

Titus 3 Continue in this way

Readings: Ruth 4:1-22 & Titus 3:1-15

Prayer

Father God, we come empty to be filled with your love and power,
We come hungry for the truth of your word to feed us,
We come weary and pray that you will strengthen us with Your mighty Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today we come to the conclusion of our look at Paul's short letter to Titus, as we look at chapter 3. It may be a short letter but it packs some very clear teaching on Christian character and behaviour and some dense theology, especially in chapter 3. Let me first give you an overview of this chapter, which to me falls into four sections.

Section 1. Verses 1-3 begins with a reminder, presumably what follows would have been part of what new Christians were taught by Paul and the early church. In essence he says, be model citizens towards the rulers and towards all people everywhere. Display the likeness of Jesus to the world, manifest the fruit of the Spirit in your new life of faith and faithfulness. Show gentleness and empathy towards all because you were like them at one time.

Section 2. Verses 4-7 is one sentence in Greek and is all about what God has done for us in the finished work of Christ and in the giving of the Holy Spirit – the whole scope of salvation is summarised in this one sentence. In these four verses we have “God our Saviour” in verse 4, “He saved us” in verse 5, and “Jesus Christ our Saviour” in verse 6, three references to salvation. The main verb of this sentence in verse 5, is He, that is God, saved us.

Section 3. Verses 8-11 Paul tells Titus to stress these things – the nature of our salvation and the outworking of that salvation in being devoted to good works, the transformed life of the Spirit. This is the profitable outworking of the gospel whereas foolish controversies about insignificant details just result in quarrels and divisions and are positively unprofitable.

Section 4. Verses 12-15 have some personal details about Paul and the comings and goings of his friends and associates, with a final reminder that “our people must learn to devote themselves to doing what is good, in order to provide for urgent needs and not live unproductive lives.” Finally, concluding as always by grace in verse 15, for the Christian the gospel is grace from beginning to end.

So that has given you the broad brush overview of the chapter, let us now look in detail at three key themes that struck me as I looked into this chapter – 1) our need of deliverance, 2) God's salvation in Christ Jesus and 3) the outworking of that salvation in the life of the Christian - major foundational themes of the Christian faith.

So firstly **our need of deliverance**. Paul begins with our need in verse 3, but notice Paul here uses “us” and “we” through to verse 7. All of us stand in the same position, whether we are a Jew, a Pharisee or a pagan. Even Paul the Pharisee, blameless under the law, says at heart I was like this too – foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved. You can almost hear the echo of Paul’s letter to the Romans – “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23), “while we were still sinners Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8). Man’s greatest need is within himself, to be delivered from his self-centredness and to be truly able to receive love and give love. So it is to humanity in its great need that God himself, in the person of Jesus Christ, steps in and does a great work of deliverance and rescue. As one commentator put it “A rescue plan of epic proportions was carried out when Christ came in the flesh.” So let’s pause here for a few questions to discuss.

1. Paul gives a pretty damning list of sins and vices in verse 3, do you think this is just because the Cretans had such a bad reputation?
2. The word sin seems not to be spoken of these days, except as a joke or in church. Have we lost something?
3. Where does what Paul have to say about sin and our need fit in with the multitude of “self-help” therapies that abound these days?

And now we turn to God’s rescue plan, **God’s great salvation** is laid out in verses 4-7, one sentence in Greek. William Barclay said “perhaps no passage in the New Testament more summarily, and yet more fully, sets out the work of Christ for men than this.” This whole sentence is possibly an early creedal summary of the gospel. Hence Paul’s comment in verse 8, “the saying is trustworthy”, similar to 1 Tim. 1:15 “Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners”. It wouldn’t be surprising that the early church tried to encapsulate its message into memorable short, pithy, creedal statements. It was for later generations to give us fuller creeds, when faced with groups affirming this or that heresy. Certainly this sentence is very concise and dense theologically, it summarises what God has done for us and in us. Just look at what it says: you are loved, saved, washed, reborn, renewed, justified, made heirs and have the hope of eternal life. Wow, what a fantastic salvation. As one commentator said, God brings us a new heart, a new power, a new desire, a new status, a new relationship and a new future. Verses 4-7 are very Trinitarian, we have the work of God our Saviour, the Holy Spirit and Jesus our Saviour. It is also very clear that the origins of our salvation, our deliverance, lie in the goodness, loving kindness, mercy and grace of God towards the whole of his creation. The word love in verse 4 is “love for humanity” (*philanthrōpia*), reminding us of John 3:16 “for God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life”. God’s love is for everyone, it’s an all-inclusive love. So this great rescue mission is motivated by God’s love for the whole of creation. It is not in response to the righteous things that we have done, but because of his great mercy (v.5), as Jean was reminding us last week. The underlying unspoken story is that of the Exodus, the deliverance of the children of Israel from slavery in Egypt. It was a work of God alone, with his outstretched arm He delivered His people. He did what his people could not do for themselves, they were powerless. In

the same way, Jesus came, not just for the Jews, but for the whole world to deliver us from bondage to sin and selfishness. For as Paul says in Romans 5, “at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly” (Rom. 5:6). Tom Wright put it this way “God’s action in Jesus Christ is not a reward for good work already done. It’s an act of free kindness and loving goodness (verse 4). And it results, not on a pat on the back because we are already the sort of people God wanted on His side, but in washing and renewal.”

So before we go on to the transformation that follows the rescue, let’s pause for questions to discuss.

1. How helpful do you find the Creeds of the Church?
2. Do you find the doctrine of the Trinity helpful or confusing?
3. If we were powerless and God has rescued us, how should we respond?

God’s transformation of his people. We, says Paul, were disobedient and enslaved, but now we are reborn, transformed by the indwelling Holy Spirit and devoted to doing good (v.8), obedient to the rulers (v.1), gracious and humble in all we do (v.2). This is the great message of the new covenant, deliverance from enslaving sin into the new life of the indwelling Spirit of God, bringing forth the fruit of righteousness. Transforming us from sinners to saints. As Ezekiel foretold in chapter 36, “I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.” (Ezek. 36:25-27). This passage needs to be put alongside verses 4-8 in Titus 3 because that is exactly what Paul is saying here: v.5 “He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit”, and then going on in v.8 to talk about being devoted to “doing what is good”. I fear that the work of the Holy Spirit in our own day is still misunderstood and confusing to many. Simon Ponsonby in his helpful book on the Holy Spirit, “God inside out” says about the Holy Spirit: “He is not a force or energy to be manipulated for my own ends, but Lord in His sovereign freedom to be ‘worshipped and glorified’. As a person, He is ‘a being in relation’ with me, a being/person wired for relationship. The Holy Spirit is not an *It*, not a *What*, but a *Thou*, a *He*, a *Who*. God outgoing, outreaching, outstretching to me in love. The Spirit is not a vague, distant, abstract, incommunicable force-field, but divine Lord and personal Lover.” And the Holy Spirit, says Paul, has been “poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Saviour”. Note the word “generously”, God is a God of lavish and generous love. He is not stingy in his giving. One of the big problems we have with the teaching of the Trinity, three persons in One God, is that for us three persons implies independence. But each person of the Trinity does not act independently of the other two, so here, the Holy Spirit is poured out from the Father, through the merits and work of Jesus our Saviour. As John the Baptist foresaw, the One who would come after him would baptise with the Holy Spirit. So the work of the Spirit is not just confined to the conviction of sin and drawing us to the Saviour, but also in the transformed new life of the Christian. God’s Spirit indwells you as

a Christian and His Spirit longs to manifest the life of Jesus in your life, in my life, in the here and now. Yes, we have a glorious hope for the future but we also have a hope for today. William Barclay wisely said “Christianity does not just confine its offer to blessings that shall be. It offers a man here and now life of a quality that he has never known before. When Christ enters into a man’s life, for the first time he really begins to live.”

Some would try and put a wedge between Paul’s preaching of justification by grace (v.7) and James’ teaching on faith without works is dead. But Paul is very strong here, “He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy” (3:5). We are saved by grace not by works, but now good works should be the fruit of salvation through the indwelling Holy Spirit. So Paul says, Christians should be “eager to do what is good” (2:14), “ready to do whatever is good” (3:1), “devote themselves to doing what is good” (3:12) and “devote themselves to doing what is good” (3:14). As Jean reminded us last week, Paul in Ephesians 2: 8-10 said: “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” The good news should lead to good lives, because that is God’s grand design for his people. And before we conclude let’s have some further questions to discuss.

1. Jean spoke last week about grace, have you thought further about grace this week?
2. Do you find the work of the Holy Spirit confusing and open to misunderstanding or even overemphasis?
3. How do you see the Christian’s “good works” working out in practice? Are we limited in what we think those “good works” could be?
4. In verse 1 Paul says we should be “subject to rulers and authorities”, are there any limits to that? You might like to refer to Rom. 13:1-7 and 1 Peter 2:13-17.

Conclusion – isn’t God good! He is unbelievably good! We have looked at our need of deliverance, our helplessness, and then God’s salvation in Christ Jesus, his rescue plan of epic proportions, and finally the outworking of that salvation in the life of the Christian through the indwelling, ongoing work of the Spirit of God, transforming us into the image of His Son, Jesus. But as we conclude, I want to pick up one small but powerful word in verse 2 – humility, some translations have courtesy, gentleness or meekness. The word denotes humility, courtesy, consideration of others without being servile. One of the reasons I want to highlight it, is because humility follows from God’s grace to us in delivering us and transforming us. We are debtors to grace and therefore have nothing to be proud about, all we have received, we have received by the gracious hand of God. God wants us in the end to be so free from any bias in our own favour that we can rejoice in our own talents as frankly and gratefully as in our neighbour’s talents, whether that is in preaching a sermon, making a cake, fixing a fence, arranging flowers or whatever. We are all now and forever debtors to grace. Amen.