

How to summarise the life of a Christian believer

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Date: 02 July 2017

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[0 : 0 0] So I'm Australian. Okay? All right? Now, I realise that has different connotations for different people. I wonder what, if you were to put it in one word, just one word only, when you heard that I'm Australian, what's the first word that comes to your mind when you think about Australia?

Don't call it out. That might be best for all of us if you keep that to yourself. But I wonder what it is. I wonder what word comes to mind when you think about Australians.

Or Americans, for instance. You know? I mean, if you're American, we could come up with a word. Maybe that wouldn't be also that polite either, I don't know, or French or something. We kind of do that, don't we? We kind of come up with an idea that kind of characterises and summarises different nationalities of people.

There's a kind of generalisation that works for almost all of them. All right? So here's my question for you. A question I think it's worthwhile us thinking about this morning.

What would be the one word that you would come up with to describe the Christian? I mean, if you could summarise the Christian life or the kind of characteristics of the followers of Jesus in one word, I wonder what that word would be, what you think it might be.

[1 : 2 1] Or perhaps even, here's a better question, how about what do you think would happen if we asked that question of the New Testament? If we read through the... Or maybe even just Paul's letters, let's say.

We read through all of Paul's letters and we kind of asked Paul that question. We read through with that question in mind. What does it look like to be a Christian? What characterises a Christian?

What one word would summarise the life of a Christian believer? I wonder what you think the answer might be if you were to undertake that exercise.

And good exercise it would be to do, would it not? I want to suggest to you this morning that if you did do that, and we read through all of Paul's letters or we read through all the New Testament, we kind of asked that kind of question.

What one word summarises the Christian faith? I want to suggest to you this morning that if we did that, we would realise that one word wouldn't cut it. That actually one word wouldn't be enough.

[2 : 2 0] And that Paul actually pushes us towards three words. Three words that he uses frequently to describe, to characterise the Christian life.

And the three words of these, they are faith, hope and love. Faith, hope and love. So often throughout the New Testament, so often throughout Paul's letters, these three words of faith, hope and love are used to kind of characterise, to summarise the Christian life.

They kind of appear as a triad of virtues that stand out amongst all the others, that stand out in terms of describing our life.

That happens at several key points throughout Paul's letters, and one of them is here in Colossians 1, verses 3 and 4. Paul never met the Colossian Christians, we know that.

He never evangelised them, he didn't plant the church there, he'd never been to visit them at all. We see here in what was read for us, verse 8, or verse 7, that it was Epaphras, who is a faithful minister of Christ, who told them the gospel.

[3 : 39] Epaphras was the one who planted the church in Colossae, not Paul. And Epaphras was the one who had told Paul about the Colossian believers, and where they were at in their Christian life.

And as Paul reflects back on what Epaphras has told him of the Colossians, well, he summarises it for us in verses 3, 4 and 5 there.

We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we've heard, what has he heard of? We've heard of your faith in Christ Jesus, the love you have for all the saints, the faith and the love that Paul attributes here to springing from the hope that's stored up for them in heaven.

As Paul summarises what he's heard from Epaphras about these believers in this little town called Colossae that he'd never visited, he summarises their Christian life in these three words, faith, hope and love.

This is the way Paul often uses to summarise the Christian faith. And it's not just that he uses that here at the introduction of his letter, it's not just that he summarises the Christian faith there and then kind of moves on from it.

[4 : 56] Actually, what Paul does throughout this letter is he uses faith, hope and love not just as the summary at the start, but all the way through the letter to encourage these Christians in their growth and in their walk with Jesus.

And in their stand actually against false teaching and false ideas about Jesus. Faith, hope and love. They don't just summarise the Christian life, they actually instruct the Christian life.

They shape the Christian life. They mould where each one of our Christian lives should be going. As Nick said, I have the privilege of lecturing at George Whitfield College and I lecture lots of different courses, but one of the funnest ones is that I get the chance to teach New Testament Greek to all the students coming in.

And this is a great joy, right? We have a lot of fun together and I really enjoy the opportunity to do that. It opens up the Bible in such great ways and it really is a great privilege.

One of the things I do every year is to teach the students the difference between what an indicative verb is and what an imperative verb is. You didn't think you were going to get a Greek lesson here this morning, did you?

[6 : 16] Nick didn't tell you that. But we are. And you know what? You're going to get a Greek lesson, not from me, but you're going to get it from Paul. Aha. Hi, Paul. I just saw Paul sitting in the front row here, so I'm going to use Paul to your advantage.

Paul, if you haven't met Paul, stand up, Paul. Say hi to everybody. Paul's just finished his Masters in New Testament studies.

Just finished, graduated at the end of last year. Just now, even. Well done. Was it good? Did you enjoy it? Now, you just finished a Masters in New Testament and you just told me that you've applied to do a PhD in New Testament.

You guys pray for Paul. But if you've done a Masters in New Testament and you're applied to do a PhD in New Testament, you better know something about New Testament Greek. Right? So I'm putting you on the spot.

Everybody here needs to know the difference between an indicative verb and an imperative verb. Can you help them? Good. Phew. What's the difference between an indicative verb and an imperative verb, Paul?

[7 : 27] Okay, that's nice and simple. Easy. You get it? Pass. He passed. All right, you can sit down. An indicative verb describes. It tells you the way things are.

An imperative verb commands. Tells you what to do. Indicative, the way things are. Imperative, what you should do. Right? There's a difference between those two types of verbs.

It's actually the same in English as well, but we don't usually talk about it like that so much. And it's not as obvious in English as it is in Greek. Here's the thing that's really important about that. There is a gospel grammar.

There's a grammar that goes along with the gospel. Because you see, in the gospel, the indicative always comes before the imperative.

The way things are always comes before what you should do. The indicative, the way things are. Who God is. What God has done for you.

[8 : 31] Who Jesus is. What his death and resurrection have achieved for you. Indicative. The statements of fact. The statements of the way things are. They come first in the gospel grammar.

Before the imperative. How you should act in response to the way things are. You see, there's a grammar to the gospel. The indicative comes first. Then the imperative.

For every other religion of the world, that grammar is reversed. It's always do, do, do, do, do. And then maybe this will result.

It's always do this and do that. And then maybe, well, then there'll be a statement of the way things are. You're right with God. Or Allah. Or Buddha. Or you'll reach Nirvana. Or whatever it is.

In every other religion of the world, the imperative comes before the indicative. You have to do to get a state of description of the way things are.

[9 : 28] But the gospel, the grammar is reversed. In the gospel, it's the statement of the way things are. Who God is. What he's done for us in Jesus. That's then followed by the imperative.

What you should do in response. Now, actually, that's the way the gospel is shaped. But that's actually all the way Paul's letters are shaped as well. And if you look at Paul's letters and you read through them carefully, you'll realize that for the first half of Paul's letters, he's always talking about the way things are.

Who God is. What he's done for us in Christ. Before he starts, and it's always the second half of the letters, that he starts talking to us about how we should respond and what we should do and how we should live as followers of Christ.

The indicative always comes before the imperative. And Colossians is a great example of that. So, we just had... Oh, no, we didn't have... We just had the introduction read to us.

But if you read through the rest of chapter 1, you get these great statements of the indicative. This unbelievable... Chapter 1, verse 15 onwards, this profound description of who Jesus is.

[10 : 32] Statements of fact. Descriptions. He's the image of the invisible God. The firstborn over all creation. By him all things were created. Things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible. All things were created by him and for him.

Before all things. In him all things hold together. The head of the church. The body. The beginning. The firstborn from amongst all the dead. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him.

All these great statements of fact. Descriptions. About who Jesus is. And not only who Jesus is, but what he's done for you.

Verse 20. Through him, God reconciled to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood shed on the cross.

Once you were alienated from God, you were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now, he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation.

[11 : 32] They're all indicative statements. They're all descriptions of the way things are. Who Christ is and what he has done for us. That's where Paul starts his letters.

Always starts at that point. But once you've understood the indicative, once you've understood who Jesus is and what he's done for you, well then Paul wants you to think about how you're going to respond to that.

The indicative comes before the imperative. And I want to look at some of Paul's imperatives for us as we work through Colossians here because in chapter 2 verse 6, we have the first thing that Paul tells the Colossians to do.

Right? We come across it in chapter 2 verse 6. It's the very first thing he tells them to do, very first thing he tells us to do in response to understanding who Jesus is and what he's done for us.

Chapter 2 verse 6, have you got it there? This is what Paul says. So then, right? Understanding all of that, so then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught and overflowing with thankfulness.

[12 : 51] The first thing Paul tells us to do, right? The first imperative, the first thing he tells us to do in response to who Jesus is and what he's done for us is to dig our roots down deep into the faith.

The first thing he tells us to do. Dig deep into the faith. Now, I know some people have a green thumb, right? You know that phrase?

You know that saying? I've got a brown thumb. Just telling you now, confession time, right? Plants die in my presence, okay? I don't know what it is, but my wife and I, we cannot keep plants alive.

People give us a gift, they give us a plan or something as a gift and we look at each other nicely and smile and we appreciate the nation of the gift. But behind that smile is a little twinkle in our eyes because we know that plant's dead in three months' time, right?

It's the way it works in our house. Our gardens are a mess, our plants are dead. I've got four boys under 10, right? I figure if they're alive, I'm doing okay, okay? Right?

[13 : 55] I don't have time to keep plants alive as well, right? But you don't have to be a good gardener to get Paul's metaphor here. It's an agricultural metaphor, isn't it?

Dig your roots down deep. You don't have to be a good gardener to know that the healthiest tree, the strongest tree, the tree that bears the most fruit, the tree that withstands the massive big Cape Storm that rolled through a couple of weeks ago, the tree that does that is the tree with the deepest roots, isn't it?

We all know that. We all understand the metaphor. And that's Paul's metaphor here. That's what he's saying. He's saying, be that tree. Dig your roots down deep in the faith so that you'll be the healthy tree.

You'll be the one who grows good fruit and produces good fruit. You'll be the one who stands firm when the onslaught comes. Be that tree, says Paul.

Dig your roots down deep into the faith. It reminds me very much, actually, of what's said in Psalm chapter 1. Don't turn there.

[15 : 10] Just listen. I don't know. It's hard to prove. But I suspect that Paul probably had Psalm chapter 1 in the back of his mind when he wrote these words and when he picked up this metaphor.

Just have a listen to the way it's described for us. The righteous man is described for us here in Psalm chapter 1. Not so with the wicked.

They're like chaff and the wind blows them away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor the sinners in the assembly of the Lord. For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

It's the same metaphor, isn't it? It's the same picture. And how does one dig their roots down deep, according to Psalm 1? Well, it's the person who meditates on God's word, who understands it and who learns it and who loves it.

And this is Paul's challenge to us here. The first thing he tells us, the Colossians, and us to do in response to understanding who Jesus is and what he's done for us is to dig deep, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord.

[16 : 45] Be built up in him, strengthened in the faith that you were taught. And as you do that, overflow with thankfulness. I'm not sure what that's going to look like for you, but we've got to figure out how we're going to respond to that.

What does it mean for you in your stage of life, in your particular Christian walk, to be digging your roots down deeper into God's word than you are at the moment?

Perhaps there's some of you in the room today who don't know Jesus as your personal Lord and Saviour, who don't know him as he's just been described for us in chapter 1, who don't know him as the image of the invisible God, the creator of all things, and also the one who died so that you could be reconciled to God.

Perhaps for you, it's verse 6. That might just be today. Just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord.

Perhaps today is the day that you need to do that. That's the very start of setting your roots down. Maybe that's you today. Maybe you've set your roots down years ago, and that day was many, many years ago.

[18 : 03] What's it going to look like for you to be continuing to dig deep into God's word? Are you a part of the regular Bible study groups that meet throughout the week here at church? If not, let me encourage you to be so.

Let me encourage you. I mean, you're all here on a cold Sunday morning. That's a great start. But make this a priority. You never miss here. This is where you want to be. Because this is a place that's going to help you dig your roots down deep into the faith and into God's word.

Maybe it's taking things further. Maybe you want to enrol in GWC's Explore course, a correspondence course that you can do by yourself, or maybe a group of you want to start up here and get together and do GWC's correspondence course so that you can dig your roots down deep into the faith.

Maybe it's going to be enrolling in a PhD so as to dig our roots down deep into the faith. You don't have to be doing a PhD to do that. Wherever you are in your Christian world, what are you going to be doing to dig your roots down deep into the faith that you received at one stage and that you were taught?

And as you do it, be thankful. Be thankful to God for the opportunity to be able to do that. That's what Paul tells us to do. The very first thing he tells us to do, the Colossians to do, and us to do, in response to who Jesus is and what he's done for us.

[19 : 28] He summarises what he's heard about these Christians' lives in Colossae with the words faith, hope and love. And the very first thing he tells them to do is to dig their roots down deep in the faith.

Second thing he tells them to do, second thing he tells them to do is in chapter 3, verse 1. In the rest of chapter 2, he tells them not to do a whole stack of things. All right, okay, that's fine. But the second thing he tells them that they should be doing, chapter 3, verse 1, this is what he says.

Since then you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on earthly things.

For you died and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. And when Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

The second thing Paul tells us to do is to hope. Hope. Set your hearts and your minds, not on earthly things, but on things above.

[20 : 35] Let the reality of your hope in heaven shape and change your life on earth. That's what Paul tells us to do. Set your hearts and your minds on things above.

Why would you do that? Well, Paul tells us why. Because he says, you know what? Friends, if you're a believer in Christ, then your whole life, past, present and future, is wrapped up in Christ.

You see that in these verses. Since then, you have been raised with Christ. Past tense. Past tense. Your past. In the past you've been raised with Christ.

For you died, verse 3, past tense. And your life is now hidden with Christ, present tense. And when Christ, who is your life, appears, future tense, you also will appear with him in glory.

Do you see it? Your whole life, past, present and future, is tied up with Christ. And so Paul says, set your hearts and minds on things above, where Christ is seated.

[21 : 44] Because he is your life. Now, I don't know about you, but I suspect that if you're anything like me, your heart and your mind is far too frequently caught up with the things of this world, is it not?

What occupies your heart and your mind? Is it paying the bills? Is it the kids? Is it their future? Is it this country?

Is it how to get out of this country? You can't pay out Australians, but you all want to be there, right? What is it that occupies your heart and your mind?

Is it set on the things earth? Or is it set on the things above? I vividly remember that time in my life where, you know, the kind of parents sort of step back a little and start letting you as a young adult make your own decisions and kind of grow up a little bit.

That time for me, you know, it was in late sort of teens or early kind of 20s, that kind of stage in life. I remember my dad sitting me down and saying, you're an adult now, son. You make your own decisions. I'm going to step back.

[23 : 04] I'm going to watch from the sidelines. And I remember at that stage in life, saying, okay, okay, great, dad. That's great. And you're not going to tell me what to do. I'm going to make my own decisions. But still wanting dad's advice.

They're still coming to my father and talking to him and saying, hey, look, dad, I've got this decision in front of me and I've got to do this and that. And he'd say, well, I've let you make your own decisions now, son. And I'm like, okay, I know that. But I want to talk to you about it.

I want your advice. And I remember, I'd often lay out these problems to dad and these big things that I was trying to wrestle with in those stages of life. And I remember he'd often sit there and listen to me.

And at the end of me talking, he'd just look at me and he'd say, son, in the light of eternity, it doesn't really matter, does it? Drove me crazy, right?

Absolutely insane. I'd be like, thanks, dad. That's really helpful. I'm trying to come to you for advice and that's all you give me? Drove me crazy. Frustrated me like nothing. Then.

[24 : 06] Now, though. Looking back on it. Now I realise some of the best advice that he ever gave. Right, isn't he?

In the light of eternity, so many of the things that we worry about and we pour our emotional energy into, so many of the things that our hearts and our minds are focused on, in the light of eternity, they just don't really matter.

And this is exactly what Paul is encouraging us here to do. In the light of eternity, look at the things of this world. Set your hearts and minds on the eternal future that you have.

Let that shape the way you make decisions. We live here in South Africa and it is a real joy and a privilege. We really consider it that way.

We're very glad to be here. We're very excited to be here. But it doesn't mean there aren't times when we miss our home and we miss our family and we get a little homesick.

[25 : 07] My wife particularly experiences that probably more than I do. She wrote to a friend of hers once. This friend was in a similar situation. She also was living away from her family and where she grew up for the sake of the gospel and for ministry.

And they were writing to each other about what it's like to feel a little homesick and encouraging. And I'll never forget what my wife's friend wrote back. Very powerful.

She said, you know what? I feel homesick too. But every time I feel homesick I try to remind myself that actually this is not my home.

And then I try to live my life homesick for heaven. What a great way to think about life, eh? Homesick for heaven.

That's what Paul's encouraging us to do. Set your hearts and your minds on your real home. On things above where Christ is seated and where you will live with him forever in glory.

[26 : 18] Because when he appears then you also will appear with him. First thing Paul tells the Colossians to do is to dig their roots down deep in the faith.

The second thing he tells them to do is to hope. To set their hearts and minds on things above. And it's probably, hopefully, no surprise to you now.

But the third thing he tells them to do is third command. Third imperative verb. Oh, again, halfway through chapter 3 he's got things he tells them not to do.

Right? But the third thing that he tells them that they should do is in chapter 3, verse 12. Therefore, as God's chosen people holy and dearly loved, there's the indicative again, he can't help sneaking it back in.

Here's a statement of description of who you are. As God's chosen people who are holy and dearly loved, that's who you are. What should you do? Clothe yourselves with compassion and kindness and humility and gentleness and patience.

[27 : 26] Bear with each other and forgive one another whatever grievance you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord has forgiven you. And over all these virtues put on love which binds them all together in perfect unity.

Love, says Paul. Put on love. Clothe yourselves with love. And the way Paul's set out this sort of paragraph for us is explaining what that love is going to look like.

What's it going to look like to love each other? Well, it's going to look like being kind and compassionate and humble and gentle and bearing and forgiving one another. That's what it looks like to love. Love's not, you know, a kind of other thing on the list of ten other things he's telling you to do here.

He's telling us to love and he's showing us what that looks like. Love, says Paul. Well, I wonder whether that was the word that came to your mind when you thought about Christian living when I asked you at the start.

It's certainly the way Jesus describes it, isn't it? To his disciples, a new commandment I give to you that you love one another just as I have loved you.

[28 : 40] By this all men will know that you are my disciples. if you've loved one another. Love has to be a key characteristic of the followers of Jesus Christ.

Paul says here this is what we should do when we understand what God has done for us in Christ. When we understand that we are God's chosen people wholly and dearly loved.

When we understand that God has loved us. well then we must love. I don't know where that hits home for you today.

There are far too many stories aren't there of broken relationships, of churches divided, of families divided, of people who hold on to pain and hurt, who won't forgive.

But one of the ways we've been told we should love is that we should forgive one another as God is. Maybe that's the pressure point where this comes to be.

[29 : 54] Maybe it looks like going out of your way to reach some people around you to spend more time with them. Maybe it goes out of your way to welcome a family in this church who despite the fact you've been sitting next to each other in the future for the last six months maybe it means inviting them over the last six months and you too.

I don't know what it means in you. But I do know that Paul calls us to love in response to the way that God has loved us.

Faith, hope, and love. It's the way Paul uses to describe these Colossian Christians Christians Christians who he's never met but it's not just the way he used to describe them at the start of the letter and then just kind of leave it.

No, no, no. It's faith, hope, and love that he commands them to, that he exhorts them to, that he encourages them to grow in and to have exemplified in their life as they are followers of Jesus and it's the same today.

It's Paul's challenge to us today. How are you going to dig your roots down deep in this? What do you have to let go of in this world so that you can set your hearts and minds on things about it?

[31 : 22] How can you love more? Dear Lord God, we thank you so much that you loved us and sent your son to die for us.

Lord, we thank you that in the gospel, the indicative comes before the imperative. Who you are and what you have done for us in Christ is the foundation. Lord, help us to respond to that.

faith, hope and love all of our days. Amen.