

Acts 24

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[0 : 00] Now if you turn with me please to Acts chapter 24, seeking the Lord's help, we'll look at some verses in this chapter, especially from verse 14, Acts 24 at verse 14, then as far as verse 16.

But this I confess unto thee, that after the way which they call heresy, so worship I the God of my fathers, believing all things which are written in the law and in the prophets, and have hope toward God, which they themselves also allow, that there shall be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and unjust.

And herein do I exercise myself to always have a conscience void of offence toward God and toward men. It's marvelous having a Bible, isn't it, because when we come to the Bible we're coming to a book like no other.

Certainly human writings can make things seem very real, and as you're reading a good quality book it takes you into certain circumstances, and you sometimes may even go so far as to get a feel that you're living through them with the author or with whatever the subjects of the book are.

But when you come to the scripture, and a passage like this especially, you are actually taken back to the real event. And such is the kind of language that's used here in this chapter by, we take it, Luke, the writer of the book of Acts, that it's a very, very kind of, almost a vividness to it, where you feel that these events are just brought alive to you, as if you're just seeing them happening for the first time.

[1 : 51] And of course, in a sense that's true, because the Bible is always fresh, and the Bible is always new, because it is the truth of God. It's not just like, as we said, any other book which you can maybe be interested in, or get some excitement for from a while, but then you put it aside and say, well I know that's not real, but I enjoy reading it.

But when you come to this chapter, or to this book, you're taken right back into this courtroom. And you're taken back to the scenes in this courtroom, as it were, where you find, first of all, this professional lawyer called Tertullus coming out to lay out the charges against the Apostle Paul. And then you find Paul called by the presiding Felix to actually then speak for himself, and make his defense against the charges.

Now he was charged here with three very serious charges. He was charged with being a troublemaker. And to tell us, this was really the essence of his case against Paul.

He was charged with being a troublemaker. He had found this man, verse 5, a pestilent fellow, means a person causing trouble. And then also a ringleader of a sect.

[3 : 07] He says he had a mover of sedition among all the Jews throughout the world, and to cause sedition to act against the state, of course, with a serious accusation. And also a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes, who has gone about to profane the temple.

Another woman, she was accused of being a profaner of what was regarded as holy. And these charges were at the very heart of the charges brought against the Apostle.

But at the center of his defense, you find this wonderful confession. He wasn't confessing, of course, to the charges being true, or admitting to the charges, or admitting guilt as charge.

Very opposite of that. But as he made his defense, he brought out this wonderful Christian confession. And indeed, in these verses 14 to 16, you could say this is a confession that really defines for us very largely what a Christian life is.

What a Christian life is about. Because Paul says four things about himself and what he does that really largely define for us what a Christian life is about.

[4 : 19] I worship. That's the first one. Secondly, I believe. Thirdly, I have a hope. And fourthly, I take pains regarding my conscience.

I worship. I believe. I have a hope. I take pains about my conscience. Let's look at these four as they define for us.

Not, of course, in a totality or in an absolute way. There are other things you'd have to add. But by and large, these are some of the main features of a Christian life. What it means to be a Christian and to live as a Christian.

He is, first of all, saying this very personal way. But this is, I am confessing to you. I'm not confessing, he says, to these charges. But I am confessing this to you. I willingly and gladly confess that after the way which they call heresy.

You know, it's interesting that the way of the Christian life had, by this early stage in the New Testament, come to be called the way.

[5 : 24] Whether it was by the apostles and the disciples themselves that called it the way, or whether it was those that actually didn't agree with them and sought to deal with them, as here in this chapter.

But in any case, being a Christian meant to be in the way. And it really is a title in the book of Acts for the lifestyle of a Christian.

To follow Jesus is to be in the way, to be the people of the way. You find that actually done later on in verse 22, for example, when Felix heard these things, having more perfect knowledge of the way. It is literally in the text of the chapter. He says that having knowledge of that, of the way. So that these people, including Paul, all his companions, they were in the way.

That fits in, of course, with the Bible's emphasis throughout, because that's something that had always been a feature of the people of God. They were people who very commonly spoke of themselves as being on a path, on a particular path, on the path of righteousness, on the path of peace, on the path towards an inheritance.

[6 : 42] And that follows on into the New Testament and into the teaching of Jesus himself for a start, where, you remember, he spoke about the two ways, the two paths, the two ways, the one leading to eternal life, the now way, strive to enter that way, he said, and avoid the broad way which leads to destruction.

There are two ways, and there are only two ways. But the way is the way of Christ, the way of following Christ, the way of discipleship. And for the disciples, and for the church at that time, as it should be today as well, the way is clearly marked.

The way is clearly defined by the Lord himself, by the Bible, by the teaching of the Scripture. It doesn't mean everything in Scripture is clear, but the very things that you need to know are substantial and foundational to a Christian life are not actually left obscurely scattered through a Scripture.

They're there, easily picked out. And that's very different to what you find in much of the anti-Christian, anti-Gospel rhetoric and assault that's made on the kind of things that we know of belong to the way.

Liberal theology tells you that, well, you can't have any certainty about these things. You can't have a certainty even about the Bible, of course, so therefore you can't really have a certainty about anything if you can't have a certainty about the Bible and what it is.

[8 : 12] Well, evolutionary, humanistic, secularism will tell you, well, of course, how can you be certain about something that's developing all the time? This is just a product of human philosophy and human thinking down through the ages, and who knows where you'll be in 20 years' time, let alone another few centuries' time.

But God is saying, the way is clearly defined and clearly marked. This is it. Walk in it. The way that God has set out for us in terms of what is, and this is acceptable to him.

The way of his command, the way of his promises, the way of the Gospel, the way of forgiveness through faith in Christ, the way of righteousness.

As we see, it involves looking towards a conscience, a void of offense. So it's according, he says, to the way, he, I worship.

I worship. I worship according to this way, or after this way, which they call hellesy, so I worship the God of my fathers. And of course, I need to tell you that.

[9 : 25] You know, that is very obvious anyway, that one of the primary marks of a Christian is that they are a worshipping people. And not only that they worship, but that they worship this God, who has revealed himself as the God of the way, and that they worship him in accordance with his will and his revelation.

Not only that they themselves might choose, I worship according to the way which they call heresy, so worship by the God of my fathers.

And that life of praise, of prayer, of adoration, of listening to God, of speaking to God, the way of worship, that is what defines the Christian.

That's what defines yourself as a Christian. You cannot be a Christian and not worship the Lord, or not have in your heart this drive, this urge to worship him.

Of course, in a sense, the urge to worship is left even in fallen, sinful human beings, as we all know, but it's distorted by sin and by our fallenness. And that urge to worship is then, of course, developed in our sinfulness into all kinds of false worship and idolatry.

[10:36] But what Paul is saying is this, that he has come to know this way, and this Jesus of this way. Therefore, I worship the God of my fathers.

And it dominates the whole of his life that he is a worshiper. I remember being struck some time ago by a verse in the book of Judges in chapter 15, as to do with Gideon.

And it struck me as something that we need to try, and I certainly need to try and develop more of in my own life. And that is that on a daily basis, when certain things are experienced, or when you become aware of certain things in the passing of God's providence, worship really has to be fitted very intricately into those events as they pass one from another.

There was Gideon, and this dream that was interpreted for him, which had been, as they were against the Midianites, remember the barley cake that rolled down the hill, smashed into the tents of the Midians.

Midianites, and the interpretation of the dream was for Gideon, a sign of the Lord himself coming to actually provide a victory for Gideon and his followers. And you know, what it says is this in chapter 7, verse 15, as soon as Gideon heard, he was worshipped.

[12:02] As soon as Gideon heard the meaning of that dream that had been attributed to him, he worshipped. The first thing he did was worship. And I wish I could say that of myself.

Maybe you're saying the same of yourself tonight, that you wish more through each day as they pass, that at certain stages of the day, when you're aware of certain things in your life, that the first thing you thought of was worship.

Maybe you like that, if so, you're a blessed person. That's how Gideon was. As soon as he heard the worship of this, try and develop that mindset of Gideon.

And the mindset of the apostle of Judeo is very much the same. That as one event led to another throughout each day, his mind was attuned to the worship of God.

The God, he says, of my fathers. And I think that's how we're going to be able to support this. We have a fascinating thing that from this church tonight in Scalpy, this little island that has such a blessing, but largely unknown in many parts of the world, there is a direct line from this place of worship tonight from you as a people, right back through the history of the church of God throughout the centuries and millennia right back to the likes of Abraham and even before him those who worshipped God because it's this God that Paul worshipped, the God of my fathers and that line unbroken as it is in the way it has developed throughout the centuries of people worshipping this God we say tonight in exactly the same way as the apostle as we are tied to him by what he said I worshipped the God of my fathers not just of the previous generation but of previous centuries and millennia right back to the time when people first began to call upon the name of the Lord if our God tonight to us is a new

[14:09] God, you can be sure of one thing if it's a new God either by a distortion of scripture or by setting scripture aside or by our own human wisdom or interpretation of what scripture should mean that some people will actually have it well if that's not God tonight you can be sure of one thing he's not God because the God of our fathers is the God that has revealed himself in this scripture in this book the God of the way the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and that's one of the things that you are constantly aware of yourself in your life isn't it that you are a worshipper of God and of this God and as you come to anticipate the Lord's day and the Lord's supper this coming Lord's day God willing you anticipate coming to sit in remembrance of the Lord's death as a worshipper of that Lord as I worshipper of the God who sent me into this world and of Jesus himself the Saviour who came

I worship secondly he says I believe now he says very accurately here in the A.B. it's translated I worship the God of my fathers believing all things that are written in the law and in the prophets and that's a very important connection I worship believing he's not just saying I worship as well as

believing what he's saying is I worship believing and believing I worship you don't have the worship without the believing and you don't have the believing without having it joined to the worship they belong together they're in separate law because our worship is much more than just a formality it's much more than just something you do outwardly we don't have worship in our understanding of it as something that you just do as a matter of rote as a matter of just practice a matter of mere ritual it may be that it is a ritual too a worship to an extent but it's not just a mere ritual because worship is worship that involves the mind the mind the mind that thinks of God that loves God that looks to God that adores God the mind that reckons with the truth of God the mind that assimilates that truth in our souls so that it's something that belongs to our worship we worship believing and of course for Paul believing is believing as he puts it here everything all things which are written in the law and in the prophets it's not dealing so much just now with believing in Jesus believing in Christ faith in Christ that of course is never detached from believing all the things that are written in the law and the prophets but it's focus is narrower here on

I'm saying I believe all things which are written in the law and in the prophets I notice not some things not the things that I myself think of as special or important Paul didn't say in this day well yes I know that Abraham said this and I know Moses said this but that doesn't really fit into the present day situation and we have to actually adapt or even get rid of or leave behind some of the things that Moses said and Abraham said or came down through the centuries towards the end of the Old Testament the prophecies this is a new age Paul might have said if you had followed the thinking of the kind of liberal or secularist mindset you have to do that's what he would have said he didn't say that I worship the God of my father believe in all things which are written in the law and in the prophets what is the basic flaw what is the basic flaw of the unfaithful church of today

I'm using church in the wider sense of course church in the sense of confessing to be Christians what is the basic flaw in that wider unfaithful church especially as you see all sorts of ideas about human relationships being promoted and all the sort of things that are attached to that what is the basic flaw the basic flaw is this that scripture is not taken to be what it actually is the authoritative word of God you won't find any of those people or these modern sort of theologians or secularists even to go out with the church and the secularist mindset that's been imported into the church as well you won't find them saying I believe all things which are written in the law and the prophets because it's a pick and choose approach to the Bible and that's fatal it's fatal to the church it's fatal to the gospel it's fatal to human development it's fatal to anything that passes for a Christian life because if we don't really have the Bible as God's word fixed in our mind convinced in our mind and building upon it then there's no certainty about anything a great theologian in America once was making a was carried out a review of a book by a Scottish theologian called James Denny James Denny was a book on the atonement and it was being reviewed by Benjamin B. Waterfield in America and the review said that the book as it stood was perfectly orthodox it was perfectly orthodox on the atonement not much could be said at all about it in terms of any flaws or any errors in it but he said there's this one thing he said there's no certainty that tomorrow Dr. Denny will believe the things he believes today why not because Waterfield said he has a flawed view of scripture and what he thinks about the atonement today is not necessarily what he thinks about it tomorrow because he doesn't have it based in a proper doctrine of scripture as you see if you begin with the doctrine of scripture as a confession of faith does very deliberately then you really say every other truth that falls on from that that has been revealed in the scripture is anchored in the scripture and anchored in the authority of scripture and anchored in the God inspired nature of scripture therefore you can't believe something else tomorrow if you believe in Christ's literal resurrection as something taught by scripture today

[21 : 46] I believe all things that are written in the law and in the prophets and that is the greatest temptation ever since human beings were ejected from the garden of Eden certainly one of the greatest if not the greatest temptation is to listen to the voice that says has God indeed said has God really said that's what lies behind the twisting of scripture the jettison of scripture the reinterpretation of scripture and using all that's important in terms of an orthodox proper view of scripture has God indeed said the devil has had that question proved to human ears right down through the centuries that could even be that he's saying it to you now has God indeed really said yeah and if you lose your hold of that that this is what God has said then we have a big problem and a big problem for ourselves individually but also in a wider sense for the church so that's the second thing

I worship and then he's saying secondly I believe now it really only says and have hope and also all these things are actually running together they're all very closely tied together I worship I believe I have a hope toward God that there shall be a resurrection of the dead he goes on to say of the just and of the other just now of course having a hope or having this hope is one of the main distinguishing features of being a Christian worshipping God absolutely a distinction of being a Christian believing all that God has spoken is a mark of being a Christian but so too is having this hope I have a hope remember Paul when he wrote to the Ephesians he actually put it in such a way that it showed quite clearly that having this Christian hope is very much a prominent feature of being a Christian and what a Christian is because he contrasts it in the case of the Ephesians was what they once were he says without God and having no hope in the world without God having no hope but now as he writes that epics then he says now he says your hope is in God or you might say what he really also meant by that was God himself is your hope what you have in God what God has said of himself that's where your hope is grounded that's your hope that's your foundation for your hope and the hope of a Christian is based upon God's promises and upon the truth of God's promises which have put arise out of scripture they're in scripture they're actually there in the word of God but the hope that we exercise hope always looks forward to something being fulfilled either in this life or in the life to come and that hope that we exercise which sits along with faith in our hearts that hope is itself based upon dependent on indeed in one sense on the truth of God the promises of God which are true which are yea and amen as Paul says to the Corinthians in Christ Jesus seeing the promises are true and God is faithful to the promises the hope of the Christian is a certain hope and some people have something of a problem with that having a certain hope how can I have a certain hope if somebody asks me are you saved

I mean we can't say with all to 100% confidence yes I know for sure that I am and therefore how can I possibly say I have a certain hope of eternal life well you see that's something that you need to come back to again in terms of the difference between hope in the ordinary sense and hope as it's defined by Paul and in the scriptures as this Christian hope there's such a thing as a certain hope certain in the sense that it is based upon the infallible promise of God that can never be uncertain you can never be unsure about God's promise whether it's going to stand or not and because that's the nature of the promise and of God's truth in which it's embedded therefore the hope that accepts that and lives by that is a certain hope in that sense let me try and just pull that out a bit further hope in the ordinary sense you could say for example something like this

I hope to be on holiday from next Tuesday hope to have that holiday for a few weeks beginning Tuesday of the next week God willing but I cannot be certain here and now that that will be the case a lot of things can happen between that and then I may become ill I might even die something else may happen to prevent me from going on the holiday that I've planned something may have happened in the bookings I've made that it can't be fulfilled all sorts of things that happen for the non-fulfillment of what this ordinary hope looks towards so I can say I hope that I'm going to be on holiday for a few weeks from next Tuesday but I can't say about that hope that's a sure and certain hope because it's not based on something absolute something sure something infallible but if I say tonight as a Christian who believes in Christ

I hope to be with Jesus in heaven I can't then turn around and say but I'm not sure if that will be the case or not yes I can if I look into myself and start rummaging about there to look for a basis of my hope in my own ability in my own faithfulness in my own steadfastness I'm not going to find a foundation for my hope there might as well look for it anywhere else out there it's like bog cotton they just blow it in the wind but if I say I hope that I will be with Jesus in heaven as somebody who presently believes in him because I know that that hope is based upon the promise of God to his people that that's where he will take them well that hope is certain that hope is sure that hope is in the way it's grounded in God's promise it's a certain hope who's going to displace it the only way it can fail is that the death of Jesus fails somewhere and someday in its efficacy otherwise the hope and the promises are yea and amen in him and that's why in Hebrews and where you find

[29 : 50] Hebrews chapter 10 and we may come back to this later on not really in the caution of the communion but when he says in Hebrews chapter 10 three or four things that he's saying let us let us draw near the true heart and full assurance of faith let us hold fast the profession of our faith and any commentator will say that actually the word faith should be hope as a translation certainly a possible translation let us hold fast the profession of our hope without wavering why how can we hold the confession of our hope without wavering well because he is faithful who has promised it's based upon truth itself no less than God's own faithfulness I worship I believe I have a hope but I

have a hope towards God that there shall be a resurrection now here's something that the Christian hope reaches towards with this certain hope the hope of the

Christian doesn't say I think there might be a resurrection someday I'll just have to wait until things have developed and then we'll see if there is indeed going to be a resurrection of the dead or not you take people into a cemetery and especially if it's a large cemetery it doesn't have to be but it's quite a thought isn't it that all of those graves that you see especially the large cemetery and we put all the cemeteries in the world together and the millions of corpses buried there it's a terrific thought in many ways a difficult thought to get into your head but all of these people are going to rise up from the grave and Christ return and Paul is saying I have this hope that there shall be a resurrection and it's not a hope when he said well I hope in some sense that it will be but I can't be sure he said this is my hope

I have a confident hope I have a sure hope that there will be a resurrection as part of my Christian life he said as part of what I live towards as part of what keeps me going that there shall be a resurrection and that in other words of course he's dealing here with a resurrection of the dead both of the just and unjust and it's very important that he then goes on to the fourth point which we'll see in a minute where he talks about his conscience because he knows that this resurrection from the dead the just and the unjust as he puts it elsewhere means that he must meet with God and the judgment and this hope towards the judgment for Paul is something that fills him with excitement it doesn't lose its solemnity and solemnity doesn't mean that it doesn't fill you with a thrill when you think of God's promise that his people are going to be openly acquitted and stated by him and shown to be perfect in Jesus

Christ yeah of course there's a solemnity about death and about how can it not be about meeting God and his judgment but it doesn't do away with the truth of the promise and with the solidness of the hope that's based on that promise that Christ will bring his people home and that they shall be like him and see him as he is and spend eternity with him and that confidence comes out in this that he says I have a hope that there shall be a resurrection of the dead both of the just and of the unjust and we could develop that one further but just to notice that Felix of course when he came to the point later on in verse 25 especially especially then even Paul reasoned of righteousness temperance and that also included judgment to come

Felix trembled he was afraid eternity was very near to him God had been brought very near to him his conscience had been quickened and he trembled yet he said go your way for this time when I have a more convenient season and we'll call for you don't ever say that about yourself don't ever say about yourself when I have a more convenient moment I believe I repent I become a Christian the most convenient moment is when you're listening to God when God is speaking to his soul when God's truth touches his conscience don't say then when I have a more convenient moment I'll do it it's the same for coming to confess the

[35 : 14] Lord same for coming to take communion it's a means of grace a means of strengthening a means of further enhancing the church of God in this world and adding to not only its testimony but its strength and its witness if the Lord is leading a new heart tonight as a Christian and you've not yet done that don't say I'll have a more convenient time some other time I'll be more ready for it some other time thanks I'll be more than I always use blessings myself included when we put things off that in our hearts we only should do for Jesus as Felix was none the better for having heard the gospel though he trembled as Paul preached in his presence later on he just hoped that some money would be given to him by

Paul so they might set him free he wanted Paul to offer him a bride which he would have gladly taken and made some money out of the situation and it's interesting how the chapter finishes after two years Portius Pestus came into Felix's place he came to be his replacement and then Luke just says and Felix worried to show the Jews a pleasure left Paul bound what a sad man what a tragic man what desperately sad he is who trembled before the preaching of the gospel who had inaccurate knowledge of the way that Paul explained to him yes there's no record of a change in his life he simply disappeared as far as we know I lost sin I worship

I believe I have a hope but then he says I take pains herein do I exercise myself that means literally I take pains to always have a conscience void of offense toward God and towards men taking pains or to exercise in the text of the New Testament Greek that means something like what you find in a craftsman or someone like that by creating something or fashioning something using the skills that he or she has and what it's doing is taking that sort of idea and applying it to our conscience and

seeking to keep a clean conscience before God toward God and toward men and that's important because we can't just say well it's okay as long as my conscience is clean before God it doesn't matter what people think it does matter what people think at least to this extent that you and I must not have a bad conscience that we've done someone wrong and done nothing about it because if we have a clean conscience are going to have a toward God policy then we have to have the same towards men I take pains when they do what craftsmen do when they take the skills they have and apply it in such detail and with such carefulness to what they're actually providing or producing or crafting whatever it is all the same that carefulness I have to apply spiritually in my life to my conscience I take pains I take pains otherwise in one sense at least much of the previous points really don't stand up not meaningfully at least I worship I believe I have hope but then if I don't take any if I'm not bothered about my conscience where do I stand in relation to the rest we say

I take pains to work on man to keep a conscience void of offense now that of course is such an immensely challenging point but then it always is when you come to God's standard for a Christian life and the standard of a Christian life is set before us not so that we could say tonight well until I actually attain all of that to my entire satisfaction I'm never going near the Lord's people you'll be waiting the rest of your life in that case but tonight I'm able to see I know my trust is in the Lord I know Jesus means to me more than anyone else and anything else and I worship the God of my Father according to the way and I believe everything that is revealed to me by this

[40 : 30] God and I have a hope founded on the promises of God not on myself and I take pains about my conscience I'm still troubled that it's not perfect that it's not entirely clean all the time but Jesus knows that and the death you remember and disagree remembering in the Lord's Sabbath is the death that guarantees you even though now your conscience is not perfectly clean in Christ you are before God that's what he means to us and so significant he is that's why he says this do in remembrance this way God him I do he you