

Calvin's Institutes, Book Three, *The Way in Which We Receive the Grace of Christ* [cont'd]

CHAPTER II FAITH: ITS DEFINITION SET FORTH, AND ITS PROPERTIES EXPLAINED [part 4]

The estimated schedule for Book III continues as follows:

<u>Topic</u>	<u>Sections</u>	<u>Class</u>
Chapter II Faith (concluding today)		
Faith and Assurance, concluded	17-21	Jan 20
Faith and The Fear of God	22-23	"
The Foundation of Faith	29-30	"
Chapter III Repentance		
Repentance, the fruit of faith	1-4	Jan 27
Definition; mortification/vivification	5-9	"
Believers are still sinners	10-15	Feb 3
The fruits of repentance	16-17	"
Fruits of repentance, concluded	18-20	Feb 10
Unforgivable sin	21-25	"

16. The chief hinge of faith (Review)

Last week, we saw that Calvin essentially created a very close tie between true faith and the assurance of salvation. See these quotes:

Here, indeed, is the chief hinge on which faith turns: that we do not regard the promises of mercy that God offers as true only outside ourselves, but not at all in us; rather that we make them ours by inwardly embracing them. Hence, at last is born that confidence which Paul elsewhere calls "peace" [Rom 5:1], ...

Now it is an assurance that renders the conscience calm and peaceful before God's judgment. ...

No man is a believer, I say, except him who, leaning upon the assurance of his salvation, confidently triumphs over the devil and death; ...

This high view of the connection between saving faith and assurance of salvation must be defended in view of the struggle that many face. Calvin addresses this requirement in the following sections.

17. Faith in the struggle against temptation

Still, someone will say: "Believers experience something far different: In recognizing the grace of God toward themselves they are not only tried by disquiet, which often comes upon them, but they are repeatedly shaken by gravest terrors. For so violent are the temptations that

trouble their minds as not to seem quite compatible with that certainty of faith.” Accordingly, we shall have to solve this difficulty if we wish the above-mentioned doctrine¹ to stand.

Calvin goes on to say that we cannot imagine any certainty that is not tinged with doubt, nor any assurance not assailed by some anxiety. In fact, believers are in perpetual conflict with their own unbelief. The spiritual rest on Christ, which is characteristic of true faith, exists in spite of the tumult brought about by the unbelief of the flesh.

As an example, Calvin quotes David. David, with innumerable complaints declares how unquiet his mind always was. “Why do you tremble,” he says, “my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God” [Ps 42:5, 11; 43:5]. Or, “I have said in my alarm, I am cast away from the sight of thine eyes” [Ps 31:22].

In despair he condemns himself to death, and not only confesses himself to be troubled with doubt, but, as if he had fallen in the struggle, he feels that there is nothing left to him. For God has forsaken him, and has turned his hand, which was once his help, to his destruction. So he justifiably urges his soul to return to its repose [Ps 116:7] because he had experienced what it was to be tossed among stormy waves.

Says Calvin, the characteristic of true faith is that it rises up through all these difficulties and is not destroyed by them.

So, David, even when he might have seemed overwhelmed, in rebuking himself did not cease to rise up to God. He who, struggling with his own weakness, presses toward faith in his moments of anxiety is already in large part victorious. ...

Here, then, is the proper reward and penalty of unbelief: so to tremble as to turn aside from God when one does not open the door for himself by faith.

But, on the other hand, believers, whom the weight of temptation bends down and almost crushes, constantly rise up, although not without difficulty and trouble. ...

Calvin has now taught two perspectives:

1. Faith is connected with great assurance.
2. Faith is warred against by the forces of evil (the world, the flesh, and the devil) and is in constant tumult.

How, then, are these two perspectives to be understood?

18. The conflict in the heart of the believer

In order to understand this, it is necessary to return to that division of flesh and spirit which we have mentioned elsewhere. It most clearly reveals itself at this point. Therefore the godly heart feels in itself a division because it is

¹ A reference to his teaching in the preceding section 16.

- Partly imbued with sweetness from its recognition of the divine goodness,
Partly grieves in bitterness from an awareness of its calamity;
- Partly rests upon the promise of the gospel,
Partly trembles at the evidence of its own iniquity;
- Partly rejoices at the expectation of life,
Partly shudders at death.

This variation arises from imperfection of faith, since in the course of the present life it never goes so well with us that we are wholly cured of the disease of unbelief and entirely filled and possessed by faith. Hence arise those conflicts, when unbelief, which reposes in the remains of the flesh, rises up to attack the faith that has been inwardly conceived.²

But if in the believing mind certainty is mixed with doubt, do we not always come back to this, that faith does not rest in a certain and clear knowledge, but only in an obscure and confused knowledge of the divine will toward us? Not at all. For even if we are distracted by various thoughts, we are not on that account completely divorced from faith. Nor if we are troubled on all sides by the agitation of unbelief, are we for that reason immersed in its abyss. If we are struck, we are not for that reason cast down from our position. For the end of the conflict is always this: that faith ultimately triumphs over those difficulties which besiege and seem to imperil it.

19. Even weak faith is real faith

Calvin goes on to say that when even the least drop of faith is instilled into our minds, we begin to contemplate God's face, peaceful and gracious toward us, even if afar off. We know we are not deceived by this. Then, as we advance in the faith, the sight becomes clearer. Ignorance is gradually dispelled. But, in any case, we do have a clear knowledge of the grace of God. Therefore, even though we are aware of our darkness, we are also definitely aware of the distant vision, which the flesh cannot suppress, and which comes closer to us every day.

20. The weakness and strength of faith

Calvin quotes Paul to show that "we know in part and prophesy in part" [1 Cor 13:9,12], and "see in a mirror dimly" [1 Cor 13:12]. This is faith's weakness. Yet at the same time, with uncovered face and no veil intervening, we see God's glory in the face of Christ, with such effect that we are transformed into his very likeness [2 Cor 3:18]. This is faith's strength.

And, in speaking of the many and varied temptations that strike us to hinder our faith, Calvin says the worst is the temptation of conscience:

But it is especially our conscience itself that, weighed down by a mass of sins, now complains and groans, now accuses itself, now murmurs secretly, now breaks out in open tumult. And so, whether adversities reveal God's wrath, or the conscience finds in itself the proof and ground thereof, then unbelief obtains weapons and devices to overthrow faith. Yet these are always di-

² Calvin believes that faith arises in the heart of man – the most central part – whereas temptations to unbelief approach him external to his heart. The "flesh" is not the most central part of a believer.

rected to this objective: that, thinking God to be against us and hostile to us, we should not hope for any help from him, and should fear him as if he were our deadly enemy.³

The practical consequence of this advice is that when we feel that God has most grounds to be angry with us, we should always approach him on the grounds of his grace expressed Christ, not flee him. For when we are satisfied with ourselves, it may be that God our Father is not satisfied, and is preparing discipline for our good; but when we are in spiritual distress, and repentantly confessing our sins and approaching God by the means that he has ordained, then assuredly he is pleased with us!

21. The Word of God as the shield of faith

To bear these attacks faith arms and fortifies itself with the Word of the Lord. And when any sort of temptation assails us – suggesting that God is our enemy because he is unfavorable toward us – faith, on the other hand, replies that while he afflicts us he is also merciful because his chastisement arises out of love rather than wrath. When one is stricken by the thought that God is Avenger of iniquities, faith sets over against this the fact that his pardon is ready for all iniquities whenever the sinner betakes himself to the Lord's mercy. Thus 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. Rather, all the contentions that try and weary it result in the certainty of this assurance. A proof of this is that while the saints seem to be very greatly pressed by God's vengeance, yet they lay their complaints before him; and when it seems that they will not at all be heard, they nonetheless call upon him.⁴ ...

Thus the disciples whom Christ rebuked for the smallness of their faith complained that they were perishing, and yet were imploping his help [in the boat, in the storm: Matt 8:25-26]. Indeed, while he reproves them for their little faith, he does not cast them out from the ranks of his disciples or count them among unbelievers, but urges them to shake off that fault. ...

The root of faith can never be torn from the godly breast, but clings so fast to the inmost parts that, however faith seems to be shaken or to bend this way or that, its light is never so extinguished or snuffed out that it does not at least lurk as it were beneath the ashes. And this example shows that the Word, which is an incorruptible seed, brings forth fruit like itself, whose fertility never wholly dries up and dies.⁵ The ultimate cause of despair for the saints is to feel God's hand in their ruin, taking into account things present. And yet Job declares that his hope will extend so far that even if God should slay him he will not for that reason cease to hope in

³ A paraphrase might be: Sin works in our conscience to promote a carnal fear of God, a conviction that he is against us (because of our sins), so that we turn away from him and the comfort he has to give.

⁴ We remember Christ's words on the cross: "My God, my god, why have you forsaken me?" This is the response of the godly.

⁵ I Pet 1:23 suggests itself as the scripture reference here. We are born again of the word which endures forever.

I Peter 1:22-25 ²² Seeing ye have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit unto unfeigned love of the brethren, see that ye love one another with a pure heart fervently: ²³ Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever. ²⁴ For all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away: ²⁵ But the word of the Lord endureth for ever. And this is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you.

him [Job 13:15]. The matter stands thus: Unbelief does not hold sway within believers' hearts, but assails them from without.⁶

Calvin goes on to compare faith – the shield against Satan's fiery darts – to a soldier's shield. He may receive blows on his shield that make him give ground. Perhaps the shield is even somewhat damaged at some point. However, the spiritual warrior's shield of faith never gives way entirely (as long as he holds it up), and always becomes fresh, whole and strong again. Those who wield it gain the triumph in the end, because being tested on the battlefield by faithful use of the shield of faith (which is capable of deflecting all the fiery arrows, if used), these spiritual soldiers become stronger with each battle, and are again ready to enter the fight.

Thus, if we may judge from the outcome, believers not only emerge safely from every battle, so that, having received fresh strength, they are shortly after ready to descend again into the arena; but besides, what John says in his canonical letter is also fulfilled: "This is the victory that overcomes the world, your faith" [1 John 5:4]. And he affirms that our faith will be victor not only in one battle, or a few, or against any particular assault; but that, though it be assailed a thousand times, it will prevail over the entire world.

22. Faith and the Fear of God.

The subject of Calvin's presentation takes on a new dimension at this point, moving from a discussion of that fleshly fear which distrusts God, to that kind of fear which has respect for God. Calvin still addresses fear in terms of the spiritual warfare within ourselves between the flesh and the Spirit. Each of the two sides in this spiritual warfare produces its own kind of fear.

Calvin begins by enumerating some instances:

There is another kind of "fear and trembling" [Phil 2:12],⁷ one that, so far from diminishing the assurance of faith, the more firmly establishes it. This happens when believers, considering that the examples of divine wrath executed upon the ungodly as warnings to them, take special care not to provoke God's wrath against them by the same offenses; or, when inwardly contemplating their own misery, learn to depend wholly upon the Lord, without whom they see themselves more unstable and fleeting than any wind.

Perhaps it can be put this way – it certainly is in accord with what Calvin has said in previous sections about the internal warfare of flesh and Spirit: The fear of the flesh moves us to doubt God's free grace; whereas spiritual fear causes us to distrust ourselves and flee to God! This is how to discern between the different types of fear.

Calvin concludes this section by commenting that the kind of godly fear discussed here is to

⁶ Calvin sees the heart as the controlling factor. What has supremacy in the heart has supremacy in the whole man.

⁷ **Philippians 2:12-13** Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; ¹³ for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.

The term "good pleasure" does not mean "arbitrary pleasure." It means "good will," or "favor."

restrain presumption, which sometimes creeps upon the saints from the vestiges of the flesh, in order that it may not play the wanton in vain confidence. It is another thing [he means a wrong thing] so to dishearten the conscience with fear that it cannot rest with full assurance in God's mercy.

Therefore, Calvin is careful to understand the relationship of faith and fear in such a way that godly fear attacks carnal presumption and bolsters faith, rather than weakening it.

23. "Fear and trembling"

Then, when the apostle teaches that we should "work out our own salvation in fear and trembling" [Phil 2:12], he demands only that we become accustomed to honor the Lord's power, while greatly abasing ourselves. For nothing so moves us to repose our assurance and certainty of mind in the Lord as distrust of ourselves, and the anxiety occasioned by the awareness of our ruin.

In this sense we must understand what is said by the prophet: "I, through the abundance of thy goodness, will enter thy temple; I will worship ... in fear" [Ps 5:7]. Here he fitly joins the boldness of faith that rests upon God's mercy with the reverent fear that we must experience whenever we come into the presence of God's majesty, and by its splendor understand how great is our own filthiness. Solomon, also, speaks truly when he declares that men blessed who is always afraid in his own heart, since by hardening it falls into evil [Prov 28:14]. But he means that fear which renders us more cautious – not the kind that afflicts us and causes us to fall – while the mind confused in itself recovers itself in God, cast down in itself is raised up in him, despairing of itself is quickened anew through trust in him.

Accordingly, nothing prevents believers from being afraid [with godly fear] and at the same time possessing the surest consolation; according as they turn their eyes now upon their own vanity, and then bring the thought of their minds to bear upon the truth of God. ...

One could not consider that Calvin's treatment of the fear of God in these few sections is supposed to be a complete treatise on the subject. Rather, we should consider the title and purpose of this chapter on faith. Calvin is making faith in Christ, and in the free grace he brings, central to the Christian faith, and to do so it is necessary to deal with the question of fear. Calvin has done so by reminding us that carnal fear draws us away from God, but godly fear draws us closer to him, in self-abasement and in godly respect. Therefore, the true fear of God, godly fear, is not incompatible with the assurance of faith at all.

29. God's promise the object and support of faith

Calvin now returns to a subject he has visited earlier in this chapter on faith, in order to form a conclusion. This has to do with faith's attitude toward the different strands of thought in the Scripture. Following is Calvin's main thesis:

We make the freely given promise of God the foundation of faith because upon it faith properly rests.

What Calvin means is that the strand of teaching in the Scripture that we rest our faith upon, is the promise of God.

Now Calvin goes on to admit that true faith has a broad view of the whole Word, and yet the central focus is the comfort-giving promise, not threats, commandments and prohibitions:

Faith is certain that God is true in all things whether he command or forbid, whether he promise or threaten; and it also obediently receives his commandments, observes his prohibitions, heeds his threats. Nevertheless, faith properly begins with the promise, rests in it, and ends in it.

Furthermore, the central focus on promise is the central focus of life:

For in God faith seeks life: a life that is not found in commandments or declarations of penalties, but in the promise of mercy, and only in a freely given promise.

For a conditional promise that sends us back to our own works does not promise life unless we discern its presence in ourselves. Therefore, if we would not have our faith tremble and waver, we must buttress it with the promise of salvation, which is willingly and freely offered to us by the Lord in consideration of our misery rather than our deserts.

Calvin now begins to describe again his New Covenant doctrine of faith:

The apostle, therefore, bears this witness to the gospel:⁸ that it is the word of faith [Rom 10:8]. He distinguishes the gospel both from the precepts of the law and from the promises, since there is nothing that can establish faith except that generous embassy by which God reconciles the world to himself [2 Cor 5:19-20].⁹

Thence, also, arises that frequent correlation of faith and gospel in the apostle, when he teaches that the ministry of the gospel is committed to him to further “obedience to the faith” [Rom 1:5], that “it is the power of God for salvation to every believer; ... in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith” [Rom 1:16-17]. And no wonder! Indeed, since the gospel is the “ministry of reconciliation” [2 Cor 5:18], no other sufficiently firm testimony of God’s benevolence to us exists, the knowledge of which faith seeks.

Therefore, when we say that faith must rest upon a freely given promise, we do not deny that believers embrace and grasp the Word of God in every respect: but we point out the promise of mercy as the proper goal of faith. As on the one hand believers ought to recognize God to be Judge and Avenger of wicked deeds, yet on the other hand they properly contemplate his kindness, since he is so described to them as to be considered “one who is kind” [Ps 86:5], “and merciful” [Ps 103:8], “far from anger and of great goodness,” “sweet to all” [Ps 144:9vg], “pouring out his mercy upon all his works” [Ps 145:9].

⁸ In Calvin, “gospel” is a New Covenant word, even though he teaches that the ancient believers were saved through faith in Christ-to-come, just as we are saved by faith in the Christ who has come.

⁹ The centrality of faith is more preeminent in the New Covenant, and more clearly characterizes the religion. Paul can say, (^{NKJ} Galatians 3:25) “But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor.” He refers to the regimentation that was imposed upon the people through Moses, as characteristic of that age, and speaks of the characteristic of this age as the age of faith.

30. Why faith depends solely on the promise of grace

Calvin has objectors to his insistent and definite doctrine of faith – namely, his idea that though faith believes the whole Word, faith rests in the word of promise only. He continues defending himself, by dealing with a counter-example which evidently has been brought against his teaching:

... I admit, as I have already said, that God's truth is, as they call it, the common object of faith, whether he threaten or hold out hope of grace. Therefore, the apostle attributes to faith the fact that Noah feared the world's destruction when it was not as yet visible [Heb 11:7]. If fear of imminent punishment was the product of faith, then threats ought not to be excluded from the definition of it. This is indeed true.

But our slanderers unjustly charge us with denying, as it were, that faith has regard to all parts of the Word of God. It is our intention to make only these two points: first, that faith does not stand firm until a man attains to the freely given promise; secondly, that it does not reconcile us to God at all unless it joins us to Christ. Both points are worth noting.

It is as if Calvin is saying this: If anyone wants to say of true, scriptural faith, that it produces the kind of fear which is the product of faith (not the fleshly kind of fear which is the product of unbelief), and to do this without denying the central focus on promise, then that is acceptable to Calvin. Faith that rests on the gospel ought to produce godly fear, even though faith is not fear, in its own nature. On the other hand, if anyone wants to change the definition of faith, so that it is no longer centrally focused on rest in the promise, then that is wrong, and contrary to the Scriptural doctrine of faith. Calvin says:

We seek a faith that distinguishes the children of God from the wicked, and believers from unbelievers.

He means that a teaching that we should be in doubt about our assurance does not perform this distinguishing function. Furthermore:

If someone believes that God both justly commands all that he commands and truly threatens, shall he therefore be called a believer? By no means!

It is only faith in the gospel that makes a real believer.

Therefore, there can be no firm condition of faith unless it rests upon God's mercy. Now, what is our purpose in discussing faith? Is it not that we may grasp the way of salvation?¹⁰ But how can there be saving faith except in so far as it engrafts us in the body of Christ? Accordingly, when we define it there is no absurdity in our thus emphasizing its particular effect In short, in this doctrine the malicious have nothing to carp at without implicating Paul in the same censure with us, who rightly calls the gospel "the word of faith" [Rom 10:8].

I will add the following: Calvin's objectors are probably saying that the comfort-based definition of faith that Calvin gives will lead to antinomianism – the idea that the high standard of God's Law is no longer significant, and that repentance and striving for holiness are not important. Keeping people in doubt – keeping them working for their salvation, or assurance –

¹⁰ He means by "grasping the way of salvation," not a way of doubt.

is the more sure way to gain obedience. But, Calvin knows that the spiritual comfort of the gospel is the means by which the Spirit creates and motivates holiness among the believers. Paul says,

Romans 5:19 - 6:4 For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man's obedience many will be made righteous. Moreover the law entered that the offense might abound. But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more, so that as sin reigned in death, even so grace might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it? Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.

Walking in newness of life is – not walking in doubt about it!