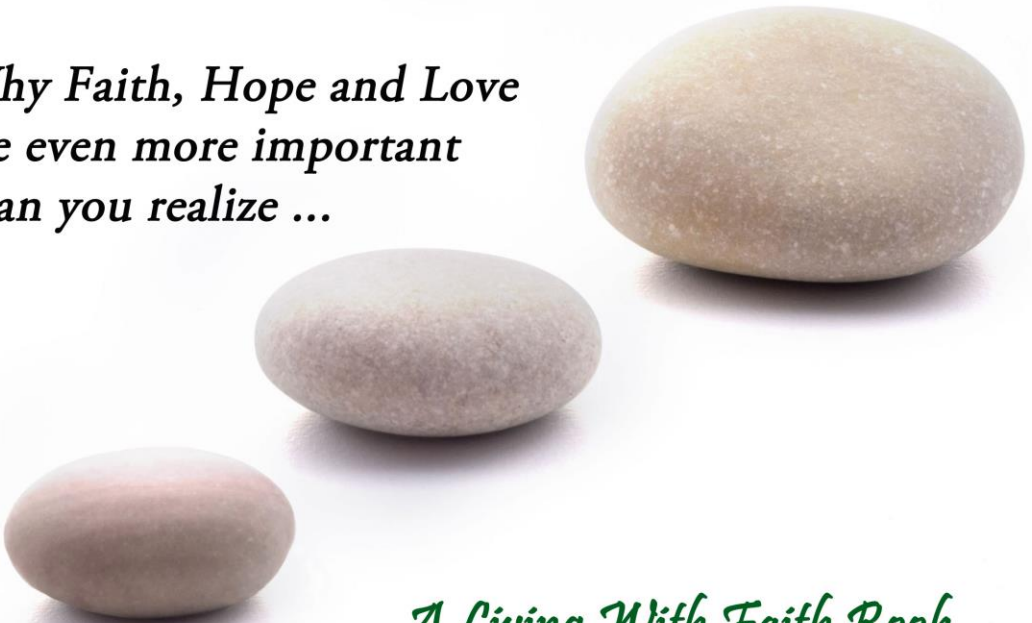


R. Herbert

THESE THREE REMAIN

*Why Faith, Hope and Love
are even more important
than you realize ...*



A Living With Faith Book

THESE
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REMAIN

*Why Faith, Hope and Love
are even more important
than you realize...*

By R. Herbert

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INTRODUCTION

“And now these three remain: faith, hope and love...”
(1 Corinthians 13:13).

Probably every Christian knows the apostle Paul’s summary of the greatest Christian virtues found in 1 Corinthians 13:13. As new believers, it is one of the first verses we learn and one we always remember. Not surprisingly, online Bible site statistics show that this verse is one of the most frequently read of all Bible verses, yet – as we will see – many do not realize what they are missing by simply reading this verse and not looking beneath the surface to see what is implied there.

The basic meaning of Paul’s statement is simple enough. Like towering mountain peaks that still stand after the surrounding landscape has been eroded down through long ages of time, or like three “rock hard” pebbles that remain when a stream has washed away the surrounding sand and soil, these three qualities “remain.” They endure when most other things do not survive or are of no further use.

Because Paul continues in this verse: “But the greatest of these is love” (vs. 13b), we might think that “*now* these three remain ...” means that all three qualities exist now, but that the things faith and hope look forward to would eventually be fulfilled and only love would then continue. As we will see in this book, this is really the opposite of what Paul was stressing – that *all three* would remain beyond other qualities and gifts, that they are vital now and always will be.

How important are these things? Many people spend a lifetime studying the Bible without realizing the extent to which these three qualities are stressed – literally dozens of times – in the writings of Paul as well as in the epistles of James, Peter and John.

Faith, hope and love are, in fact, qualities that are shown to be of paramount importance throughout the New Testament. As such, these qualities certainly should receive our attention and study – and that is exactly what this book does.

These Three Remain helps you see scriptures speaking of faith, hope and love when you might otherwise read right over them. It looks closely at each of the three key Christian attributes and examines how they interact with each other and with other aspects of your life. In fact, as you read this book, you may find that faith, hope and love are even more important than you ever realized!

PART ONE:
THESE THREE THINGS

1. THREE THINGS THAT MATTER MOST

Three qualities are everywhere in Paul's writings ...

Although we may know 1 Corinthians 13:13 by heart, many do not realize how important these three qualities are in all the writings of Paul. For Paul, faith, hope and love were more than just the topics of an important section of his letter to the Corinthian church. The three qualities appear grouped together in almost every one of the apostle's letters, though we may not always perceive that.

Paul sometimes mentions only one or two of the three concepts in a given verse, so it may not be obvious that they are all present in the same chapter or letter. But the three qualities permeate almost everything the apostle wrote and are frequently found bound together in the same way we find them grouped in 1 Corinthians 13:13. Consider these three verses:

“... the faith and love that spring from the hope ...”
(Colossians 1:5).

“... your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love,
and your endurance inspired by hope” (1 Thessalonians 1:3).

“... putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of
salvation as a helmet” (1 Thessalonians 5:8).

Sometimes Paul includes faith, hope and love in longer lists of spiritual qualities, and we may not connect them as we read the list. But the main reason we may not see how frequently Paul uses this great triad in his writing is that he often varies the expression by replacing one of the qualities with a related one which suggests the same thing from a specific angle. In these situations we can learn

much regarding how Paul thought about faith, hope and love by seeing what other words he uses to substitute for these qualities.

Take, for example, the way Paul often substitutes “endurance” for hope (just as we see these words connected in 1 Thessalonians 1:3, above):

“pursue ... faith, love, endurance ...” (1 Timothy 6:11).

“... your faith is growing more and more, and the love all of you have for one another is increasing ... we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring” (2 Thessalonians 1:3-4).

“Teach the older men to be ... sound in faith, in love and in endurance” (Titus 2:2).

The concepts of hope and endurance are clearly related, and by his use of the word “endurance” in these verses, Paul stresses that particular aspect of hope. Likewise, the apostle uses “patience” (2 Timothy 3:10, etc.) as another synonym for hope.

If we look at another example: “... faith, love and holiness ...” (1 Timothy 2:15), we find holiness taking the place of hope, and these two qualities are also connected, as Paul shows in speaking of the hope we have in the promises of God:

“Therefore, since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves ... perfecting holiness out of reverence for God” (2 Corinthians 7:1).

“Purity” is used in the same way here and in other verses (1 Timothy 4:12, etc.) because when we are walking in purity, our hope is not diminished by sin (Proverbs 24:20).

So too, when Paul writes of “... sound teaching, with faith and love” (2 Timothy 1:13), he uses sound teaching in place of hope – which might seem strange at first, but right teaching of the gospel message always gives us hope, and if we look carefully at the context

in which Paul writes this verse to Timothy, it is, in fact, one of hope (vs. 12).

As a final example of the synonyms Paul uses for “hope,” notice the way he uses “good conscience” as the basis for hope in his letter to Timothy: “The goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith” (1 Timothy 1:5). Paul’s point is clear in making this substitution – it is only when our conscience does not condemn us that we have true hope – and when we understand this, we see this verse is another clear example of faith, hope and love.

We have only considered variants of “hope” in these examples, but if you look for them you will find that Paul frequently varies the words he uses for each of the three great qualities of faith, hope and love. For example, Paul sometimes uses “godliness” for love (remember, of course, that God is love, and we find scriptures such as 2 Peter 1:7 associating the two concepts). In saying his own purpose was: “... to further the faith of God’s elect and their knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness in the hope of eternal life” (Titus 1:1-2), we see Paul was, in essence, saying his purpose was to increase the faith, love and hope of those he served. As we see in this same verse, Paul also sometimes uses “the truth” as a synonym for our faith.

When we keep these facts in mind, many of the things Paul wrote take on additional meaning for us. The three qualities are – either directly or indirectly – everywhere in the apostle’s writings.

We can learn a great deal by being aware of this fact and letting it teach us. So next time you see either faith, hope, or love – or something similar – in the writings of Paul, think about it. Ask yourself what you can learn about these vital qualities of Christian living through Paul’s choice of words and how they may illuminate the context of what is being said. Often this small technique can open up unexpected insights into some key areas of Paul’s teaching. It’s a way we can come to better understand the three things that Paul tells us – repeatedly – matter the most.

2. THREE THINGS WE CAN'T IGNORE

Seeing faith, hope and love throughout the New Testament ...

Once we begin to see the pattern of faith, hope and love throughout the writings of Paul, we begin to recognize the same three qualities throughout the writings of the other New Testament apostles. This may come as a surprise to many people, but although we do not find the kind of simple listing we see in 1 Corinthians 13:13, the qualities are there nonetheless. We just have to look for them.

When we remember how Paul so frequently uses literal or symbolic synonyms for one, two, or even three of the qualities of faith, hope and love in his writing, we see that other New Testament writers also did exactly the same. We will look at just three examples to make this point.

Although most biblical scholars do not think that the epistle to the Hebrews was written by Paul, the letter was certainly influenced to a great degree by many of his teachings and things he said. This fact is interesting when we look at the qualities of faith, hope and love in Hebrews. Notice what the author writes in the tenth chapter of that book:

“... let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds” (Hebrews 10:22-24).

By now you should be seeing faith, hope and love jump off the page as you read such scriptures. As you doubtless noticed, the author of

Hebrews mentions all three directly. Faith is mentioned in verse 22, hope in verse 23, and love in verse 24. By reading these verses carefully we can see how the three qualities are associated with others (faith with assurance, hope with purity, love with good deeds) and perhaps come to a better understanding of what the author was stressing in this passage.

As another example, we will look at the second epistle of Peter:

“... make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love” (2 Peter 1:5-7).

Here, we see Peter gives a long list of important spiritual qualities, but remembering what we have learned about the New Testament's use of synonyms or related terms, we see that faith is mentioned at the beginning of the list, perseverance (used to represent hope, as we saw in the last chapter) is mentioned midway, and love at the end. What might seem at first glance like a long list of qualities that just happens to include faith, hope and love is actually an expansion of these things – almost like a spectrum – structured around them.

And this is not just a chance occurrence. If we look in his first letter, we see something similar on a smaller scale when Peter writes:

“... so that your faith and hope are in God. Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love ...” (1 Peter 1:21-22 ESV).

Faith, hope and love are explicit in these verses, but if we look closely we can also see once again the connection between purity/obedience and hope.

Finally, let's look at another clear example – this time from the epistle of Jude:

“But you, dear friends, by building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in God's love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life” (Jude 1:20-21).

Faith and love are explicit in these verses and we do not have to look far to see hope in the form of waiting for eternal life (vs. 21).

Once we have the principle in mind, we can see the three qualities of faith, hope and love repeatedly in the New Testament writings (we will see many more examples in the course of this book), and we can profit from a deeper understanding of what those writings are aiming to teach us.

3. THREE THINGS THAT LEAD TO CROWNS

The rewards of obedient faith, persistent hope, serving love ...

In our study of the Scriptures, we need not only to notice the three great qualities that this book is about, but also to be aware of what seems to be associated with them. Sometimes, this can be quite illuminating. Look for example, at the crowns of the righteous mentioned in the Bible.

In ancient Israel both kings and priests (Exodus 39:30 ESV, NKJV, etc.) wore crowns, and the New Testament makes it clear that the calling of believers is to eventually become as “kings and priests” in the Kingdom of God (Revelation 1:6 NKJV). The Christian Scriptures also discuss the literal or figurative crowns it says will be given to believers.

Two different terms for the word “crown” are used: *diadema* which was primarily used of the crown of royalty, and *stephanos* which refers to a crown of leaves or flowers that was given for great accomplishments such as athletic and military victories. When speaking of the crowns to be given to believers, the New Testament always speaks of the second kind – the *stephanos* – which was given as a reward for accomplishments rather than the royal crown handed down merely by descent. Different *types* of this *stephanos* crown of accomplishment are also mentioned in discussing the reward of the faithful.

Some of the references to crowns simply speak of conditions pertaining to them. For example, Paul tells us that the crown of leaves sought by athletic exertion “...will not last, but we ... get a crown that will last forever” (1 Corinthians 9:25). This is probably not speaking of a specific “imperishable” crown; it is just a statement that our crown is imperishable. There are, however, three different types of crowns mentioned in the New Testament which

seem to be linked to different rewards. In all three cases, each type of crown is said to be a reward for a particular accomplishment or spiritual trait:

1. The Crown of Righteousness (associated with obedient faith): “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day – and not only to me ...” (2 Timothy 4:7-8). Here Paul associates this crown with faithful accomplishment.

2. The Crown of Life (associated with persistent hope): “Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him” (James 1:12). At first, we might only see the connection between the love mentioned in this verse and the crown of life, but when we look closely we see that perseverance (frequently associated with hope) is the actual subject of what is being said – leading to the promise (another aspect of our hope) we are given.

3. The Crown of Glory (associated with serving love): “Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, watching over them – not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve ... And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away” (1 Peter 5:2-4).

Whether these crowns are meant to be understood literally or metaphorically (see, for example, 1 Thessalonians 2:19) is beside the point. What is important and of great encouragement to every Christian is to see that the very qualities this book is all about – *obedient faith*, *persistent hope*, *serving love* – lie beneath the rewards we are promised.

4. THREE THINGS THAT LAST FOREVER

Some things will always remain ...

As we begin our study of the three great qualities of faith, hope and love, we should pause for a quick fact check. 1 Corinthians 13:13 is a monumental Bible verse that many know so well it has tended to take on a life of its own outside of the setting in which it was originally written. As a result, despite the apparent simplicity of what Paul wrote, a great many people miss the meaning of this verse.

It's easy to read what Paul says earlier in 1 Corinthians 13 about various gifts of the Spirit – prophecy, languages, knowledge, etc. – that will all eventually fail, and then to misunderstand verse 13. When the apostle says “... now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love,” many Bible readers (and even some biblical commentaries) understand this to mean that at the present time we have faith, hope and love, but love will continue. In other words, when Paul says “Now ...” we may think he means “for the present time,” just as in the previous verse we find “Now I know in part; then I shall know fully...” (1 Corinthians 13:12).

But this is not what Paul meant. The “now” is what biblical scholars call a “sequential” now. This just means that Paul doesn't mean “now as opposed to then,” he means now in the sense of “now, in conclusion ...” We can see this clear meaning if we look at the context of the whole section of his letter to the Corinthians.

If we go back to verse 8, we find that Paul says “Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away.” The following verses then discuss why this is so, and in

verse 13 Paul concludes his argument by saying “And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.”

In this chapter, then, Paul contrasts two groups of three things. The first group – examples of things that will fail – consists of prophecies, tongues, and knowledge; the second group – examples of things that will never fail – consists of faith, hope and love.

Why will these three things always remain – in the future life, and for eternity? Many think that because faith is the “evidence of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1), we will no longer need faith in the future life when we see God. In a similar way, many think that because “hope that is seen is not hope” (Romans 8:24), hope, too, will become a thing of the past when what we hope for arrives. Viewed this way, love is the only thing that would seem to be required forever.

But faith, at its core, is trust in God – it is something that will never be replaced. At what point in eternity would we not continue to apply our trust in God? And hope, even when it is fulfilled, still exists in our desire for the continuation of what is hoped for. Imagine that you hope there will be sunny weather on a day you plan to go to the beach. If you get up that day and the sun is shining, don’t you continue to hope the weather will stay good throughout the day? This is not to say that we will have to hope our future life will continue when we receive it, but that there will always be things to look forward to in that life – as C.S. Lewis wrote – opportunities to continually grow closer to God.

Love, as Paul makes amply clear, is the condition of our oneness with God and with one another, and that certainly will always remain – and will always remain of primary importance.

So (or “Now...” as Paul wrote!), the three great spiritual qualities of 1 Corinthians 13:13 are equal in their eternal necessity. Love, as we will see, is certainly the greatest of the three. But all are vital – and the following chapters will show just how important they all are in our Christian lives, how we should apply them, how they function alone and how they interact, and how they ultimately all lie at the very core of the life to which we are called.

PART TWO:
FAITH

5. WHAT IS FAITH?

Faith is much more than an emotional feeling or even a belief ...

The concept of faith can be confusing for many people. The word itself can be understood as *what* we believe (“the Christian Faith”) or *how* we believe (“their faith is strong”), though the Bible usually uses the word in the second sense. But even if we focus on faith in the sense of how rather than what we believe, many people still only understand part of what faith is all about.

Belief and Trust

First, the word used in the New Testament for faith (*pistis*) primarily means belief *and* trust. It involves not only believing that God exists, but also trusting him. When Jesus taught “... believe the gospel” (Mark 1:15), he was not just saying believe that the gospel exists, but trust that the message of the gospel is true.

In the same way, the author of the Book of Hebrews wrote “... faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see ... And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him” (Hebrews 11:1, 6). This makes it clear that faith involves both belief and trust.

Faith and Faithfulness

However, there is another aspect to faith that even many Christians miss. To see that dimension of faith it helps to go back to the Old Testament. In the book of the prophet Habakkuk there is a vitally important verse that was translated in the King James and some other English translations as “... the just shall live by his faith” (Habakkuk 2:4). But the New International Version and several other recent versions translate this verse as “...the righteous person

will live by his faithfulness.” Why the different translations? The answer is that the Hebrew word translated “faith” in the KJV really can mean either “faith” or “faithfulness” (see Isaiah 11:5 where the word is used of the faithfulness of the Messiah).

This verse in Habakkuk was seen as so important by the early Christians that it is quoted three times in the New Testament – twice by the apostle Paul (Romans 1:17, Galatians 3:11) and once by the author of Hebrews (Hebrews 10:38). While Paul stresses that the believer is justified by faith, the author of Hebrews stresses the aspect of the believer’s faithfulness (see verse 36).

So true faith can – and should – involve both a trusting belief in God and also faithfulness on our part. Faith and works are sometimes said to be antithetical, but they are not. Although the Bible says clearly that we are saved by faith, not works (Romans 3:28, 31), it also shows just as clearly that living, saving faith will produce good works (James 2:17). In that sense the aspects of believing faith and active faithfulness are both expressed in true faith.

The Gift of Faith in All its Aspects

Although we may have some limited human level of faith, deep faith is a gift of God (1 Corinthians 12:9, Ephesians 2:8) that is developed through ongoing spiritual growth and transformation (Romans 4:20, 12:6, Jude 1:20), and this applies just as much to our trust in God as to our faithfulness toward him.

In all of this we see that true faith is far more than just an emotional feeling or even a belief. True faith involves a living trust in God that affects every aspect of our lives. As we will see in the following chapters, true faith is belief and trust on the one hand and faithfulness on the other.

6. WHAT FAITH IS NOT

Faith is not a promise that everything will always go well ...

It seems to be a common misunderstanding among new believers, and even among some established ones, that if we have faith we will believe that everything is going to work out right in every difficult circumstance – if we just have faith. The unfortunate corollary of this misunderstanding is that when things don't work out or things go wrong, many believers begin to question their own faith – thinking that perhaps they did not have “enough faith” or were somehow to blame in some other way. The answer to this situation revolves around an understanding of what faith really is – or perhaps more accurately, what faith is not.

It is important that we come to understand that faith is not a guarantee that despite problems that inevitably come up, if we pray about them and have enough faith, we will be kept securely in some kind of spiritual safe zone – protected from worsening problems and hardships and even death itself – if we just have faith.

We need only read the psalms of David to see the many things God allowed him to suffer despite his close relationship with and faith in God. Psalm 44, for example, shows this clearly. In this poignant psalm David outlines God's help in past situations (Psalm 44:1-8), then details the way in which things had not turned out – ways in which God had not protected him from certain bad events and trials (Psalm 44:9-16). This occurred, David honestly reports: “... though we had not forgotten you; we had not been false to your covenant. Our hearts had not turned back; our feet had not strayed from your path. But you crushed us and ... covered us over with deep darkness” (Psalm 44:17-19). In the rest of the psalm David prays that God will yet turn things around and help him, but he is honest that despite his obedience and faith in God, things had not gone well and God had allowed him to suffer.

Is this not the point behind the greatest complaint story in the Bible – the Book of Job? Job also knew that he had been faithful and trusted God (Job 1:8, 10; 19:25), but that God had nevertheless allowed him to suffer. But this is where faith comes in. Faith is not the certainty that God will not ever let bad things happen to us. It is the certainty that He will not let anything happen to us without a purpose and for our ultimate benefit (“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” - Romans 8:28).

In reality, faith is not something we exercise to keep everything running well – faith actually kicks in most powerfully when things go wrong. Faith is not always a “get out of jail free card.” It was for the apostle Paul at one point (Acts 16:25-26) but not at another, at the end of his life (Philemon 1:9). And Paul certainly had faith, of course. The outcome to any problem we take to God depends on the will of God in the specific circumstances. God certainly will often protect us from bad events (Psalm 138:7), but if he does not, he has a purpose in mind. That is where faith comes in – being able to say, like Job: “Though he slay me, yet will I trust him” (Job 13:15).

This understanding of what faith is and is not is perfectly summed up by the apostle Peter: “...you who through faith are shielded by God’s power ... though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials” (1 Peter 1:5-6).

So do not be discouraged if things sometimes do not go well in life “despite” your faith. Faith does not guarantee the Christian a first-class flight, but it does guarantee that we will get to our ultimate destination despite everything. Faith is not a promise that everything will always go well, just that it will ultimately end well (2 Timothy 4:18). When we are faced with the realities of life, that reassurance is a wonderfully encouraging thing to have.

7. WHEN FAITH FALTERS

Faith grows in a cumulative manner; failure does not ...

The Book of Hebrews contains some of the Bible's most encouraging statements regarding faith, but it also contains some cautions. One of those cautions is found in Hebrews 10:38: "Now the just shall live by faith; But if anyone draws back, My soul has no pleasure in him" (NKJV). The writer of Hebrews then continues: "But we do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, but to those who have faith and are saved" (Hebrews 10:39).

Those are inspiring and encouraging words – as long as our faith is doing well. But every disciple of Jesus Christ comes to realize that our faith, just like our love or any other spiritual quality, doesn't always run at "100% operating potential." In fact, occasionally we may even experience a "failure of faith" in some aspect of our lives. The shadow of doubt may only fall on us for a while; but for some, even a temporary failure of faith can become a matter of lasting discouragement.

But it doesn't need to be that way. There are clear biblical examples of servants of God whose belief "cracked" temporarily, and yet those individuals went on to be listed in the Bible as examples of true and lasting faith. You may be surprised that one such person was Moses.

Moses at Meribah

At one point during the Israelites' wanderings in the wilderness, at Meribah, there was no water for the community, and the people rose in opposition to Moses and Aaron. God told the two leaders to take the staff from the holy place in the tabernacle and to "Speak to that rock before their eyes and it will pour out its water" (Numbers 20:8). Then Moses and Aaron gathered the people in front of the

rock and when Moses struck the rock twice with his staff, water gushed out (Numbers 20:10-11).

But God was angry with Moses and Aaron for the way they handled this situation. The account does not tell us exactly why, but the fact that it is recorded that Moses struck the rock twice indicates he may have doubted when nothing happened at first and then, wavering, hit the rock again. Numbers actually tells us that the incident involved a failure of faith on Moses' part: "And the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, 'Because you did not believe in me, to uphold me as holy in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them'" (Numbers 20:12 ESV).

So in God's estimation – not ours – Moses' faith faltered and temporarily failed. But this did not mean that Moses needed to be replaced or that his potential for faith-based service was gone. God continued to do great things through Moses' leadership, and when we turn to the Book of Hebrews we find that he is given a place of distinct honor in the great "Faith Hall of Fame" of Hebrews 11. That inspiring chapter assigns six specific acts of faith to Moses (Hebrews 11:24-28), but his failing of faith at Meribah is not mentioned. That should teach us that God, who inspired the writer of Hebrews, is keeping track of our victories of faith – not our failures.

John at Journey's End

Another amazing example of faltering faith that clearly did not indicate spiritual failure is seen in the life of John the Baptist – while he was imprisoned and facing execution. Perhaps discouraged and experiencing doubt, John sent to Jesus to ask him if he really were the promised Messiah (Matthew 11). Rather than chastise John for his doubt, Jesus pointed to the miracles and signs that he was doing and thus the answer to John's doubt. But there is an important part of this story we must not miss. It was at that exact point in time – just as John admitted his doubt – that Jesus

then told his disciples “I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist” (Matthew 11:11). It was at precisely the moment of John’s greatest doubt that Jesus called him the greatest among men. Clearly, God knows it is human to doubt, and he is willing and desirous to point us to the answers to those doubts without it affecting his estimation of our dedication to him.

Peter Standing on the Sea

A final and better known example of faltering faith is that of the apostle Peter. We all know the story, told in three of the Gospels, of how the disciples were crossing the Sea of Galilee in a small boat when Jesus appeared to them standing on the water. It was at that point that Peter exceeded his own level of “faith development” and asked Jesus: “Lord, if it’s you ... tell me to come to you on the water.’ ‘Come’, he said. Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, ‘Lord, save me!’ Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him...” (Matthew 14:28-31 ESV).

Peter’s faith was good to a point, but then it cracked under the strain, as anyone’s might do under those circumstances. Yet although Jesus mildly rebuked him, saying: “You of little faith ... why did you doubt?” (vs. 31), this was not the end of Peter’s discipleship. We know that Peter’s faith wavered and cracked again at the time of Jesus’ betrayal (John 18), but we know equally that Jesus still continued to work with him (John 21:15-17) – and we have only to read the Book of Acts to see that Peter went on to great acts of faith after these failures (Acts 3:1-10, etc.).

The Investment of Faith

The God who knows our hearts knows that our faith, like that of Moses, John and Peter, can and certainly may waver at times. But if

we are regularly walking in the Way of belief and seeking his help, the Bible makes it clear that just as he does in every other aspect of life, God looks at the overall picture of our faith, beyond any isolated failures. Put simply, God does not balance the ups and downs of our faith like a check book – he helps us grow faith like a savings account. Even after we experience a temporary failure or setback, God is still desirous to continue to strengthen and develop our faith according to his purpose.

It's one of the most encouraging things we can learn about the path of faith every disciple must walk: that if we keep with it, our faith grows in a cumulative manner (2 Thessalonians 1:3). We must certainly heed the biblical warnings against losing faith, but if we do not give up, faith grows through time – and the more we grow in faith, the more faith grows in us.

8. IS FAITH THE SIZE OF A MUSTARD SEED ALL YOU NEED?

What moving mountains is really all about ...

Perhaps one of the most regularly misunderstood of all the sayings of Jesus is found in the Book of Matthew:

“... Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you” (Matthew 17:20).

These words of Jesus are tremendously encouraging if we understand them correctly, but if we do not grasp what they really mean, they can often seem daunting and even discouraging. Have you ever read this verse and thought “If I had even a small amount of faith I should be able to accomplish great things”? If you have, you are not alone. Probably millions of people have misunderstood this verse since it was recorded, although its meaning was much clearer at the time the words were spoken.

We must understand that this type of expression was, and still is, commonly used as part of the vivid imagery often found in Near Eastern speech. As such, the idea of moving a mountain would not have been taken literally any more than it would be in modern Western culture if we saw “We move mountains for you” as an advertising slogan for a shipping or problem-solving company.

But there is an even more specific reason why we can understand Jesus’ words as being figurative rather than literal. We know historically that in New Testament times the Jews actually used the specific term “an uprooter of mountains” to refer to any rabbi or

religious person who was viewed as being an eminent teacher or individual of great spiritual power.

Given this historical background, we can see that Jesus was simply using figurative language in essentially calling faith (which is being stressed rather than the believer) an “uprooter of mountains.” To understand his words literally is tantamount to saying that there has never been a person with even a tiny portion of faith – as big as a mustard seed – in all of history since the time of Christ, as no one has ever been able to literally move a mountain by faith alone.

It is also important that we remember that Jesus used the tiny mustard seed in a number of parables and sayings (Matthew 13:31–32, Matthew 17:20–21, Mark 4:30–32, Luke 13:18–19, Luke 17:6) as a simile for the Kingdom of God that starts small, but eventually grows great. Interestingly, these statements regarding the Kingdom that grows from a tiny start are recorded as being given before the comments on the mustard seed representing a small amount of faith that can do great works.

So it is likely that the “mustard seed that grows” background was clear to the disciples, and that the reference to faith like a mustard seed was understood as faith that starts small but grows great. In fact, in Matthew 17:20, while the NIV says “faith as *small* as a mustard seed,” the Greek is literally “faith *like* a mustard seed” (so it can mean like a mustard seed in its growth) and is so translated by the KJV, ESV, NKJV, RSV, and many other versions.

This understanding fits much better with the fact that Jesus often chastised the disciples as being of “little faith” when they failed spiritually (for example, Matthew 8:26). This shows that a small amount of faith is not all that is necessary to accomplish great things; otherwise, even though they were of “little faith” they could still have done great works. It is more likely then that Jesus' saying regarding the mustard seed of faith relates not to its initial size, but rather to what can be accomplished if our faith grows, as the tiny mustard seed eventually does, to a great size. With even a small amount of believing faith we can accomplish many things – and as we “grow” our faith, we accomplish yet more!

PART THREE:
HOPE

9. WHAT IS HOPE?

Hope is neither faith's distant cousin nor love's poor relation ...

We may tend to think of hope as the least important of the biblical triad of faith, hope and love, but when we comprehend this quality more fully, we begin to realize just how broad and how vital hope really is.

In coming to understand the biblical concept of hope (Greek *elpis*), it is important to realize how different that is from our common modern use of the word. In the New Testament the concept of hope (like that of faith) carries three essential ideas. For hope, those ideas are expectation, persistence, and joy; and we will look at all of them individually.

Expectation

The first and primary meaning of hope in the Scriptures is that of *expectation*. Today, in everyday speech, when we say that we “hope” something good will happen, we mean that we don’t know if it will occur or not – but we hope it will. Christian hope is far different – it is the firm confidence that God will perform what he has promised.

Notice for example, what Paul wrote to Titus: “... in the hope of eternal life, which God, who does not lie, promised before the beginning of time” (Titus 1:2). If this were just hope in the modern sense, it would be a contradiction or a doubting of what Paul also says in this verse. It is precisely because God does not lie that we have hope (in the sense of certainty) in his promises. So biblical hope is similar to faith in this sense – it has been rightly said that hope is the “future tense” of faith.

But the main point to remember is that hope in its primary sense means expectation. Christian hope is not just that we hope something will happen, but the confident looking forward to what we expect to happen. That certainty is what the writer of the Book of Hebrews referred to in saying: “We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure” (Hebrews 6:19).

Persistence

The second aspect of hope in the New Testament has to do with what we today call *persistence* or patience. We see this in what Paul tells Timothy: "... we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently" (Romans 8:23-25). The relationship between patient persistence and hope is the reason we identified scriptures talking of "faith," "persistence" and "love" in Part One of this book when we examined how Paul often varies the expression "faith, hope and love" in his writings. This aspect of hope is the light at the end of life's tunnel – the thing we must continually keep our eyes on. Hope helps us carry on, and we might say that real hope is the "backbone" of our spiritual lives.

Joy

The final aspect of hope in the biblical sense is that of *joy*. Peace and encouragement are related qualities. This may not seem as obvious as the relationship between hope and patience, but notice how clear it is in what Paul writes in the Book of Romans: "Be joyful in hope ..." (Romans 12:12); "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit" (Romans 15:13). Paul says that it is as we are filled with joy and peace that we overflow with hope – if we are filled with one, we are filled with the other! We see the same connection between hope and joy in what Paul wrote to Philemon about "love... faith... joy and encouragement" in Philemon 1:5-7.

Aspects of Hope

So, hope is neither faith's distant cousin nor love's poor relation. Biblical hope is a vital aspect of our spiritual life that embraces confident expectation, persistent patience, and even peace, encouragement and joy: spiritual qualities that are of inestimable worth in our lives! We will see more of the way in which these qualities are part of true hope in the following chapters.

10. A LETTER OF HOPE

The Book of Romans is Paul's epistle of hope ...

Hope is directly mentioned in the New Testament a total of over 50 times, and many of these instances are found in the writings of the apostle Paul. But Paul's letter to the believers in Rome stands out because this epistle alone contains over one-third of all the New Testament's references to hope. Romans is truly a focal point for what the Bible has to say about this spiritual quality, and it is understandable that this letter has sometimes been called "the epistle of hope."

Paul himself is often called the apostle of faith, of course, but what we find in Romans shows us that he could also be called the apostle of hope. In fact, he often relates faith and hope in the letter, and the side-by-side nature of the two qualities helps us to see more clearly the sense of expectation or total confidence that is the primary meaning of true hope.

So it is no coincidence that Paul begins speaking of hope in his epistle by making reference to Abraham, the "father of all who believe" (Romans 4:11): "Against all hope," he tells us, "Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him ..." (Romans 4:18). Paul then widens his scope to include all believers in Christ who "... boast in the hope of the glory of God" (Romans 5:2).

Next, after discussing hope as expectation, Paul traces the connection between perseverance and hope. "...we also glory in our sufferings," he writes, "because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope" (Romans 5:3-4). This is something we also saw in Romans 8:23-25 in our previous chapter, and it is a point that Paul drives home repeatedly.

In the second half of his letter, Paul stresses the joyful aspect of our hope: "Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality" (Romans 12:12-13 – and notice all three of the "faith, hope and love" qualities in this verse in its listing of hope, faithfulness and giving hospitality). We also see this aspect of joy in "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace ..." (Romans 15:13).

So we see that in the course of the epistle Paul works through all three qualities that we have seen are aspects of hope. In fact, if you read through Romans you will see that most of Paul's mentions of hope fit one of the three meanings we have looked at.

One verse that might not seem to fit how the apostle uses hope in Romans – and that looks more like the modern idea of hope – is found in Romans 11: “... in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them” (Romans 11:14 NIV). But the Greek word for hope does not actually appear in this verse, and it should be translated more literally “in order somehow to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them” (Romans 11:14 ESV).

But when we apply our understanding of the three major aspects of hope to what Paul says about it in most instances throughout this letter, we find that he continually returns to the quality of hope and turns it around like a precious stone so that we see different facets of its value from different directions. And in the final section of his letter to the Romans, Paul ties all these facets together by relating the various aspects of hope to God himself. It is a fitting high point to a concept he has developed throughout his epistle of hope and one we will look at next.

11. THE GOD OF HOPE

*The reason for our expectation, the basis of our persistence,
and the cause of our joy ...*

In his letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul included a number of short prayers (15:5, 6, 33, etc.) and one, in Romans 15:13, is quite fascinating from the perspective of hope:

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (Romans 15:13).

This prayer is interesting in many ways, but not least in the title Paul gives to God as “the God of hope.” This is the only place in the Bible where God is specifically called the God of hope, and it is possible that Paul had a reason in mind for using the term to his audience at Rome.

The ancient Romans had a specific deity for the concept of hope – the goddess Spes. There were a number of temples to this goddess throughout Rome, but the oldest and probably most famous was one which stood in the *forum olitorium* that had a very checkered history. It is known that this temple to hope was struck by lightning at some point, and that it burned down. It was later rebuilt, but burned down again. The irony of these disasters relevant to the Roman deity of hope may have been widely appreciated, and it is possible that Paul knew and played against this situation in underlining that the true God was the God of a much more secure hope.

There is also another way Paul could conceivably have been thinking of the Roman interest in the deified hope. When a new Emperor was appointed, it was common for the ruler to issue coins depicting the goddess of hope on them, as the deity symbolized the expectation of many good things for the new emperor’s reign. We remember that Paul noticed the inscription to the unknown god in Athens (Acts 17:23). It is certainly possible that Paul had seen images of the personified hope on many Roman coins and that he was aware of and thinking of the Roman “hope” compared to the

true God of hope as the background to what he wrote to the believers in Rome.

But whether one or both of these possibilities is likely or not, Paul made an important point about hope in his prayer. We are used to saying that God is love (1 John 4:8), but in this verse in Romans Paul essentially points out that God is also hope. It is not that God is the God of hope because he hopes in the human sense of hoping things will work out – it is because God personifies the qualities of hope just as he personifies the qualities of love. God is also the God of hope because ultimately it is God who supplies our deepest hope as a fruit of his Spirit – as is also the case with faith and love.

When we see this aspect of Paul's conception of hope – as being grounded in God himself – we can better appreciate many of the things the apostle wrote in Romans. Take Romans 8:32, for example: "He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?"

It's a thought worth meditating upon. God is the God of hope, and as this last verse shows, he has given us, or is desirous to give us, everything we should hope for. Put another way, God is the reason for our expectation, the basis of our persistence, and the cause of our joy – the very things that make up hope itself.

12. THE RESPONSIBILITY OF JOYFUL HOPE

With true hope we are never stranded in the present ...

The title of this chapter may seem strange to you because “responsibility” and “joy” may appear to be very different concepts – almost opposites in some ways. This is because a responsibility is usually something we have to do, like it or not, whereas joy is something we want to have for sure.

But let’s look at this more closely. We have already seen that joy and hope are related qualities: joy is really an outcome of – or even synonymous with – biblical hope, when hope is properly understood. So keep in mind that when we look at the concept of joy in the Bible, what we find is often directly relevant to hope. In that light, remember these tremendous words of encouragement from the apostle James:

“Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything” (James 1:2-4).

Do you see the pattern in the qualities James mentions? Because perseverance is scripturally related to hope and works are often related with love (as we saw respectively in Chapter 1), when it says “faith ... perseverance ... work,” this verse really covers the same range of qualities as faith, hope and love. This is why James can say that if we have these things, we will be “mature and complete, not lacking anything.”

Going back to the beginning of the verse we see that James tells us we should (a *responsibility*) consider it all *joy* when we face trials. The thought is closely echoed in the first epistle of Peter: “In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials” (1 Peter 1:6).

The “trials of many kinds” James speaks about and the “all kinds of trials” Peter mentions include sickness, poverty, bereavement,

persecution, and any kind of suffering that we may endure. But these many trials are balanced, James tells us, by “pure joy” or literally, in the Greek, “every kind of joy” – in other words, our many trials can be balanced by the many joys of the Christian life.

So James and Peter are not telling us that we have to feel happy even if we are experiencing trials, but that we have a responsibility to live through them with underlying joy because of the hope we have been given.

It’s a radical approach to trials. Even if we do not feel the emotion of physical happiness in the here and now, we can – and should – have spiritual joy in the hope that reaches beyond the present. That is what Paul meant in writing to the Thessalonians:

“We remember ... your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ ... for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit ... and you turned to God to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead” (1 Thessalonians 1:3, 6, 9-10).

With true hope we are never stranded in the present. We can – and have a responsibility to – live with the future in mind that we *know* is there.

PART FOUR:
LOVE

13. WHAT IS LOVE?

*Biblical love is not just an attitude toward others,
but involves action toward them ...*

Every disciple of Jesus Christ knows that love is central to the message of Christianity (1 John 4:16, John 3:16, etc.), but the original Greek of the New Testament uses several words for love – each having a different meaning:

Storgē means love or affection between parents and children – family love – and this word was also used of love for one’s country, city or group.

Philia means the affection of personal friendship; it is “brotherly” or “sisterly” love, usually between equals.

Agape, the highest form of love mentioned in the New Testament, was sometimes used by the Greeks of very deep love for one’s children or spouse, but in the New Testament its usual meaning is that of the love of God for man and of man for God or of godly love for others. Just like faith and hope, we may have a certain amount of human *agape* love, but the full love to which the Scriptures point us is a gift of God (Romans 5:5).

Beyond Affection

Humanly, we tend to think of love as affection – as being based on liking. So we often say we “love” a thing such as a movie or a book when we mean we really like it. But *agape* love moves far beyond affection, and we do not need to like someone – they may even be our enemy – in order to love them with this kind of love.

That is why *agape* is the word used when Christ summarized the whole law of God in terms of love (Matthew 22:36-40). And the apostles Peter, Paul, James, and John all used this word to stress that love is the fulfilling of God’s way of life (1 Peter 4:8, Romans 13:10, James 2:8, 1 John 4:7-21). *Agape* is also, of course, the word Paul uses throughout 1 Corinthians 13, the great “love chapter” of

the New Testament – including the “love” of “faith, hope and love” in verse 13.

Beyond Feelings

The love we call *agape* has several important aspects that we need to keep in mind. In today’s world people are used to thinking of love as a feeling, but *agape* is *action* based rather than emotion based – it is something that we do rather than something we feel. We can see this in the fact that, as John tells us, God so loved (*agape* love) the world that he gave his Son for it (John 3:16). That was not a feeling God had, but an action he took. In fact, it doubtless did not feel good to give his only Son, but his love went beyond feelings in the same way that a human expressing the *agape* kind of love might willingly suffer in order to help someone else.

So *agape* love is often a *sacrificial*, giving love. It is also *unconditional* – God loved us while we were yet sinners (Romans 5:8), and the unconditional aspect of his love is the underlying reason Paul could write that nothing can “separate us ... from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:35-39).

Vital Aspects of Love

Agape also includes three other aspects that are vital for the understanding of true “Christian love,” and we will examine these closely in this section of *These Three Remain*. First, the highest form of love is ultimately based on **care**. We cannot love someone or something we do not care about. Care and concern for the welfare of another is vital to any kind of love, but it is at the very core of *agape* love. Next, we will see that **acceptance** is also a key part of the kind of love God wants us to have. We may not accept the attitude or behavior of someone, but we cannot love the person if, at some level, we do not accept them. Finally, **respect** is also vital for true godly love. In telling us that humans were made in the “image” of God (Genesis 1:27), the Bible shows that every human must be respected for that very reason.

When we love another person – perhaps our mate or child – we naturally extend care, acceptance, and respect to them. If we lack any of these three qualities in our attitude to the other, it is deficient and we really do not love them as much as we love ourselves.

Christianity extends this principle to everyone with whom we interact – our neighbors, and even our enemies (Matthew 5:43-48) – and ultimately, even to God. But again, biblical love is not just an attitude toward others, it involves action toward them. True spiritual love, as we will see, is to desire another person’s good and to *act* to accomplish that goal.

There are other aspects of love, of course. Paul enumerates a number of them in the preface to his “...faith, hope and love” statement:

“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails” (1 Corinthians 13:4-8).

Here, Paul gives us eight things that love is and eight that it is not. There are certainly other things we could say of love, but in the following chapter we will look more closely at the three central qualities of care, acceptance and respect.

14. THREE COMPONENTS OF REAL LOVE

Care, acceptance and respect constitute the most fundamental aspects of the expression of love ...

The New Testament contains a profound and beautiful story that illustrates exactly the three aspects of care, acceptance and respect that underlie *agape* love. The Book of Luke records that Jesus was invited to the home of a Pharisee named Simon. While he was there, a woman who was a prostitute slipped into the house and, weeping at his feet, wiped her tears from him with her hair before kissing his feet and pouring expensive perfume onto them. When Simon began to think that Jesus surely could not be a prophet of God or he would have known the sinfulness of the woman, Jesus rebuked him by comparing her behavior with that of the Pharisee:

“Look at this woman,” he said. “When I entered your home, you didn’t bother to offer me water to wash the dust from my feet, but she has washed them with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You refused me the customary kiss of greeting, but she has kissed my feet again and again from the time I first came in. You neglected the usual courtesy of olive oil to anoint my head, but she has covered my feet with rare perfume. Therefore her sins – and they are many – are forgiven, for she loved me much; but one who is forgiven little, shows little love” (Luke 7:44–47 as paraphrased by *The Living Bible*).

It is a story of heartfelt *agape* love and its results. *Agape* means to love actively and deeply, sometimes even sacrificially (John 3:16) – as this woman clearly did, considering her actions and the economic sacrifice she must have made in her gift of expensive perfume. But if we look closely at the story, we find that it highlights three of the key aspects of *agape* love and how it is expressed to others. Notice the three specific things that the repentant woman did:

Care – She washed Jesus’ feet: This was a *physical need* in the hot dusty climate of Jesus’ world, though it was something that the Pharisee did not even provide for – although this was a common courtesy at that time. But the woman’s actions signified, in Christ’s words, the fact that with her tears she expressed love by caring for another. We care for others when we are concerned for them and when we “take care of them” by helping them.

Acceptance – She kissed him: In doing this the woman expressed total acceptance of the one whose feet she kissed. It was also customary in that culture for a host to greet guests with a kiss to the cheek to express acceptance and welcome. In her actions the woman expressed the aspect of love which addresses acceptance – one of our deepest *emotional needs*.

Respect – She anointed him: By pouring extremely costly perfume on him the woman showed great respect – an area in which the Pharisee also failed by not even providing the customary (and relatively inexpensive) anointing of olive oil to honor his guest. Giving respect to another person addresses the underlying *mental need for personal significance* that all humans have. This is not the same as pride, but it is part of what it means to be human and part of God’s love (Psalm 138:6).

Significantly, then, the woman’s expression of love addressed the physical, emotional and mental needs of the human condition – all things the woman herself doubtless rarely received; but these were the qualities of care, acceptance and respect she had probably seen Jesus give, unreservedly, to many like herself who were rejected and despised by many religious people of the day.

The story not only paints a clear picture of these three qualities, it also reminds us that all of these qualities are necessary. *We can interact with others without caring for them. We can provide care to others without really accepting them. We can accept people without truly respecting them.* But the repentant woman’s actions showed all three things: the care, acceptance and respect that constitute the most fundamental aspects of the expression of love to others – as Jesus affirmed in his acknowledgment of the woman’s deep and godly love.

15. ABOVE ALL ...

In their letters, Peter and Paul both stress the same thing ...

Nowadays, when we write something we want to stress we can underline the words we feel are important or put an *asterisk next to them. If the words are printed or on a screen we can put them in **bold**, *italic*, or even **color** type. If the words are on paper we can highlight them with pens or markers.

The New Testament writers did not have any of these options, of course. In the ancient Greek the early Christians used, stressing something involved the words themselves – the order in which they were written or the use of key words to draw attention to important things. That’s why the Bible frequently uses expressions like “remember” or “take heed.” But in the New Testament the most powerful expression the writers used to highlight something was “Above all...” That expression was the nearest thing to a red marker pen the apostles could use! Just as we might use a marker to highlight only the very most important text in a book, the biblical authors used “Above all ...” very sparingly – in fact, only three times regarding matters of Christian behavior in the whole New Testament. Using slightly different expressions in the Greek language, but all meaning the same thing, three apostles each wrote “Above all...” on one occasion in their respective writings.

In his epistle, the apostle James tells his readers “Above all, my brothers and sisters, do not swear ...” (James 5:12), but in this instance the “above all ...” is regarding a specific group of problems that James was addressing.

That leaves us with only two times in the New Testament when the expression “Above all ...” was used more widely of our conduct and responsibilities as disciples of Jesus. One of the two times “Above all ...” is used in this general and all-encompassing manner is found in the first epistle of Peter. The apostle tells us “Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of

sins” (1 Peter 4:8). We might almost say that Peter saved his red highlighter for this one thought!

Notice too, that Peter tells us to love “earnestly” and the Greek word means *fervently, intensely, strongly*. It is not enough to love, he says, we must love in the extreme. And if we do, Peter says, we “cover a multitude of sins.” It is not entirely clear whether he meant that we cover over the sins of others when we love them, or that when we love others this covers our own sins. Perhaps both meanings are intended!

The only other instance of “Above all...” regarding our behavior is found in Colossians 3 where, beginning in verse 12, Paul gives the Colossian Christians a list of things that we must “put on” in our Christian lives. Paul lists the most important traits that we can manifest – traits such as compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. He then brings this list of Christian virtues to a close with the following words: “And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony” (Colossians 3:14).

We should not read this “Above all ...” as a simple figure of speech. Paul stressed the supremacy of love many times in his writings and especially, of course, in 1 Corinthians 13:13 where he tells us of faith, hope and love that “... the greatest of these is love...” That is the doctrine of love. In Colossians 3:14, Paul gives us the practice: “Above all these put on love...” The same apostle who gave us one of the Bible’s most memorable verses in 1 Corinthians 13:13 gave us one of the Bible’s most urgent commands in Colossians 3:14.

So we should not miss the fact that when the apostles Peter and Paul use the most powerful manner they had of stressing something in their writing, they both use that “highlighting” method to stress the same thing – the importance of love. Above all, Peter, Paul and other New Testament writers tell us, we must love one another. Nothing the Bible tells us about our day-to-day relationships with each other is more important than that.

16. HOW DO WE LOVE GOD?

The Bible speaks of three ways we can love God ...

When Jesus was asked which was the “Greatest Commandment” (Matthew 22:37, Mark 12:30, Luke 10:27), he quoted Deuteronomy 6:5: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.”

But how exactly are we to do that – what is it that we do to express love to God? Many Christians would say that we show love to God in our prayer, praise, worship, and so on. While this is true, of course, and we certainly can express love in these ways, it is interesting that the Bible itself mentions only two specific ways in which we are to love God.

Obedience

The first way the Bible teaches love for God – in the words of Christ himself – is through our obedience. Jesus made many statements to this effect: “If you love me, keep my commands... Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me ...Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching...” (John 14:15, 21, 23). The same principle is reiterated in later books of the New Testament such as “...if anyone obeys his word, love for God is truly made complete in them.” (1 John 2:5), and in 1 John 5:3, etc.

This is something we find throughout the Old Testament as well as the New – for example, in Deuteronomy 30:16: “For I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws...” We see the correlation between love and obedience throughout the Pentateuch and then continuing through the Book of Joshua (Joshua 22:5) and beyond. In fact, there are more verses correlating our obedience with our love for God than those showing any other aspect of our relationship with God.

Service

A second specific way the Bible shows we express love to God is found in the Book of Hebrews: “God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them” (Hebrews 6:10). This principle may not always seem immediately obvious because showing love to others may not seem the same as loving God, but, as Hebrews shows, loving others is loving God – the two are inextricably connected.

Jesus showed this, of course, in the Parable of the Judgment in which he said: “The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me’” (Matthew 25:40). It is a fundamental concept of the Christian Faith that God holds our love given to others as equivalent to love given to him.

Totality

Returning to the words of Jesus, we can also see beyond the specific teachings the Bible gives regarding loving God through obedience and service. If we look closely at Jesus’ quotation of Deuteronomy 6:5 that we “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength,” we can see not only the idea of degree – that we love God as *much* as we can – but also the idea of extent – that we love God in every aspect of our being.

The aspects of our selfhood that Deuteronomy 6:5 enumerates represent an ever-widening circle. Our “heart” represents our inner thoughts, emotions, and will; our “soul” represents our physical being as a living person; our “strength” is the power we exert toward something. But our “strength” can have a broader meaning, too. The Hebrew word used in Deuteronomy 6:5 can sometimes be translated as an adjective – as “very” – or it can be a noun (as it is in this verse) – as “muchness” or “abundance.”

In other words, loving God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our strength encompasses loving God with our inner thoughts, our outer being, and even the extended circle of that which we own – our “abundance.” If we want to know how to love God, the full answer is that we can love God in every expression of every one of these areas – in the totality of our being.

**PART FIVE:
CONNECTIONS**

17. THE TREE OF FAITH, HOPE AND LOVE

Faith, hope and love connect to each other like the component parts of a great tree ...

Throughout most of the chapters of this book we have mainly looked at faith, hope and love individually, but we should always remember that these three qualities constantly interact with each other in our lives.

Even while we have focused on them individually, we have repeatedly seen scriptures in which two or more of the three qualities interact in some way. In some cases we even find scriptures that imply we cannot have one quality without the others (Galatians 5:5-6, Colossians 1:5, etc.).

To understand this fact it is helpful to use a simple analogy. Metaphorically, we might say that the three qualities of faith, hope and love function like the parts of a great growing tree. Faith comprises the roots of this tree, hope its trunk, and love its flowering and fruiting branches. It's a simple analogy, but one that we can profitably think about.

The Roots of Faith – nourish our growth: “But blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence is in him. They will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream...” (Jeremiah 17:7-8); “rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith ...” (Colossians 2:7).

The Trunk of Hope – strengthens or supports our growth: “You wearied yourself by such going about, but you would not say, ‘It is hopeless.’ You found renewal of your strength, and so you did not faint” (Isaiah 57:10); “but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength ...” (Isaiah 40:31).

The Fruiting Branches of Love – manifest our growth: “so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work” (Colossians 1:10).

This last mentioned scripture is of particular interest because, in context, we might say it relates to all three parts of our “tree.” Notice the full scripture:

“... bearing fruit in every good work [love], growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power [faith] according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience [hope]” (Colossians 1:10-11, parenthetical comments added).

Using our analogy, it is clear that if we successfully attack or dig up the roots of a tree, the whole plant will soon die. If we cut down the trunk of the tree, the roots may die and the fruiting branches certainly will. Finally, if the fruiting branches themselves are cut off, the tree itself may not die, but it will stand useless and essentially lifeless with neither purpose nor productivity.

The same kind of thing happens with faith, hope and love. If our faith is weakened or destroyed, our whole spiritual life will suffer. If our hope is eroded or lost, we lose faith and love. And if our love is diminished, our faith and hope become barren and meaningless.

On the other hand, increasing one of the three great qualities often helps increase one or more of the others. As we will see in the following chapters, increased faith invariably leads to increased hope in our lives, and increasing our hope really can lead to an increase in the love we feel and express.

When we understand that principle, we can better understand what Paul tells us in Galatians and Colossians. Faith, hope and love connect to – and interact on – each other like the component parts of a great tree. When one part grows, so do the others; when one part declines, so do the others. But when faith, hope or love grows within us, we invariably see the others increase in our lives, too. And when they do, we see that the “tree” of faith, hope and love is truly a tree of life.

18. THE CONNECTIONS OF FAITH

Faith strengthens our hope and empowers our love ...

In looking at our analogy of the “tree” of faith, hope and love, we saw that the “roots” of this tree can be said to be faith. What can we learn of the connections of those roots? First, compare what Paul wrote in the first and second chapters of his letter to the Colossians:

“...growing in the knowledge of God being strengthened with all power...” (Colossians 1:10-11 where this growing and strengthening seems to be equated with faith).

“...rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught ...” (Colossians 2:7).

In both cases we see that spiritual strength seems to be linked to faith. This is true in the sense that the strength of our hope and love are often directly dependent on the strength of our faith. Just as the strength or ability of a tree to survive is often a function of its roots, if we doubt, we have diminished hope, and if we lack faith to act, our works of love will likewise be limited. So in this general way faith certainly does connect to the “trunk” and “branches” of hope and love.

But there are also specific ways we can see connections between faith and those other qualities. In the Book of Romans Paul makes an important statement regarding our relationship with Christ: “...through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand” (Romans 5:2). Grace and love are often nearly synonymous in Paul’s writings (2 Thessalonians 2:16, etc.), but whether we see a direct connection between the two in this verse or not, it is clear that Paul says we access or “tap into” God’s grace through faith.

And look at what Paul told Philemon: “I pray that your partnership with us in the faith may be effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share for the sake of Christ” (Philemon 1:6). Here, our faith is clearly linked to our spiritual understanding, which is something that in turn will affect our hope. The connection between faith and hope (or its related quality,

patience) is seen throughout the New Testament. Notice how Paul places them side by side in speaking of the Thessalonian Christians: ... we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that you endure” (2 Thessalonians 1:4 NKJV).

Another example of faith’s connections is Galatians 5:5-6. We looked at this scripture earlier as an example of faith, hope and love, but notice the double connection it makes to faith: “For through the Spirit we eagerly await by faith the righteousness for which we hope ... The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.” Here, faith that affects our hope is placed alongside faith that expresses itself through love.

Verses such as these help us to remember that faith is far more than just abstract trust – it is the spiritual quality that takes over when hope might otherwise have faded. Faith is also the quality that so often enables us to act in love where we might not do so because of fear or doubt. It is no exaggeration to say that faith nourishes our hope and empowers our love – and as such we must never neglect the power of its connections.

19. THE CONNECTIONS OF HOPE

Hope is vital in producing active faith and love ...

Earlier in this book we looked at a somewhat surprising scripture in Paul's letter to the Colossians which tells us of: "... the faith and love that spring from the hope..." (Colossians 1:5). What Paul says here is surprising because we might expect hope to be the result of one of its presumably more "important" siblings – faith or love – rather than the other way around. Why is this?

The answer lies in the fuller context of what Paul wrote. Notice that his whole thought is: "the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven and about which you have already heard in the true message of the gospel that has come to you" (Colossians 1:5-6). The point here is that the Colossians' hope was something that they first understood in the message of the gospel they heard. That message, of course, was one of the hope we are given as a result of God's forgiveness and the promise of eternal life.

But that message also ties in to the broader picture of the situation among the Colossian believers. In the first half of his letter, Paul strives to correct a false doctrine that was gaining ground among these early Christians – that of Gnosticism. When applied to Christianity this false teaching twisted many aspects of the gospel; but its central stress was on spiritual illumination – "light" – through secret or superior knowledge (Greek *gnosis*).

Keeping this little bit of history in mind, notice what Paul tells the Colossians:

"For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you. We continually ask God to fill you with the **knowledge** of his will through all the **wisdom and understanding** that the Spirit gives, so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing **fruit in every good work**, growing in the **knowledge** of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great **endurance and patience**, and giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of **light**" (Colossians 1:9-12, emphases added).

First, we should not miss the fact that Paul mentions *knowledge* twice in these verses (vss. 9-10) – stressing that true knowledge should be focused on God (and, by implication, not on the philosophical knowledge of Gnosticism) and that that knowledge should lead to God’s kingdom of *light* (not the “light” of philosophical illumination.)

But, far more important than Paul’s verbal attack on gnostic beliefs is what he shows about the way of God in contrast to Gnosticism. If we look closely, we can see that Paul uses a slight variant of his triad of faith, hope and love to summarize the things that are the most important results of God’s way. He includes “wisdom and understanding” (which we saw are related to faith); “fruit in every good work” (which we have seen is used in the New Testament for the results of love); “endurance and patience” (which we have seen are often synonymous with biblical hope).

Now we can see the practical application of what Paul is saying here. Paul contrasts the empty, fruitless results of Gnosticism with the clear results of belief in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Those results are active faith and active love that are both based on the hope we gain through the message of the gospel (Colossians 1:6).

Interestingly, in his first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul deals with a different problem, but one with similar results. There, he speaks of believers whose faith and love were being undermined because they were losing hope – both because of persecution, and because they were thinking that those who died in the faith before the return of Christ could not fully participate in the plan of God.

That is why Paul assures the Thessalonians such is not the case, and that Christ “... died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him” (1 Thessalonians 5:10), and why he encourages them to have the hope they need (1 Thessalonians 4:18, 5:11). He then stresses the need to develop a more active faith (1 Thessalonians 3:2-3; 4:14) and a more active love (1 Thessalonians 3:12-13; 4:9-10) out of the hope they have that enables them to face persecution and even death.

Paul knew that Christian hope is vital in producing the active faith and love we need to exhibit in our lives rather than a selfish concentration on our own “enlightenment” and spiritual condition – as he wrote to the Colossians. He also knew that it is vital that we do not lose hope so that our faith and love can continue to grow – as

he wrote to the Thessalonians. Without hope we either do not develop faith and love or we begin to lose them. Truly, our hope strengthens and supports these other qualities. In this sense faith and love do spring from hope and connect with hope constantly!

20. THE CONNECTIONS OF LOVE

Love urges us toward faith and hope that are focused beyond our own needs and desires ...

When we look at the final quality within the great triad of faith, hope and love, we find that love also connects and interacts with its fellow qualities.

We saw this in several examples in past chapters, and it is never clearer than in Paul's words to his friend Philemon: "Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord's people" (Philemon 1:7).

Here, the love Philemon had shown Paul and others clearly led to joy and encouragement (directly associated with hope) for many among "the Lord's people." The connection between love and hope is also made clear by Paul in verses such as this one in the Book of Romans: "And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit ..." (Romans 5:5), or this one in 2 Thessalonians 2:16: "May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope ..."

The love-hope connection is so clear and direct in verses like these that we can take great encouragement from the effects of love on our hope. The more we love, the more hope grows in our lives.

And there are other ways in which love connects with the qualities of hope and faith. In the previous chapter we saw how Paul spoke of "the faith and love that spring from the hope" (Colossians 1:5). We have also seen, in Galatians 5:5, that the same apostle writes, "For through the Spirit we eagerly await by faith the righteousness for which we hope..." At first sight, these two verses may seem to contradict each other. Does faith come from hope (Colossians 1:5) or does hope come from faith (Galatians 5:5)? The answer is that both spiritual qualities interact with and upon each other, so both statements are true.

In fact, in the very next verse in Galatians, Paul continues: "...The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love" (Galatians 5:6). Here we see that faith, for it to be true, has to be expressed through love. This is the same as saying that faith *works* through love (NKJ, ESV, HCB, and many other translations), and

the same could be said of hope – hope works through love. Faith without love is cold and empty belief (James 2:19), just as hope without love is limited and selfish hope. It is only through love that both qualities develop fully and are properly expressed.

Love challenges us to ask “why do we believe, and why do we hope?” Love urges us to a faith and hope focused beyond our own needs and desires to a faith that works for others and a hope that is centered on them as much as on ourselves (Romans 11:14). Love prompts us to find that God is not only a God of love, but also a God of faith and of hope – and that in seeking faith, hope and love in our lives we are seeking the character of God himself.

Hundreds of scriptures tie into this truth, and we can learn much by noticing and focusing on them. We hope that the scriptures discussed in this book will help you to recognize similar verses when you find them in your own personal study.

Taken individually, these and many other verses throughout the New Testament give us continual glimpses of the connections among faith, hope and love. Taken together, these same verses show that the three qualities cannot exist in isolation. Using our analogy of the tree of faith, hope and love we can confidently say:

Faith establishes hope and love,

Hope supports faith and love,

Love produces faith and hope.

All three are necessary, all three will always be needed – which is why, Paul tells us, all three remain.

AFTERWORD

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