

# Being a Christian

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[ 0 : 0 0 ]     What is the meaning of being a Christian? In a society which so often dismisses Christian belief out of hand, and where we as Christians so often feel isolated, we need to have very strong reasons to stand out from the crowd.

Arguably, Psalm 23 is not merely the most comforting and beautiful of the Psalms, but also the one that gives us the strongest of reasons why we should live as Christians in today's Scotland.

Perhaps tonight you're struggling to hold on to your faith in Jesus Christ. The world is pulling you back to itself, and you're losing your grip on the eternal realities and the basic truths of the Christian faith.

In a word, you've forgotten what it means to be a Christian. You've forgotten what it's like to have the Lord as the satisfied of your soul. You've forgotten what it's like to feel the satisfaction of his provision for you, and his presence with you in the dark places of the valley of the shadow of death.

If this is what it's like for you, and let's face it, at one stage or another, we can all recognize ourselves in this picture, we need to get back to the core of our faith. We need to start being Christians again.

[ 1 : 2 9 ]     Because it's only as we live as Christians that we'll have the confidence to stand out from the secular world. And in so doing, draw from that world those who talk big about the world and in their heart of hearts know that there's so much more to life than money and pleasure and career that will draw them to Jesus.

In Psalm 23, verse 6, we have what are perhaps the most comforting words in this psalm. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

These words are so filled with meaning and comfort for us as Christians, but they also help us to understand the meaning of being a Christian and how we may live as Christians.

And so as we study these words together, let your sense of assurance grow and your desire to return to where you once were in the faith grow.

Because these words tell us that being a Christian means four things. It means, first of all, living in the meaning of God. Living in the meaning of God.

[ 2 : 5 2 ]     It means, secondly, experiencing the love of God. It means, thirdly, being the children of God. And then lastly, it means hoping in the promise of God.

As we come to the end of our communion season, let these be your oath before God. That no matter how hard the world tries to pull me back, I'm going to hold on to Christ.

Being a Christian means, first, living in the meaning of God. Living in the meaning of God. There are so many aspects of our secular atheistic society which clean draw the breath from our lungs.

Never mind the intellectual, or as I see it, lack of intellectual arguments for the secular position. The most worrying of all is the blatant and unashamed declaration by our educators and media that there is no ultimate purpose in life.

Scientists have discovered that the universe is far bigger than we had ever imagined. It takes light, one second, to travel the distance from the earth to the moon and then halfway back again.

[ 4 : 14 ] And it takes light two hundred thousand years to travel from one edge of the Milky Way, our galaxy, to the other edge of the Milky Way. And we are just one among billions of galaxies in our universe.

The earth really is an infinitesimally insignificant speck of dust in the seeming infinity of space. There are eight billion human beings on planet earth today.

Eight billion! I'm going to use this because my primary team is Aberdeen. Think of a full Petaudry Stadium. Twenty thousand people.

If each person at that football game represented another four hundred thousand people, that is the entire population of Glasgow, a full crowd at Petaudry on a Saturday afternoon would represent all eight billion people on earth.

When you think of the vastness of the universe and the size of the human population, the question we ask is this. What do I matter?

[ 5 : 27 ] What is the meaning of my life? Is my life of any more worth than that of an ant or a worm? Am I of the same value as a virus?

Although perhaps they would never say such a thing, secular atheists believe that there is no meaning and that we as human beings capable of the art of da Vinci, the medicine of Sir James Simpson, the compassion of Florence Nightingale, the literature of Leo Tolstoy, the science of Lord Kelvin, the music of Mendelssohn, the intelligence of St. Paul, that we as human beings are of no greater value or worth than a jellyfish.

against such hopeless meaninglessness. Psalm 23, verse 6 insists that human beings have worth and meaning because we are precious to God.

in this verse David says, Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me. Me.

I am of worth to God. Me, I am. Each of these eight billion human beings on the planet are loved by God. We ask the question, what do I mean and what does my life matter?

[ 6 : 56 ] Well, without God, the answer is nothing. But with the God of Psalm 23, verse 6, whose goodness and mercy follow us, the answer is everything.

Think again of society's fascination with genealogy. You see this by watching TV shows like Who Do You Think You Are? where famous celebrities trace their ancestry.

People are fascinated with their roots. where they come from. But let's think about this analytically and painfully for a moment.

In 150 years from now, all of us will be gone. So will our children. So will our grandchildren.

So will our great-grandchildren. Our tombstones will all be covered with moss and the lettering will have begun to fade away. And then in another 150 years after that, everything we wear physically will have dissolved into the earth.

[ 8 : 03 ] There shall be nothing left of us. Our ancestors, our descendants rather, will not know and by that time probably will not care who we were or what we did.

Our life will be forgotten. there will be nothing left. And then in a couple of billion years or so, when the sun begins to run out of energy, it will expand and expand and consume the earth.

Everything will be gone. The seas, the mountains, all trace of life. It will all become a mass of hyper-molten, expanded sun.

there shall be no trace of anything which ever was done on this earth. No memory of the love you had for your wife or your children.

No one to remember the sacrifice of those who gave themselves in the great wars. No one and nothing left except a great grinning skull at the edge of the universe, laughing at our vanity and crying out to us, meaninglessness, all is meaninglessness.

[ 9 : 27 ] That is the logical end point of secular atheism. If anyone really believed it, the sheer despair of the meaninglessness of existence would drive them to suicide.

But against this hopeless vanity, psalm 23 verse 6 cries out to us over the years, surely goodness and mercy shall follow me.

I'm so mortal, I'm so frail, but this me means something to God. God values me.

I matter to him. The call of this verse is to live in that meaning. you have meaning because God loves you and values you.

He demonstrated his love for you by giving his precious son on the cross for you. Hold up your head high. Refuse to be intimidated by society which we should pity for the despair and hopelessness of their position.

[ 10 : 44 ] Live in the purpose God gives you and the value he places upon you. Do not despair but live in his meaning. That's what it means to live as a Christian, to live in the meaning of God.

But secondly, living as a Christian means experiencing the love of God, means experiencing the love of God. My wife is a nurse. She travels all around the south of Scotland working with very sick children and their parents.

And she comes home and although she never goes into details, it would often all be a breach of unemployment, she'll often tell me about the dedication of parents for their children.

That there's nothing a parent will not do for a sick child. She's often struck by these amazing examples of love and commitment. These examples of love, amazing as they are, are just faint pictures of the infinite, inventive, and unchangeable love of a covenant God for us.

The most basic covenant in the Bible is that which God made with Abraham. One feature of which is God's promise saying, I will be your God and you will be my people.

[ 12 : 10 ] And what God promises, God delivers. He is our God who loves us and is committed to us and is passionate about us. That is, after all, one of the fundamental distinctives of the Christian faith.

The truth that God is love. If we ever doubted that truth, then look no further than the blood-stained face of Jesus on the cross. Hear no more than his loving cry, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.

Although Psalm 23 finds its context in the love of God, it is seen most powerfully here in verse 6, Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.

love. This word mercy here is the steadfast covenant love of God. It's the committed, passionate love of God for us.

That promise that I will be your God through the thick and the thin of your life, in the ups and downs of your life, in the still waters and the green pastures of your life, in the down times of the valley of the shadow of death in your life.

[ 13 : 25 ] I will never stop being your God, and I will never ever stop loving you. The innermost motivation of his heart is one of passionate, intense love.

But it's not hard, is it, to forget that. I wonder whether Satan's primary method of prizing us away from Christ and drawing us back into the world is to give us amnesia, concerning this very thing, the love of God.

Perhaps, right now, you're going through difficult circumstances in your life. The shadow of death is darker than ever it was before. You're grieving, a broken relationship, you're worried about your health or the health of someone you love, your kids are going the wrong way in life.

Whatever it is, you feel you're flying into the teeth of a gale. And it's in Satan's interests to use these circumstances by placing the suggestion into your mind that what you are going through right now in your life is a sign that God does not love you.

He'll try to convince you that if God did love you, everything in your life would be plain sailing, that there'd be no valleys of death shadow. You'd never ever have to cry one tear or experience a broken heart.

[ 14 : 54 ] Is that where you are right now? Listening to the sibilant whispers in the ears of your heart of the evil one? Or are you listening to the word of scripture and what you know of God?

That God is love and that he loves you and that he will always love you. That in his love and wisdom God has placed us in this dark valley so that we may learn how deeply he loves us and how completely we may learn to rely upon him.

If God does not love us then he is not God because this is what he has promised and covenanted and this is what he has proved through the death of his son on the cross.

That his love is deeper, his love is longer than we can possibly love him or we can possibly begin to fathom. But the steadfast, committed love of God is displayed to us in our day-to-day lives by his goodness.

His love is the fountain from which flows his goodness. Because God loves us, he is good to us. His goodness is his providing, guiding, comforting, protecting, blessing, restoring, shepherding of us and for us.

[ 16 : 20 ] His goodness is the still waters and the green pastures. His goodness is the way of righteousness in which we walk. His goodness is his presence with us in the valley of the shadow of death along with his rod and his staff.

His goodness is his table with us in the wilderness. His goodness is his anointing of our heads and our overflowing cups. In a word, his goodness is a coverall for all the blessings and the benefits of the gospel.

All those things which are ours by virtue of what Jesus did on the cross for us, they're all ours. But again, perhaps, we're back in those difficult times in our lives.

We're hearing that whisper in our ears telling us, God is not good to you. God is harsh. God is unloving.

God is mean to me. One of the things I'm often told about Glasgow, I can't think why, is that it's always raining and the sun never shines.

[ 17 : 26 ] Now it's true. We don't often see the sun in Glasgow, but the truth is the sun always shines in Glasgow. Always. It's just that most of the time you can't see it because it's blocked out by big, dirty clouds and by the rain that falls on your head.

But the sun always shines above the clouds. Sometimes we can see the goodness of God more clearly than at other times. And sometimes our vision of the goodness of God is clouded by our own personal stresses.

But it doesn't mean that God is not good to us. It doesn't mean that any of these blessings and benefits of the cross are ours any the less. We are still forgiven.

We are still adopted. We are still empowered. We are still righteous to the blood of Jesus. If anyone ever had an excuse to doubt the goodness of God, it was his own son who endured a deeper darkness on the cross than any of us will ever know.

A darkness which the creed encapsulates by saying he descended into hell. But never once did Jesus doubt the goodness or good intentions of his father for him.

[ 18 : 39 ] God's goodness never fails. He just keeps on comforting. He just keeps on giving. He just keeps on loving. He just keeps on nurturing us. The goodness and mercy of God are spoken of here as following us all the days of our lives.

The word follow here perhaps the translation is a wee bit tame. It is not so much that they follow us, they pursue us, they chase after us.

We lie down in green pastures and the goodness and mercy of God pursue us there. We walk in the valleys of the shadow of death and they chase us there.

They pursue us, they chase us, they hunt us out. We cannot escape from the goodness and mercy of God. We cannot hide from them. We cannot run faster than them.

They are not sheepdogs tamely following a shepherd as much as they are the hounds of heaven passionately pursuing us. This is what it means to be a Christian.

[ 19 : 46 ] You cannot escape the love of God. You can't escape his goodness. The experience of the love of God in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Allow yourself. Allow yourself to be caught up with the goodness and mercy of God. I'm not saying that we'll always be on the mountain tops of experience.

Sometimes we'll be in the valleys and our feelings will be very different. But you'll always know that God loves you.

And that the gospel of Jesus Christ in all its fullness is yours. Hold your head high. You are loved by the God who made the vastness of the universe and he is good to you.

That's what it means to live as a Christian. To experience the love of God. Thirdly, to live as a Christian means to be a child of God.

[ 20 : 52 ] Being the children of God. In the second part of verse 6, the imagery begins to change. Thus far, we've been lying down in the fields of the shepherd, walking in the valley of the shadow of death.

We've been seated at a table in the wilderness. But now at the end of verse 6, we're in the house of the Lord. And in our last point, we'll look more deeply at what is meant by the house of the Lord. But the question at this point is this.

Who belongs in the house of the Lord? Perhaps we could answer that question by thinking of our own houses. Who belongs in my house? Is it not my family?

My household? Who belongs in the house of the Lord? Is it not his children? His sons? His daughters? Are they not his family?

Are they not the clan of God who live in his house? You see, in verse 6, David is making the astonishing claim concerning the status of every believer.

[ 21 : 55 ] Not just that they are members of God's covenant, that he is their God and they are his people, and as such, the loving kindness and goodness of God pursues them all the days of their lives.

Not just that they are members of God's covenant, but David makes this astonishing claim for them. They're members of the family of God. He's telling us that those who have the Lord as their shepherd are not to be thought of as much as the sheep of the shepherd, not even as the servants of the shepherd, but the children of the shepherd, his sons, his daughters.

That's who dwells with God in his house. When we begin to think of what David says here in that way, our eyes begin to open with astonishment at the immense privilege we have as Christian believers, those for whom the Lord who is our shepherd laid down his life.

We are not merely covenant members. We are not merely citizens of the kingdom of God. We are not merely his servants who do his will. We are not even merely his friends as Abraham was.

We are his sons and daughters. We are the spiritual heirs of the God of infinite power, love and holiness.

[ 23 : 28 ] United to Christ, we are adopted as sons and daughters of the living God to a new family with a new father and a new home.

We dwell in his house. In Romans 8, the Apostle Paul emphasizes in our reading we read together us being children of God. He says, For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God.

The Spirit you receive does not make you slaves so that you live in fear again. Rather, the Spirit you receive brought about your adoption to sonship and by him we cry, Abba, Father.

The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children then we are heirs, heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ. And all this means that you and that me bear molecular machines.

That's what the secular atheists would tell us, all you are is a molecular machine. You are a son or a daughter of the living God. I am proud to be known as a child of my father and mother.

[ 24 : 49 ] I guess when you are a teenager you don't really want to be seen with your mom and dad because that would be uncool. But as you grow and mature you want to be seen with your parents because you are proud of them and you want to be known as their child.

Now if that is true of our weak and sinful parents how much more true is it of our heavenly father? We are his children so let me challenge you.

Are you ashamed of your spiritual parentage? Are you ashamed to be seen with your heavenly father? To be known as a Christian? If you are it's a sign of deep spiritual immaturity and a lack of awareness of how proud you should be to have a father such as he is.

Are you ashamed of talking about your heavenly father to others? What does that say? But if we flip the coin from challenge to comfort being a child of God means that in the same way that our parents love us in everything if anything is bothering us we can take it to them and they'll do what they can to help us we can take all our fears and anxieties fears and worries to our loving heavenly father we can come crying out to him Abba father we can find in him all the strength and the wisdom and the comfort we need to face whatever challenges lie in our paths do you really think that a loving heavenly father would ever leave you to the wolves and to the wilderness of the valley of the shadow of death and not be with you there to comfort you to protect you and to guide you with his presence if you're a

Christian today you are a child of God through the death of Christ united to him by faith the spirit of God has made you a child of God hold your head high you're a child of the God who made the earth and the sky the seas and the air he's your father that's what it means to be a Christian to be the children of God and then lastly to be a Christian means hoping in the promise of God hoping in the promise of God if you remember from this morning we saw that the ultimate context of Psalm 23 is to be found in God's redemption of his people from their slavery in Egypt and his loving care for them as they travelled through the barren wilderness on their way to the promised land of Canaan we talked last evening about how there were times in their experience as the wandering people of

[ 27 : 51 ] Israel when they had to walk through dangerous valleys but through it all God was with them as their shepherd we saw that the presence of God was with his people God commanded his people to make a golden box and to place this golden box inside a tent this box was the ark of the covenant the tent of meeting this tent or tabernacle so called was the earthly presence of God over which dwelt the shekinah cloud of his glory for hundreds of years the ark of the covenant God's presence on earth was hidden within the tent of meeting representing the presence of God on earth the ark was not situated in a fixed temple or building but in a tent whenever the people moved the tent with the ark inside the earthly presence of God moved with them it could be written of the presence of God no fixed abode when David became king we learn that he tried to change all that he wanted to get rid of the temporary tent and to build in its place a fixed temple which would house the ark of the covenant in Jerusalem forever and although he never got to do it it was a task assigned to his son

Solomon you can see the depth of David's desire here in verse 6 when to me it almost seems like he's in a daydream he begins to speak of the house of the Lord he's got this picture in his mind you see of this marvelous temple he wants to build for the ark of the covenant he wants to build it not because he wants to make a name for himself or because he wants to win merit for God but because he wants the presence of God to be with him always he does not conceive of life as worth living without God with him he wants to experience fresh outpourings and experiences of the nearness of God in his life and so he wants to build this magnificent temple in his city where God can dwell with him but there's more to it than that if you recall under the conditions of the tabernacle worship only one man one man the high priest could go into the most holy place in which was the ark of the covenant and only once a year only one man only once a year could get up close and personal as it were to the presence of God that's the way it was under the mosaic covenant you can see here from verse six

David says I'll be that man I want to be that man who goes into the inner presence of God but not just once a year let me be with him always because I want to be where God is I want to be in the house of God always can you not see his dream here can you not taste his hope that the day will come when he will be able to build God a temple and come near God and live with God and never move away ultimately this is a hope David reserved for eternity because he knew that it would never really happen in his lifetime yes goodness and mercy would follow him all the days of his life here on earth but David pictures heaven as being the constant presence of God in his heavenly temple almost a thousand years later at the very moment that our saviour

Jesus Christ died on the cross the curtain of the temple which keeps sinners from the most holy place was ripped from top to bottom signifying that what David had hoped for in his wildest dreams was now a reality that sinful people like you and like me through the shed blood of Jesus Christ through his death can have free access into the presence of God that we can dwell with him in his heavenly temple and yet again is this not just a shallow reality of heaven itself the heaven which is the ultimate fulfillment and realization of David's dream because they in verse six where the dwelling of God is with men we shall dwell forever in his house as his children unlike the terms of the covenant which was made with Moses whereby only one one day a year would have access to

God now all of us all the time can have access to God and unlike what we have now where we only have access to God through faith in Christ but our eyes cannot see him there in heaven we shall see God in Christ with our eyes we shall touch him with our hands we shall hear him with our ears and we shall be with him always there in the eternal presence of God shall be the ultimate fulfillment of psalm 23 verse 6 for we read in revelation 7 verse 17 the lamb at the center of the throne of heaven shall be their shepherd and he will lead them to springs of living water and God will wipe every tear from their eyes we shall as Paul says forever be with the Lord now surely this is enough to strengthen us to persevere in our faith in

[ 34 : 07 ] Christ to keep on going to keep on striving for him in the midst of an apathetic and hostile society after all if we are to believe what the secular militant atheists tell us in 10,000 years there shall be nothing left of us not even a memory but our hope tells us that in 10,000 years because of the amazing grace of God we'll be bright shining as the sun with no less days to sing God's praise than when we first began so what does it mean to live as a Christian it means first to live in the meaning of God it means secondly to experience the love of God it means thirdly to be a child of God and it means fourthly to hope in the future of God if you are a Christian tonight you have a privilege beyond reckoning to have all these things as yours hold your head high keep going you keep standing for

Christ in your day to day lives whatever you are whatever you're doing whoever you may be with but if you're not a Christian if you do not yet trust in the Lord Jesus Christ then think of what you are missing by the standards and thought patterns of our atheistic society ultimately none of us are worth anything we are cared for by nobody we are nobody's concern there is no future for any of us is that not enough to drive you to spare by contrast listen to and respond to what you know in your heart of hearts is the absolute truth that you were made for better things than this that you were far more worth than a virus or a jelly fish come trust in

Jesus Christ and what he did upon the cross for you and you will find a new meaning in him that you never thought you would ever find you will have a new experience of the love of God in him you never would have hoped to experience you will have a new family to belong to you will have a new future to hope toward you will have everything to gain you will have nothing to lose by coming to Jesus Christ let us pray almighty god our loving heavenly father how we bless you for the confidence of this last verse surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the lord forever oh lord we pray for any here this evening who having heard this message are infuriated because of how it convicts them of their place in the world oh lord we pray that your spirit would speak in power that your spirit would bring meaning to the lost love to those who hate belonging to those who are confused and a hope to those who are despairing and all through the cross and resurrection of

Jesus Christ in whose name we pray amen