

A Confession Defining a Christian Life

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[0 : 0 0] Now please turn with me to the passage we read in the book of Acts, Acts chapter 24, and reading again at verse 14, just breaking into the middle there of Paul's answer to the governor Felix.

But this I confess to you, that according to the way which they call a sect, I worship the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down by the law and written in the prophets, having a hope in God, which these men themselves accept, that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust.

So I always take pains to have a clear conscience towards both God and man. One of the great things about the Bible is that it brings to you events just exactly as they were.

It's almost really like just seeing a film of it happening before your eyes. And when you come to a passage like this, as it takes you into what effectively was this courtroom where Paul was asked to give an account of the charges against him or answer the charges against him, not only do you find that that's set before you just there in the way in which it happened, but the language that's used is very vivid.

It's the kind of language that really draws you into what's happening. And as it draws you into what's happening, you just feel like you're in this courtroom and that you're actually listening to what's going on and an observer and watching as Paul is summoned here by the governor, having also heard of the charges laid against him as they were set out by Tertullus. And so today we're really brought into this courtroom situation. We're here just listening to Paul giving his defense or his answer. And as you do so, there are so many things to admire.

[2 : 0 5] Tertullus was a professional. He was a professional lawyer. He was somebody who was well used to setting out charges against people who were accused. He felt at home there. And he began by that sort of appeal to the vanity of Felix. Felix wasn't a good governor. But in order to make his mark, Tertullus began flattering him. And you find that in verses 2 there through to verse 8.

Everything he says there about Felix is generally untrue. He wasn't that sort of likable man at all. But he's really just appealing to his pride, to a sense of vanity, in order hopefully to present his case successfully. And after he's finished and the governor nods to Paul to speak, Paul replies.

And the difference is palpable. Instead of trying to flatter his way through to Felix's approval, what Paul effectively does is set out four marks of why he's a Christian. He actually, before Felix, sets out his defense of the lifestyle that he lives, of why he's living it, of what's involved in this life of being a Christian, being an apostle. He makes his confession. That's how he says, I am indeed making this confession. This I do confess. He's not confessing any guilt regarding the charges that were brought against him, but he is now confessing to these four things that are absolutely crucial, foundational to the life he lives. Which is why the confession is actually a definition of the Christian life, by and large. It's really a summary or a definition of what it is to be a Christian, of those things that are essential in a Christian life. And the way that he brings it to Felix in such a personal way is also important for us. He doesn't just talk in generalities.

He says these four things very personally. I worship. I believe. I have a hope. I take pains with my conscience. He personalizes it so that Felix, hopefully, though he didn't, will actually bring this and apply it to himself. But these four things are, for you and for me today, crucial aspects of what it means to be a Christian. And as we go through them, ask yourself, and I must ask myself, how am I in relation to this? Where do I stand in relation to this definition of what it means to be a Christian?

Let's look at these in turn. I confess this, he says, that according to the way which they call a sect, I worship the God of our fathers. I worship the God of our fathers. Now, he says, according to the way, and if you go through the book of Acts, you'll see that this is brought out a number of times.

[5 : 25] The Christian way, the life that Christians lived, had come to be called the way. And that fits in with the whole idea, of course, of the Christian life being a path that you follow, and you find that in the Bible itself anyway, all through from the Old Testament right into the New Testament, the path of righteousness, the path of peace, the things that characterize this path, this way of life.

And for those who had come to accept Christ, as Paul had, and his companions, for the church of the time, they were then seen by the world around them by that stage to have been following the way.

And they weren't ashamed to be known as a sect following the way. For Paul, that was a privilege. It was something he was proud of. He wasn't going to deny it. But it just shows us that by that stage, the Christian life had come to be given this term, the way. They are in the way. It's a path.

It's clearly marked. Jesus is foundational to it. And you know, that itself reminds us of how important it is to actually distinguish the Christian life as a way to follow, as a path that we must keep too. Because you'll find many different ideas of what a Christian is in the world of today. You'll find it even from people who say they're Christians but deny certain things that the Bible obviously makes fundamental or crucial to a Christian life. This is quite different when you say that the way of the Christian is clearly marked out in the Bible. That's not to say that absolutely everything that we have questions about are easily answered from the Bible.

But it is the case, and it is important, that every single thing about the kind of lifestyle that we should live, the principles of that lifestyle, and indeed many of the details, are clearly marked in the Bible. Now, you don't find that with liberal theology or with evolutionary secularism. Because liberal theology will say, well, actually, it's the case that all faiths pretty much are following the same path. We're on a journey together, and we know we're heading towards the same place. But we haven't quite marked it out yet, and there are things that we just haven't quite distinguished about the way, so we're still working at it. God is saying, I'm telling you what the way is.

[7 : 57] I've clearly marked it out. I'm telling you what righteousness is, what sin is, what forgiveness is, who Jesus is. And of course, secular humanism and evolutionary secularism, when you try and bring this before that sort of mindset, they'll tell you, well, there's no certainty whatsoever about human destiny.

There's no certainty about where the world is heading, or how things will end, or even what human lives will be like a generation or two down the line from now. Well, God is saying, it's actually clearly set out for us. The way is marked out by God. See, the problem is not that the Bible fails to speak clearly about righteousness and relationships and issues like that. The problem is the Bible speaks clearly, but people don't like it. It challenges their way of looking at life, challenges our way of looking at life. If we're left to ourselves to think about it, to follow our own inclination, we're not going to agree with the way that God sets out in the Bible. But that's why Jesus more than once actually said on being questioned in different ways, for example, how many that would be saved? How did he answer these sort of questions? He said, strive to enter through the narrow gate, which leads to life. Avoid the broad gate and the broad way which leads to destruction, which many walk on. You see, he's again talking about a way and the way that is in Christ.

According to the way, I worship, he then says, the God of our fathers. Now, worship, of course, is a crucial mark and distinction and distinguishing mark of a Christian as well, and worship not just in any sort of general sense and worship not just any kind of God in any kind of religion. He's very clear about it. I worship the God of our fathers. See, one of the things that these Christians were being accused of is that the God they were worshipping was a new God. And the Jews couldn't find this God at all agreeable to themselves, this Jesus, this man who had died on the cross and who had risen from the dead. It was being presented as risen from the dead. And Paul, as we'll see, is focusing very much here on the resurrection and the resurrection of Christ central to that as well. But Paul is saying, I worship, I worship. And that life of worship is so crucial, you know, isn't it, to every Christian?

Worship, not just private worship, but worship together with others of God's people. That's why we're here today. That's why it's important to us, why it's precious to us to be together to worship God. Because while you can worship God at home on your own, that's not the definition, the final definition of worship as the Bible sets it out for you. Because worship all through history of God's people has been worshiped together. And as far as possible, that's how we maintain it, as long as we're able to. We value that worship together. We value the togetherness of worship. We value the corporate church of God together in worship. And we value belonging to that number and to that practice.

But it does dominate life as well, doesn't it, the worship of God. It enters into every situation in life. We don't just worship God formally when we come together as we do now. Worship is an element of a believing life, a life of anyone in this way, in this following of Jesus. There's a great example of how worship comes into situations. And if only we were, if only I was more like this man Gideon in Judges chapter 7. You'll find an account there of Gideon. And of course, the ministry and the life of Gideon is such a prominent one in the pages of the Old Testament as a leader of the times.

[12:32] But you remember at that time in chapter 7 of Judges, he was told by God to go down to the camp of the Midianites and that he would hear something. Then he heard some news there. He heard two of the Midianites speaking together about one interpreting a dream that he'd had to the other fellow. And his conclusion was, this is nothing other than the sword of the Lord and Gideon. He has given the Midianites into Gideon's hands. And then you read this, as soon as Gideon heard the interpretation of the dream, he worshipped. That was his first reaction. That was the first thing he did. That was the first thing he thought of. As soon as he heard this news, he worshipped. He didn't rush off from where he was, back to where he would take on the Midianites. He didn't rush away from that spot.

He stood there for a moment. He just worshipped. He gave thanks to God. His soul was primed, you see, to worship him as soon as he heard that news. And that's what we should pray for as well, that the Lord will tune our hearts in such a way that we too will act worshipfully.

In all our circumstances, that our primary concern will be to honor God, to worship God, to ascribe glory and praise and honor to him. And you see, he's the God of our fathers, he says. As we said, Paul was at pains to point out that this was not a new God. This was the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David. You ever thought how amazing it is as you sit here today?

You're worshipping the same God Moses worshipped, Noah worshipped, David worshipped, Paul worshipped.

All the way down through these centuries and millennia of history, people have worshipped this God. And you and I today are in that same line of worship, that same unbroken line of worship. We worship the God of our fathers.

[14 : 53] That's the first thing that marks the Christian. He worships and they worship, she worships, and worships this God. And it's according to the way, according to the way in Christ, we worship this God. Secondly, I believe, he says.

This I confess to you. I worship the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down by the law and written in the prophets. Now, it's important, in a sense, what he's saying is, I worship believing.

And you must keep those tied together, because worship is not detached from believing. Worship is not just a mere formality where you engage in a certain ritual without really applying your mind to it.

That's what it says. I worship believing. And of course, that involves faith, and it involves trust. But it also involves the use of your mind, the application of your mind. Worship is not just doing something by rote. It's not something that you do just because you're following a pattern.

It's not something you do because it's a ritual that's been kept for many years. It's not just reading something off a page that's been done hundreds of times before, without really thinking of what you're doing.

[16 : 10] Worship is a thinking devotion. You apply your mind in worship to what you're doing, to the God you're worshipping, to thinking about this God, about your relationship to him, and your relationship to other Christians, to the church. You think your worship.

You think through your worship. You think in terms of this God, and you're believing in him, and what it means to you to worship him, and to trust in him, and to have him as your God.

I worship believing. But you see, he said believing everything laid down by the law and written in the prophets. In other words, the whole of the scripture, as Paul had it at that time, the Old Testament scriptures, the law and the prophets, the entirety of that body of writing, what he's saying is, I believe everything laid down by the law and written in the prophets.

You don't find Paul saying, well, the things that Moses actually wrote about are no longer relevant. This is the day of the apostles. So we actually just look at the Old Testament and decide what is or isn't acceptable to us as apostles, and we cut out the things that are no longer relevant, and we just form an opinion as to what's relevant for our age, and we keep those things.

And that's how it is as time goes on. Nothing like that with this man. I believe everything laid down by the law and the prophets. It's the word that God has spoken out. One of the greatest problems that the church faces today, I mean the church in the widest sense, if not the greatest problem, is a flawed view of the Bible.

[17 : 53] A flawed view or an inadequate view of what Scripture is, what this word is, what this book is, whose word it is, what authority it carries, that it actually applies to every aspect of my life, my thoughts, my motives, my way of life, my relationships, how I act, how I react, how I speak, the language I use.

Every single aspect of my being has to be governed by this word, because it is the word of God. He's saying, I believe everything laid down by the law and the prophets.

And of course, we now apply that to the New Testament, as it's included in the entirety of the word of God, as we now have it. I believe everything, he says in the word.

Do you believe everything, in terms of every single matter that the Bible brings before you, as the principles for your life and my life?

What's required of us in order to have eternal life? What is going to be the case at the return of Christ? What Jesus has done?

[19 : 09] The effect of what he has done? All of that, you see, is set out. I believe everything. I worship believing everything laid down by the law and written in the prophets.

One of the great temptations that you and I face is the very same one that came to Eve in the Garden of Eden in the words of the tempter.

Has God indeed said? Has God really said? Because the devil is not far from you right now. Even as I preach the word of God and as you read the word of God, as we hear God speaking to us through the scriptures, there is a voice not very far away from you.

There's a thought that comes from time to time and we plant it in your mind. Has God really said that? And it's not just a question. It's a question that injects doubt as to the perspicuity of this word, as to the authority of this word, as to whose word it is, as to does it really require this of me?

Should I really believe it for what it says? That's really how we came to fall into sin because we listened as human beings to the voice that said, has God really said that?

[20 : 38] Does God really require that of you? There's not something there that you can just leave aside or do without. It's a great temptation to just treat the Bible other than God's own word.

I believe worshiping. I believe everything laid down by the law and written in the prophets. We all have a Bible.

We all have more than one in our homes, no doubt. What is it to us? What's our use of it daily? Weekly?

Do we believe everything in it as God's word? Do we leave bits out that we don't like? Do we choose the familiar bits and leave the rest?

It's all God's word, friends. It's all there for our good, for our benefit. We worship believing. Believing everything that God has revealed to us in his word.

[21 : 52] Thirdly, I have a hope, he says. I worship believing, having a hope in God, which these men themselves accept that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust.

Now, you see, here he comes to mentioning the resurrection and it's in relation to this hope. I do worship, he says. I worship the God of my fathers. I worship, I believe as I worship and I have a hope in God.

Having a hope in God. Again, it's a distinguishing feature of a Christian's life. That a Christian has hope. A hope that's united to the matter of resurrection.

First of all, the resurrection of Jesus from the dead without which we don't have hope. But that's what gives us hope. That he has overcome death. That he's come to defeat death and to leave it behind him.

You see, that's one of the great things that you remember Paul in writing to the Ephesians in chapter 2 as he goes through how they were once before they came to know Christ what they were.

[22 : 57] And one of the things he says there is that you were without hope. Without hope. Without God having no hope in the world.

But now you see he has a hope in God. he's turned from having no hope to having a hope in God. A hope united to Christ's resurrection.

Believing that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust. Now this hope is a very important issue obviously in the Bible and especially in relation to what a Christian is.

It's a very different thing to hope in the ordinary sense in which we use the word. You'll know this yourselves. But the hope and it's important for our assurance as Christians that we realize the Christian hope is a certain hope.

And that's not the same thing as saying that I'm assured of my salvation every day that I live. When we say it's a certain hope what we mean is this hope is based upon something unshakable.

[24 : 10] Something that will not move. Something that's not going to change. that is Christ's resurrection and indeed the promises of God that are set in Jesus Christ they're not going to change.

They're not going to be in any way altered however much the world may alter. And as you believe the promises of God as you believe as we said earlier everything written in this book for our guidance for our benefit there are so many promises there that are given to us who believe in God.

And when you believe and come to trust you then have this hope. It's a hope you see that's based upon the certainty and the truth of God's promises.

Hope that's based upon the truth of God's promises. How does that differ from hope in the ordinary sense? Well just I don't know if you've been on holiday some of you are on holiday here I'm sure others are preparing to go on holiday and every time you prepare to go on holiday you do certain things in advance.

You work out your itinerary you make your bookings you make your travel arrangements all of that. And you could say that there's a sense in which you hope that everything that you've got there by way of a timetable by way of arrangements by way of bookings that they're all actually going to be fulfilled.

[25 : 33] But you can't guarantee that. It's not a certain hope. Things might change. Before you come to actually take up those arrangements that you've made. The plane might be late.

You might miss your connection. You might become ill. Something else might happen that prevents you from following out the things that are there that you had hoped that you hoped you would actually fulfill.

It's not a certain hope. But you never come to the Bible and say well I'm not sure really if God is true about this or not or if this is going to work out or not. because the promises of God are absolutely true.

They are certain. They've made certain to us in Jesus Christ. And so you can say your hope is a certain hope because it's not based on something that might change that might be different tomorrow than what it is today.

It's based upon the unshakable immovable foundation of truth of God's truth of God himself of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

[26 : 41] And that's a hope he says in the resurrection but you see he says the just and the unjust. Now we're not going into the resurrection of Jesus that's foundational to our hope.

You can see that elsewhere in the scriptures 1 Corinthians 15 particularly where there's an extended treatment of it. but he's focusing here not on the resurrection of Christ but this resurrection of human beings the resurrection of the just and the unjust that is still to take place at the end of the age the end of time the end of the world.

But he says I have a hope and I have a hope united to our resurrection which includes the just and the unjust. You see Paul is confident of his victory already having been achieved not by himself but by Christ on his behalf.

And because he shares as we were saying to the children because he shares in the life that Jesus has procured for him by his death and resurrection he knows that this hope is not going to be put to shame that he's not going to fall short of it.

He knows that he shares in the resurrection of Christ and therefore he shares already in a victory over death that's been accomplished for him and made certain for himself as he will come finally to the resurrection in his own experience through which he will enter fully into the life that God has procured for him.

[28 : 18] It's both the just and the unjust. a lot of people might hope that a very vain hope a very futile hope that death is the end of all things but of course it's not not when you believe the scriptures and it's not just a resurrection of the just those who are in Christ and have a hope in Christ no he says Paul is saying I have a hope in God which these men themselves accept that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust.

So what does he do? Well we'll see in a minute he takes pains to have a clear conscience both towards God and man. But resurrection of the just and the unjust.

I wonder how Felix felt as Paul was just reaching the end of his summary. Well if you go through the chapter you can see that Felix put him off for the moment and as we saw he came back again with his wife Drusilla and he sent for Paul and heard him speak about faith in Christ Jesus and as he reasoned Paul reasoned about it he didn't just set it out matter of fact he reasoned his way into Felix's conscience and with the help of God with the spirit of God applying it he spoke about faith in Jesus Christ and that involved reasoning about righteousness and self-control and coming judgment and Felix was alarmed he was afraid he shook he trembled that he followed down on his knees and confessed his sins having heard this preacher having heard this apostle having heard this testimony of what it is to be a Christian having heard that there was going to be a resurrection of the just and the unjust having heard

Paul reasoning about righteousness and self-control and coming judgment Felix was alarmed he knew his life was on the line he knew he was in the balances he knew he was being measured by this truth of God no he said go away I'll send for you when it's convenient and he sent for him many times not because he was near to repentance but because he hoped that Paul would offer him a bribe that he makes some money out of him what a miserable miserable man what a sham what dreadful state to be in having heard all that he heard and seen all that he'd seen he left Paul in prison so as to do the Jews a favor we can tremble in the presence of the word of God and still be lost we can be alarmed in our conscience and still not be saved we can have all of that and still not have a living hope as Paul did here

I worship I believe I have a hope and then he says so he says I take pains always to have a clear conscience towards both God and man now these words take pains the words taking pains describe or they are translate rather a word which really means to what you see somebody who's crafting something or creating something with skill they take pains over they don't matter they don't mind taking some time over it's got to be just right and if you see a skilled tradesman for example you don't find them cutting a piece of wood just any old way or just being satisfied if it nearly fits the joint has to be right it's proud of his work the skill that goes into it he takes time over it same with an artist same with whatever somebody's doing that's using skills that's what Paul is saying

[32 : 26] I take pains with my conscience I attend to it I give it time to think about what I'm doing I take pains to keep it clear to keep it clean before God and man it's important to Paul how he relates to his fellow human beings as a Christian he doesn't want to be someone who is rightly accused of doing something that he ought not to or not doing something he ought to wants to keep a clear conscience towards God and man but he's taking pains and you and I have to take pains with our conscience it's not something that just comes about automatically without application without working at it especially without applying the truth of God to it and I fail in that very often that's something

I need to confess before God and to yourselves I'm not perfect I need to confess before God every day there are matters over which I have guilt in my conscience I sin we all sin but the important thing is to use that and take pains over keeping a clean conscience confessing our sin seeking God's grace and forgiveness and healing for myself and in relationships wherever I've gone wrong that's what Paul is setting out as a mark of a Christian today if we need to be reconciled to somebody else if we need to make peace with someone else if we've been wronged or if we've wronged someone and that relationship needs to be mended and we need to accept them back or ask them to accept us back again well that's part of keeping a clear conscience it's not enough just to confess it to God you've got to make reparation to the person you've wronged you've got to come and say well I have a conscience that I need to keep clear towards man as well as towards God four things

I worship I believe I have a hope I take pains with my conscience do you and I have these four in the right place in our lives today let's pray we give thanks to Lord our God that your word is so comprehensive so detailed so full of the kind of information that we require that our lives should be ordered by it and we thank you Lord for the privilege of coming to worship you to believe in you to have a living hope and to be concerned to keep a clean conscience we know that we owe this to your grace to the work of your spirit within us and we pray that we may be further helped as we seek to live that life that gives praise and honour to your name receive our thanks and our worship now we pray for Jesus sake

Amen our final psalm this morning is Psalm 31 on page 243 we're singing verses 21 to 24 to tune to St. Thomas these final verses of Psalm 31 all praise and thanks be to the Lord for he has magnified his wondrous love to me within a city fortified page 243 these verses 21 to 24 and the trueness St. Thomas to God's praise praise for praise and thanks be to the Lord for he hath magnified his wondrous love to be within a city a city fortified for from thy eyes

God all I am I in my hands that say my voice yet first I went to thee with Christ my hope I made for love the Lord all he is saints because the Lord doth heart the faithful love he plenced us thee our doer shall reward he all good courage and he strength and to your heart shall send all he who hope and confidence that all the

[38 : 34] Lord depend after the benediction I'll go to this side door this morning now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ the love of God the Father and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you now and always Amen