

# Abide These Three: Faith, Hope, and Love

Richard C. Leonard, Ph.D.

First Christian Church, Hamilton, Illinois — June 14, 2015

## Exodus 34:1-10

The LORD said to Moses, "Chisel out two stone tablets like the first ones, and I will write on them the words that were on the first tablets, which you broke. Be ready in the morning, and then come up on Mount Sinai. Present yourself to me there on top of the mountain. No one is to come with you or be seen anywhere on the mountain; not even the flocks and herds may graze in front of the mountain."

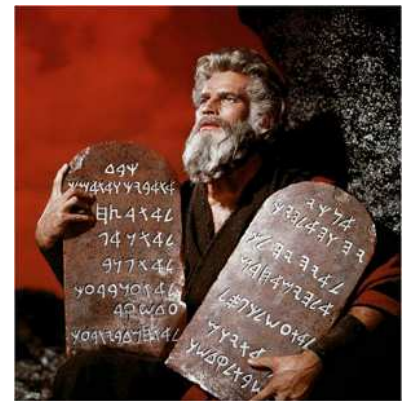
So Moses chiseled out two stone tablets like the first ones and went up Mount Sinai early in the morning, as the LORD had commanded him; and he carried the two stone tablets in his hands.

Then the LORD came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, *Yahveh*. And he passed in front of Moses,

Abide These Three:  
*Faith*  
*Hope*  
*Love*

proclaiming, "*Yahveh, Yahveh*, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation."

Moses bowed to the ground at once and worshiped. "O Lord, if I have found favor in your eyes," he said, "then let the Lord go with us. Although this is a stiff-necked people, forgive our wickedness and our sin, and take us as your inheritance." Then the LORD said: "I am making a covenant with you. Before all your people I will do wonders never before done in any nation in all the world. The people you live among will see how awesome is the work that I, the LORD, will do for you."



## 1 Corinthians 12:27--14:4

Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues.

Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? But eagerly desire the greater gifts.

And now I will show you the most excellent way. If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.



Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, 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. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears.

When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love. Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy. For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God. Indeed, no one understands him; he utters mysteries with his spirit. But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort. He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church.

“And now these three remain: *faith, hope and love*. But the greatest of these is love.” This familiar quotation from 1 Corinthians 13 contains the three words I want to discuss today, and we will get to them shortly.

1 Corinthians 13 is sometimes called the “love chapter,” and it’s often read at weddings as two believers prepare to offer their vows of matrimony. But you’ll notice that I read more than just that famous chapter; I read a few of the apostle Paul’s remarks that preceded it, and a few that followed. I did this for a reason: to demonstrate that this famous passage on love is part of a larger discussion of *spiritual gifts*. Paul is speaking of gifts of the Holy Spirit at work in the church, the gathered body of Christ — gifts like prophecy, healing, miracles, tongues, teaching, administration, helping and assisting others. And after Paul has said what he wants to say about love, he returns to his discussion of spiritual gifts, prophecy in particular.

What does that tell us? It tells me that love, as such, isn’t the big thing that’s on Paul’s mind. What concerns him, as he writes to the Corinthian church, is how these believers are going to work out and exercise their spiritual gifts, those abilities the Spirit of Christ gives to his people so they can carry out the mission of his church. This is the mission Jesus gave his apostles just as he was ascending to his Father, recorded in Acts 1:8: “But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses.” The development and exercise of these gifts are what Paul is writing about, and his discussion of love is a kind of interruption in his train of thought. He inserts it as a corrective, a warning to not get puffed up about the gifts of the Spirit, or to think that exercising these gifts puts us on a level above other believers. Instead, when we practice our particular gift — whether it’s teaching, or prophecy, or healing, or tongues, or just helping others in the church — we’re to do so in an attitude of love.

But what is this “love” of which the apostle speaks here, in this famous chapter? You may have noticed, in the time that I have been filling this pulpit, that I have hardly ever spoken of “love.” In fact I usually avoid using the word, if I can. The reason I avoid it is because that word is so easily misunderstood in our culture. As you’re aware, the New Testament writers use three different Greek words that are translated in English as “love.” So when we hear that word in Scripture, we’re apt to give it a meaning it didn’t have when the apostles wrote about it.

Our culture, as you know, is hung up about “love,” which people often equate with sexual desire. When you hear someone speaking about “making love,” you know what that means. Or people can use the word “love” to describe any kind of desire, as when a person says, “I just love apple pie.” (Actually, my favorite is pecan.) The Greek word for “love,” as “desire,” is *eros*, from which we get the English word *erotic*. I think most

Christians understand that this isn’t the New Testament meaning of love, because Scripture uses a different Greek word. Then there’s a second Greek word, *philos*, which refers to a brotherly or neighborly sort of love. It’s from this word that we get our English word *philanthropy*, which means doing things to benefit other people because you care about their welfare. Both of these words, *eros* and *philos*, have to do with how we feel about something, or someone. But neither of these words are the word the New Testament uses for the kind of love Paul is referring to in our passage.

### Three Greek words for “love”:

- *eros* – desire
- *philos* – brotherly concern
- *agape* – love arising from God’s love

The word the New Testament uses is the word *agápe*. This word describes a kind of love that doesn’t depend on our feelings about someone. Sometimes we think we have to have some kind of squishy, sentimental feeling about someone to love them, but *agápe* love doesn’t depend on that sort of thing. Instead, the love Paul and other New Testament authors write about is a reflection of the love God has for us, as revealed especially in what he has done for us through his Son, Messiah Jesus. As John puts it in his First

“Follow the way of love,  
and eagerly desire  
spiritual gifts . . .”

-- 1 Corinthians 14:1

Letter, "We love, because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). So we need to probe into what it means for God to love us, in order to understand what it means for us to love others as a reflection of his love.

That means we need to ask where the New Testament word *agápe* comes from. As you know, when the New Testament Christians spoke of the Scriptures, they didn't mean the New Testament — because they were writing the New Testament! For the earliest Christians, the Scriptures were the Hebrew Scriptures, and they took their theological terminology from those Scriptures. So my suggestion is that when Paul, and other apostles, used the term *agápe* they had an Old Testament equivalent in mind.

That's why I began by reading that passage from Exodus, chapter 34, where the Lord describes himself to Moses, using his personal name *Yahveh*, in these words: "*Yahveh, Yahveh, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin*" (Exodus 34:6-7). The Hebrew word translated "love" here is the word *chesed*, one of the most important and often-used words in the Old Testament. The Psalms are especially rich in their use of this word, but we find it elsewhere as well. Sometimes English versions translate it as "lovingkindness," sometimes as "steadfast love," sometimes simply as "love." I suggest that when the New Testament authors wrote of *agápe* love, they had in mind this Hebrew word *chesed*. What does it really mean?

Taking a broad view of the many occurrences of this word, we can say that *chesed* is the Lord's "covenant love" — that is, it's his *commitment* to his partners in the covenant. It's God's loyalty to the people he has called to serve him, with whom he has made a special agreement called the covenant. God's love is his particular attachment to those who have entered into an agreement with him, to worship and serve him and fulfill the mission to which he has called them.

In other words, God's love isn't a general feeling of benevolence toward everybody. The Bible has other ways of speaking about that kind of attitude on God's part, such as his providence or his perfection. But his love, his *chesed*, is his special attachment to those who have "signed on" to his mission, who have pledged their allegiance to him by saying, "You are my Lord and my God." I submit that when we read about love in the New Testament, that's the kind of love it's talking about — God's "covenant love." And when writers like Paul speak of acting in *agápe* love, they mean acting on the basis of our commitment to God, and to one another in the family of God. We're all familiar with Romans 8:28, "We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose." Those who love God, and whom God loves, are those who've responded to his call and are working out his purpose in their lives.

So, as you can see, New Testament love doesn't depend on *how we feel*. We don't love others because we especially like them, or because we're attracted to them, or because we have sympathy for them. We love them because we're *committed to them as fellow members of the family of God*, and because God has first made a commitment to us by giving us his covenant, bringing us into his family. We don't wait till we feel like it before we can love; we love out of obedience to the Lord. That's why Jesus can even *command us* to love one another: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another" (John 13:34). Within the body of Christ, we're committed to one another simply because we belong to each other.

Think about this from a purely human standpoint. We're committed to our family members simply because they're members of our family. We may not approve of what they do or say; we may find their attitude and behavior disappointing; we may not even like them! But we're still related to them, and so we're committed to them. That's biblical love, just as the Lord describes his love to Moses: "slow to anger, abounding in covenant-love and faithfulness, maintaining covenant-love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin." God's love for us doesn't mean he always approves of us. Scripture makes that clear, when Paul writes, "But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). God



αγαπη = ἔσθ  
*agape = chesed*  
The Lord's *covenant-love*  
(loyalty to his  
special partners)



surely doesn't approve of our sin, or excuse it with a wink. God loves us not because we're good, because we're not; he loves us *because we belong to him*.

Can we step outside of God's love? Yes, we can. God's love is his *chesed*, his covenant-love; it's his loyalty to those who are members of his family. But if a person says, "I don't want to be part of that family, I don't care about God's mission in this world, I'll just go my own way, taking my cue from the culture in which I live," then that person has stepped out of the relationship in which God's love operates. The Lord still wants to reach that person and bring him into the family, because it's not his desire that anyone be lost to a godless future. But his *agápe* love, his *chesed*, is reserved for his faithful family members. And it's the same with us. We're not commanded to love everybody, even if we care about them and want to help them. It wasn't to the Pharisees, or the Sadducees, that Jesus commanded, "Love one another." It was to his disciples that he said that, because they were his family, his people, his own.

And it's on the basis of God's covenant-love that we can appeal to him for help. As the Psalmist cries, "Rise up, come to our help! Deliver us for the sake of your steadfast love," your *chesed* (Psalm 44:26). It's because we're in a covenant with the Lord, a family relationship in which we've entered through Jesus, that we can call upon the Lord in prayer. If a person isn't in that relationship, if he or she has turned away from that covenant or refused it in the first place, then that person really "doesn't have a prayer." You can't ask God for help if you don't know him, and you don't know him unless he's your Father, and he isn't your Father if you're not in the family. It's really as simple as that. (The only exception would be the unbeliever who realizes his need for God, and cries out, "Lord, forgive me, and bring me into your family through the cross of Jesus." That's a prayer of the unbeliever the Father will always hear.)

"And now these three remain," Paul wrote, "faith, hope and love." We've covered love; so let's go on to a discussion of faith. Now I mentioned that the three Greek words for "love" have to be covered by only one word in English, which leads to misunderstanding. With faith, it's the other way around; the Greek of the New Testament has one word for faith, *pistis*, along with the verbal form *pisteuo*, and these can be translated by several different words in English. This also can lead to misunderstanding.

For example, Jude, in verse 3, refers to "the faith [*pistis*] which was once for all delivered to the saints." In English, that suggests that faith is a body of doctrine or belief that can be spelled out in some written document. In the same way, in Romans 3:22, Paul refers to "the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe." We could get the impression from this that having faith means to hold certain beliefs, as though faith is being defined as accepting certain doctrines. But in the Greek the same basic word is used for "faith" and "believe," and you don't define a word by itself. We could translate Paul's words more accurately as "faith in Jesus Christ for all who have faith." In the New Testament, *believing* is always *having faith* — they are the same word in Greek. We don't just believe in Jesus as an idea; *we faith him*. Faith isn't just an idea or concept, it's an action.

What kind of action is faith? We've all heard that faith really is trust, a trust on the basis of which we take action. My father used to illustrate the meaning of faith by saying, "You may believe that I can drive a car, but faith is getting in the car and riding with me." To have faith is not just to accept certain truths; it's to make a commitment, and act on that commitment. As James writes, "Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. . . . Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith" (James 2:16-17). I might say, "Oh, I believe a God exists somewhere." That's not faith. Faith is doing what God asks me to do, and trusting that he will give me the ability to do it.

But there's a further nuance to the New Testament understanding of faith. Jesus gave a powerful illustration of it when he and his disciples encountered a fig tree that wasn't bearing fruit. Because the tree was barren, Jesus consigned it to never be fruitful again. When he and his disciples passed by later, they found the tree had withered away. And Jesus declared, "Have faith in God." Actually, a better translation is

*pistis* = faith  
*pisteuo* = "to faith"  
• to have faith  
• to believe  
• to act in trust  
• to be faithful

“Have *the faith of God.*” But how could we have the faith of God? Who does God have faith in — does he have faith in some power greater than himself? No, the faith of God means *the faithfulness of God.* God is faithful to his people, and faithful to the promises he has made to us. And that’s really what faith means in the Bible; it means not just believing in God, not just trusting God, but *being faithful* to God as he is faithful to us.

God’s faithfulness is revealed in what he has done for us through Jesus. John, in the Revelation, calls Jesus “the faithful witness” (Revelation 1:5). We’re all familiar with Paul’s declaration in Galatians 2:20: “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” But, once again, we need to retranslate; Paul is saying that he lives his life not by his own faith in the Son of God, but by *the faithfulness of the Son of God* — and that Jesus demonstrated that faithfulness by giving himself on the cross, as an act of *agápe* love, an exercise of his obedience to God and his commitment to the plan of God. As you can see, when it comes right down to it there’s not much difference between our two words, love and faith. They’re both expressions of the Lord’s commitment to his people, and their commitment to him — a commitment the Bible calls the covenant.

But you’re probably wondering about the rest of that passage in Mark about Jesus and the fig tree, where he goes on to say, “Truly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and cast into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours” (Mark 11:23-24).

Preachers have usually taken Jesus’ words to mean that the “mountain” of our problems can be overcome if we pray in faith. Yes, having confidence that God answers believing prayer is part of faith, and I’ll come back to that. But in this passage there’s a concrete geographical reference. Jesus says, “Whoever says to *this mountain*, be taken up and cast into the sea . . .” What mountain is he talking about? Well, they were in Jerusalem, so the mountain is Mount Zion, where the Temple was located — the Temple that was the dwelling place of the Lord, the focus of Israel’s special calling as the servants of God. What does it mean, then, for *that* mountain to be cast into the sea? In the Scriptures the “sea” is sometimes a symbol for the Gentiles, the nations outside of Israel. And the fig tree is a biblical symbol for Israel. But the fig tree hasn’t fulfilled its mission to be “a light to the Gentiles,” to be the blessing to all nations that God called Abraham’s descendants to be. The fig tree not been fruitful, and has withered away. So the “mountain,” the place where God’s presence dwells, is to be taken beyond Israel to “the sea,” to all nations, just as Paul says in Galatians 3:14, “that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles.” And it’s the obedience, the faithfulness of the followers of Jesus, those who “believe that what he says will come to pass,” that will take that gospel message to the world. And they’re still doing it today.

But this principle also applies in our personal lives as believers — i.e., “faithing people.” “Whatever you ask in prayer,” Jesus said, “believe that you have received it, and it will be yours” — and the word “believe” here is the same as the word for “have faith.” When needs arise, it’s never good to pray *in unbelief*, or in a tentative, hesitant mode. For example, if someone is ill we don’t need to pray that they might be healed “if it be thy will.” It’s never God’s will that people should stay sick, since he’s told us, “I am the LORD, who heals you” (Exodus 15:26). Nor should we think that God wants us to remain in financial difficulty, since Scripture says, “The blessing of the LORD brings wealth, and he adds no trouble to it” (Proverbs 10:22). Faith is taking God at his Word, and acting upon the Word. Because God is faithful to his Word, we respond in faithfulness to him and, in prayer, we see his answer. As Paul states, “It is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose” (Philippians 2:13).

Hope =

- Christ in us
- The resurrection of the body
- The glory of God’s new creation

“So faith, hope, love abide, these three,” Paul wrote. We’ve discussed love, as loyalty to God’s covenant; we’ve discussed faith, as being faithful to what God calls us to do as his covenant partners. Now, finally, what about hope?

As with love and faith, we could introduce many Scripture quotations at this point, but I’ll stick with just two. First, in Colossians 1:24-27, Paul says this:

Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ’s afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church. I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness — the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints. To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

Sometimes we speak of our hope as the hope of heaven, and we think of “going to heaven” as “going to glory.” But that isn’t the hope that Paul is talking about here. Let’s look at Romans 8:22-24:

We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved.

The hope Paul speaks of, the “hope of glory,” is *the hope of God’s new creation*, when he redeems this fallen world and restores it to the good world he created it to be in the first place. And the evidence that God’s new

creation is coming is the resurrection of Jesus — a resurrection in which we share as members of Messiah Jesus. Our hope is “the redemption of our body,” when God acts to “make all things new.” We already have that hope, “Christ in you, the hope of glory.” If we’re in Jesus, we already have the “firstfruits,” the foretaste, of God’s new creation, for as Paul states in 2 Corinthians 5:17, “If anyone is in the Messiah, there is a new creation.”

This hope is what God promised all along. It’s what he committed himself to by his *agápe*, his covenant-love. It’s what he has been working toward through the ages, by his *pistis*, his faithfulness, and has made real in the resurrection of Jesus, the faithful witness. “Faith, hope,

love abide, these three” — not really three separate ideas, but three aspects of the one reality of the Lord’s covenant with his people, and their corresponding commitment to him.

**Abide These Three:**

- *Faith – being obedient, faithful to God’s covenant*
- *Hope – expecting God to fulfill his covenant promise*
- *Love – commitment to our covenant partners*

Text ©2015 Richard C. Leonard  
Images from Internet sources