

When was the last time you got a real life letter? When I was growing up the postman used to come every day, and at least once a week there would be a handwritten letter from a family member, or a friend somewhere in the world.

It's wonderful opening a real letter isn't it? There's a connection to the writer, and a deepening sense of relationship.

Over the next six weeks we are going to be opening a letter, a letter written by Paul to encourage and spur Titus on as he works in a difficult place. This morning we are going to spend time looking at the opening greeting in the letter. First we'll help **{slide 2}** set the scene as we get our heads around Paul, Titus, and the place Titus is in ministry. Then we'll look at **{slide 3}** Paul's purpose v.1, **{slide 4}** Our Hope v.2 and how Paul's purpose and our hope is heard **{slide 5}** through proclamation v.3.

We know where we are going, so let's ask God to guide us:

Pray

{slide 6} *Setting the Scene v1 & 4.*

The writer is the Apostle Paul (v.1), and he's writing to Titus (v.4)

In v.5 which falls into next week's passage we see Titus' ministry location. Paul has 'left him'¹ **{slide 7}** on the Island of Crete, to set things straight there.

Crete is an island in the Mediterranean sea, south of Greece. Kiwis are linked to Crete through the defence of Crete during the second world war. Like the Kiwi soldiers who fought there, Titus had a pretty intimidating challenge before him. This was no easy post. **{slide 8}**

We don't really know how the church began there.

In Acts 2v .11 Cretans heard the good news of Jesus proclaimed in their own language on the day of Pentecost. We think that some of them were among the 3,000 who were baptised. So assume that people who heard Peter preach the Good News of Jesus, hung around in Jerusalem to hear the Apostles teachings and then returned home to tell others of this amazing life changing gospel.

Fast forward to our letter and Paul has left Titus there to strengthen this fledgling little church, which is trying to live counter to the prevailing Greco-Roman culture.

¹ Titus 1:5

Titus is a Greek name, so he's not from a Jewish background, and we know that he's a trusted co-worker of Paul; who call him 'My true son in our common faith.' v.4 They share the same faith in the Lord Jesus, they hold to the same core beliefs. Titus is someone Paul trusts to leave in charge of the important work he is setting him because like Paul he is faithful to God's Good News.

While we don't know much about the situation which led to the establishment of the churches at Crete, we get a great insight into Paul's purpose as a supporter and encourager **{slide 9}** of them.

ii) Paul's Purpose v.1

In letters to the Romans, Philippians and Titus, Paul introduces himself in a similar way. He describes himself as a 'slave of God' or 'servant of God.' He's using imagery or language that is shameful in Crete, but he is embracing the leadership model of Jesus, the servant King. All of his disciples are to regard themselves as the servants, even slaves, of others (Matt 20:27²).

Paul is clear about his identity, he belongs to another, he does another's will, he is not a free-man, he is a man under the direction of an owner who bought him at great price. Like us.

Identifying as a slave is a statement of humility, but it's also important for us to understand that the directions he is now going to give to Titus come with an authority from beyond himself. Jesus Christ is Lord, not Paul. Even though he is an Apostle, which he pairs with 'slave' the authority which he speaks with isn't his own, he is a servant for God's sake.

He serves his heavenly Father in the message he shares which he hopes **{slide 10}** will 'further the faith of God's elect and their knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness.' v.1

Pauls serves God to strengthen and encourage, to support and disciple the chosen people of God, who he calls **{slide 11}** 'the elect'.

These are people who have been chosen for salvation by the grace of God, which was first shown to Abraham, and expanded out through him to the Jewish people. In Jesus Christ, that grace is now shared across every tribe and language and nation, and ethnicity.

The elect, are those who trust Jesus, they are the recipients of the grace of God. Its a way that Jesus talks about his followers who endure great trials (Mt 24:22,24,31).

The ones who hold fast to him, who dig down deep into the way of life he gifts us, the ones whose eyes are opened to the grace of God in the power of the Holy Spirit, are elect of God.

² 'and whoever wants to be first must be your slave'

Paul wants God's chosen people to be growing in knowledge of the truth **{slide 12}**, that leads to godliness.

The truth that he's talking about is specifically the truth of the gospel, the gospel of Jesus Christ, which has saved Paul and countless others. The same gospel, handed down to us by the Apostles, without addition or alteration; it is this truth which produces godliness in the lives of Jesus' followers.

That is the yardstick for us as we assess truth; we ask the questions "does this produce a godly way of living in me?" "Is this gospel consistent with what God reveals in the Bible?" If it doesn't it is novel teaching, it is apostate teaching. If it doesn't conform to the pattern that the Apostles received and witnessed in the life of the Lord Jesus, it isn't good news at all.

Throughout this letter we'll see challenges from leaders who sought to teach a way of life which was inconsistent with the gospel of Jesus. They added more demands to the gospel. They heaped a burden on people, and called for Jewish Law-keeping on top of following Jesus. They wanted a kind of truth without godliness. That combination is harsh, and legalistic and heartless.

We see it in churches today which are graceless. There is no room for error, of difference, or the failures that are a reality of life for the Christian. The result isn't a greater dependence on God, but shame, and guilt and fear.

You end up with a culture where sin is hidden, not repented of. A culture where we smile and pretend that everything is "just fine thank you." People in churches like that feel isolated and lonely, and ultimately get worn out by trying to be perfect. That's not truth which leads to godliness, it's not good news which brings life.

We are all prone to legalism and heartless religion. In our lives we can ask where forms and rituals might have replaced what really matters; do we get upset if someone misses a response at the end of a reading? How do we cope when familiar rules are stripped back? What would we engage in gossip, or grumbling or other ungodly behaviour to protect? God's Holy Spirit is so good in bringing these things to our awareness, so that in this grace-filled Christian community we can confess, repent and seek forgiveness full and free as we allow our knowledge of the truth to lead to godliness in action.

In v.2 we see how that is possible; how true faith becomes action, how godliness can take root in the lives of the people of God. **{slide 13}** We have hope.

iii) Our hope v.2

In v.2 we see how that is possible; how true faith becomes action, how godliness can take root in the lives of the people of God. We have hope.

As followers of Jesus we are called to live out the truth we believe with every part of our being, our mind, our soul our strength. We are to be people whose whole lives are shaped by the Good News of Jesus.

This goes well beyond turning up to church or attending a home group. This is living out our faith, well and truly beyond the hour and a half we spend in this place on a Sunday.

You've heard me say it before; that is hard! To stand against the flow of our world can feel crippling at times. It's lonely to be the sole voice saying "male and female God created them" It is awkward to be the one who chooses "not to be drunk from too much wine." Saying no to cohabitation or refusing to get even. Giving money away, living modestly, stepping aside for someone else to get ahead, are all counter-cultural.

It's not easy choosing to be here on a Sunday, in a less than dazzling church service, rather than going to the beach with a spouse who doesn't come to church. Not turning up to support a family member at the weetbix kiwi-kids triathlon costs us doesn't it? People who don't follow Jesus don't get it. They think we're-weird, maybe even a little unhinged and that narrative is changing.

Our belief, that the Good News of Jesus offers the very best way to live is seen as repressive, arrogant and harmful. God's elect are called bigoted and labelled as dangerous.

Living in a Christlike way is a struggle in NZ, it was a struggle on Crete, but with the hope we share it's not impossible. That hope centres on a bigger and better reality than life here and now. At its heart is the death and resurrection of Jesus, and the wonderful gift of His Holy Spirit.

Our hope revolves around His promises of life in all its fullness. Our hope is centred on the love of God, revealed to us in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ which means that we are justified; we are made right with God, forgiven and redeemed we are set free to live a different way.

That hope promises us that we aren't missing out, when we live God's way. It might feel like it; but by living godly lives we are gaining. We are being refined, we are glorifying God, we are becoming more like the Lord Jesus. In denying ourselves like this, in saying no to the world, we are saying yes to Jesus and growing in ways that are pleasing to God.

When we bite out tongue instead of grumbling, when we wear a mask for the sake of another, when we give sacrificially to a mission partner, when we love the unlovely, we set aside what our earthly, natural responses scream, and we glorify God, and show our trust in Him. That is faith in action, as our belief in the hope we share shapes us towards godliness.

That hope, founded on the very promises of God will never let us down, because God doesn't lie v.2. God is trustworthy.

In Crete there was an overwhelming cultural tide of deception and dishonesty. **{slide 14}** Cretans boasted that the Greek god Zeus was born on their Island. They loved him. He's at the head of the Greek pantheon. And do you know what defines him? Apart from rippling abs and throwing lightning bolts - Zeus is deceptive. He takes on the likeness of a beautiful maiden's husband so he can sleep with her, he lies to get his way. That is his nature. **{slide 15}**

Jesus, the God born as a man at Bethlehem couldn't be more different. He is reliable, he never deceives, he is trustworthy and so are his promises, the promises which our hope is founded on.

How are Paul and Titus going to ensure the elect are growing in knowledge of the truth which leads to godliness? Through **{slide 16}** Proclamation, by preaching and teaching the Word of God.

iv) *Through Proclamation v.3*

I'm sure some of you are thinking "Zane you would say that" it doesn't take a rocket scientist to work out the value I place on preaching. It's a key focus of my ministry.

If you think that's because I'm the one doing most of it, I want to let you in on a secret; It's without a doubt the hardest thing I do each week.

At a home group last week some of the ladies there were surprised when I said I can spend up to 20 hours working on a sermon, not every week, and not all in one go, but for a difficult passage that's not unheard of.

The temptation is to spend less time preparing, to shorten the message, to keep it light, to drop things out that are confrontational or convicting. Sometimes that temptation is overwhelming. Bringing God's word to bear on real life struggles like like same-sex attraction, or abortion, or abuse, or the rightly ordered roles of men and women isn't much fun. As the preacher, most of the time you're on a hiding to nothing. It isn't just hard because God's word can offend hearers, God's word can offend preachers.

So why persevere? Why not make it easier on the hearer and the preacher? Because as Paul asserts in v.3 it is through preaching, that the truth that leads to godliness is brought to light.

That proclamation isn't exclusively through preaching, there are other teaching ministries which Paul, and Titus, and other faithful ministers of the gospel have engaged in, but it is the primary way Paul highlights for leading a church community deeper into God's truth.

God's eternal redemptive purposes, his Good news, the message of salvation was shared through preaching, as a command of the God who saves. Paul emphasises the need for people to hear the scriptures taught to come to Christ : Romans 10:17 'Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ.'

Paul emphasises the need for people to hear the scriptures taught for people to remain in Christ: 'You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. I would like to learn just one thing from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by believing what you heard?

The Galatian Christians had been misled, because they had given up on what they had heard. He ties hearing and faith together. Preachers remind the faithful again and again of the truth of the gospel, to strengthen and care for the congregations we are serving.

If you've found the shift in focus to fuller longer sermons a difficult transition, can I ask you to pray?

Ask God to help me and other preachers teach faithfully, and that god would use this time to change hearts in the power of the Holy Spirit. Make use of the notes, have the Bible open, grab a copy of the full text, and pray for understanding and perseverance, so that together we might grow in knowledge of the truth which leads to godliness.

To grow like that we need to hear the truth proclaimed. Even though it is hard work, we are strengthened and built up in our faith through Proclamation, by preaching and teaching the Word of God. **{slide 17}**

If we want to see true faith in action, if we want to grow nearer to God and experience the Good News of Jesus impacting our lives and the world around us then we must let the truth take root as we hear it proclaimed, and respond with godliness while we live out our purpose, as slaves of Christ. It's not an easy calling for kiwis, it wasn't an easy calling for Cretans - why don't we ask God to help us?

Pray