

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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Broadcast Date: 30 December 2018

No.: T1074

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A Christmas Message: When the kindness of God appeared

Introduction

Today's talk is part of our Christmas series, but the Bible verses we're going to look at, in Paul's letter to Titus, aren't what we might call the usual Christmas scriptures, that is, they are not among that familiar list of Bible passages which people usually preach from at Christmas. Those passages are either prophetic, written much earlier but foretelling the birth of the Lord Jesus, or else they record the historical events surrounding His birth, as reported by Matthew and Luke.

The verses we're going to look at in this talk, Titus 3:3-7, give us the inside story of Christmas; not the bare facts, but the significance of those facts. They show us what God was up to, as it were, behind the scenes.

I'm going to read the passage now, Titus 3:3-7, and then I'm just going to go through it, word by word or at least phrase by phrase, more or less in the order in which it's written. I'm reading from the English Standard Version. *"For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another. But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Saviour appeared, He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to His own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that being justified by His grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life"* (Titus 3:3-7).

Titus 3:3: The "before"

Let's look at Titus 3:3 first of all then. Now what I'm about to say may be risky, in the sense that someone will probably come along and prove me wrong, but I would suggest that you will never hear anyone other than a Christian using this kind of language about themselves. "What miserable wretches we were" is what Paul is effectively saying here, referring to himself and his brothers and sisters in Christ.

Listen to the details again. *"We were foolish"* he says. *"We were disobedient"*, *"We were led astray"* - taken for suckers by Satan in other words. And then he says *"we were slaves, enslaved by our passions."* We were living so as to make ourselves odious to those around us and we were hating back in return. Hardly a glowing character reference, is it? In fact it's totally devastating.

How often, honestly, do you hear anyone speaking of themselves in such terms?

Now what Titus 3:3 shows very clearly, of course, is that the life story of the Christian is a 'before' and 'after' story, and this verse is the "before" part. Every Christian can apply to themselves the words of the famous hymn, written by the one time slave trader turned preacher and hymnwriter, John Newton:

*Amazing grace! How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost but now am found,
Was blind but now I see.*

Now I do appreciate that there may be those listening to this who have put their faith in Christ as Lord and Saviour and yet cannot point to a clearly defined moment of conversion, when they took that vital step from darkness to light and from death to life. But whether or not we can pinpoint the day and the hour, if we belong to Christ, then such a step there must have been at some point in our history.

Titus 3:3 then is what we were, and where we were, and where we would still be, were it not for the glorious life-transforming "But" which begins the next verse, *"But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Saviour appeared..."* (Titus 3:3-4).

Titus 3:4: But God...

Titus 3:4 is the origin of the title of this talk, and it is the key verse, the pivot on which the passage hinges. And it begins with this wonderful **“But”**.

There are some glorious occurrences of the word “But” in the Bible, and this is one of the greatest. I feel I want to put it alongside that magnificent “But” of Ephesians 2:4, *“But God who is rich in mercy...”*

And really this verse is another *“But God”* verse, just like the one in Ephesians 2:4. The situation described in Titus 3:3 is hopeless. We were beyond hope, utterly incapable of doing anything to change our sinful ways or to rescue ourselves from our plight as guilty sinners. **“But God!”** But God! Yes, He alone was able to help.

Now I want us to consider the name by which God is presented in Titus 3:4. He is God our Saviour, or our Saviour God. This expression is very much a characteristic of what are known as the Pastoral Epistles, that is, Paul’s letters to Timothy and Titus, or, to be strictly accurate, of 1 Timothy and Titus, since I don’t believe it occurs in 2 Timothy. As far as I know, apart from these two books, you won’t find it anywhere in the New Testament except in Luke 1:47, in Mary’s song of praise. I don’t know why that is, but I do know that it is a wonderfully evocative expression.

If, like me, you are a lover of hymns and hymn singing, your mind may well have already gone to that great classic hymn “How Great Thou Art” (Britain’s favourite hymn by popular vote, or so I heard a few years ago). In that hymn, the hymnwriter first surveys the wonders of God’s creatorial works, and then the glory of Christ’s redemptive work, and then looks forward to His return. And after each stanza there bursts forth that glorious refrain:

*“Then sings my soul, my Saviour God to Thee,
How great Thou art.”*

Stuart K Hine (1899-1989) © 1953 Stuart K Hine/The Stuart Hine Trust

How great indeed is our Saviour God, who has stepped into human history as Titus 3:4 tells us. He has rescued us from the plight we were in as we’ve just been discussing, described in Titus 3:3, and He has opened up before us the glorious vista which we’re going to get to by Titus 3:7. The verses in between show us the details of what this rescue operation, which started at Christmas, involved.

Now Titus 3:4 says that *“...[His] goodness and [His] loving kindness have appeared”*. There are two Greek words being translated here. The one which is rendered “goodness” in the English Standard Version, the version I read from is also sometimes translated “kindness”. God is of course good, in the sense that He does what is right. But He is also good in the sense of being kind. It’s the sense which I think people are getting at when they say “God is good”. They mean “He will take care of me. He will provide what I need”. This I believe is the sense here. It’s the thought which I think Peter captured in Acts 10:38 when he was describing the life of the Lord Jesus to the Roman centurion Cornelius, and he said that He, that is Jesus, *“went about doing good”*.

The second of these words is the word from which we get our word “philanthropy”. It means literally “love for man”. Despite all the dark history of mankind since the Fall (see Genesis 3:1-7), all the ruin that sin has wrought both in the world at large and in our individual lives, God still loves us. And He doesn’t just love us, He takes a delight in us. That I think is what this word means.

It makes me think of the passage in Proverbs 8 which is, on the face of it, about wisdom personified, that is, spoken of as a person, but which I think is also a description of Christ. It ends by saying *“I was daily His [that is God’s] delight, rejoicing before Him always, rejoicing in His inhabited world and delighting in the children of man”* (see Proverbs 8:30-31).

Now before we leave Titus 3:4 let’s not forget the word *“when”*. There was a moment in history when all this happened, *“when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Saviour [did appear]”*, and that is what makes this a Christmas message.

To me, there is something especially heart-warming about the Christmas story. Whilst the Easter story focuses on the essentials of the Christian gospel and for that reason is really much more important than the Christmas story, yet for me there is always a special thrill associated with Christmas.

CS Lewis, in his book *Mere Christianity*, I think hits the nail on the head as to why this is so. He describes this world as enemy occupied territory and says that Christianity is the story of how the true King has landed, as it were in disguise. That’s the thrill of Christmas. It’s the idea of the news being whispered through all the ranks of those who have been waiting and hoping for this moment “He’s come at last”.

Christmas is about the moment of that landing. It's about the moment when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Saviour appeared.

Titus 3:5: not by works but by His mercy

Titus 3:5 tells us that God saved us. "Saved" is a simple enough word, and its plain and straightforward meaning is easy to grasp. I've already described it as a rescue operation, and so it is, but in the New Testament, salvation is a very comprehensive idea and we'd have to read quite a lot of Scripture to take in all that it involves. These verses, whilst they don't go into all of that detail, nevertheless contain some of the basic bedrock truths as to what being saved, in biblical terms, means.

One of these is that we are **not** saved by doing good deeds. Titus 3:5 says that we have not been saved "*because of works done by us in righteousness.*" This is not to decry doing good deeds. The New Testament elsewhere tells us in no uncertain terms that we should be going flat out to do good deeds, but not, most emphatically not, in order to earn favour with God, and qualify for a pass into Heaven.

No, the Christian gospel is absolutely clear that, in order to gain God's favour, the greatest saint who has ever lived must take his or her place alongside the greatest sinner who has ever lived and both of them must say, in the words of another famous hymn:

*Just as I am, without one plea,
But that Thy blood was shed for me,
And that Thou bidst me come to Thee,
O Lamb of God, I come.*

Charlotte Elliott (1789-1871)

We are saved not because of anything we have done or ever could do, but because Christ has died for our sins upon the cross.

The principle on which our salvation rests, as Titus 3:5 goes on to tell us, is God's own spontaneous and completely inexplicable mercy.

Born of water and the Spirit

The second half of Titus 3:5, together with Titus 3:6, tell us how God communicated that salvation to us. How did it reach us? Paul tells us that it was through two things, the washing of regeneration and the renewal of the Holy Spirit. What exactly is he referring to here?

The general idea clearly is that of a fresh start. The words "regeneration" and "renewal" tell us that. Put that idea alongside the involvement of, firstly, water (for the washing) and, secondly, the Spirit and there is an obvious link to the discourse the Lord had with Nicodemus, the Jewish religious leader, recorded in John 3:1-21. There He spoke of the necessity of being born anew - a complete fresh start like starting your life all over again by being born a second time. And there also, in connection with this new birth, the Lord spoke of being born of water and of the Spirit.

Taking these two things in reverse order, what does it mean to experience the renewal of the Spirit?

Well, the Bible undoubtedly teaches a profound truth, which we certainly don't have time to explore today, but which we know by the technical term of the Trinity. There is one God who exists in three Persons.

One of those three Persons is the Holy Spirit, or the Spirit of God, or simply the Spirit. It is the Spirit Who gives life, as the Lord said in John 6:63, and this is a principle which seems to me to run through Scripture. It was He who worked in your heart and pointed you to Christ. It is He Who is at work in the world still, bringing about conviction of sin, of righteousness and of judgment, just as the Lord said He would when He spoke of the coming of the Spirit in John 16:8.

Not only was the Holy Spirit the One who first shone a light into our souls and initiated a spiritual awakening which brought us to Christ, but He is deeply involved in God's work in our lives. By the Spirit, according to 1 Corinthians 12:13, we were all baptised into one body. When we believed, according to Ephesians 1:13, we were sealed by the Holy Spirit and according to Romans 8:26, the Spirit even acts as a kind of interpreter when we don't know how to pray as we ought. In our passage today, Titus 3:36 concludes by saying that "*the Holy Spirit was poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Saviour.*"

Notice the words *“poured out.”* The analogy of water is sometimes used in connection with the Holy Spirit. In John 7:38, for example, when the Lord said that those who believed in Him would have living water flowing from them to the thirsty world around, John specifically adds the comment that He was referring to the Spirit, which those who believed in Him were to receive.

We might wonder then if the *“washing of regeneration”* (Titus 3:5) is just another reference to the renewal of the Holy Spirit, but I think I’m right in saying that in the scriptures which link the Holy Spirit with water, it is the life-giving and thirst quenching properties of water which are in view, rather than its cleansing properties. The expression *“washing of regeneration”* (Titus 3:5) is, I believe, drawing our attention to another important agency which is involved in that great work of salvation which God our Saviour has wrought in our lives.

So what does the washing refer to? Some may see it as a reference to being baptised, but I don’t believe Paul is talking here about baptism at all. Being baptised, important though it is, doesn’t change what you are inwardly. It changes what you are outwardly. It puts your Christianity into the public domain. But here it is a question of an inward change, and in order to gain an insight as to what Paul is driving at when he refers to the washing of regeneration, I believe we should look at what he says in Ephesians 5:26. There he is describing how the Lord is patiently and painstakingly purifying His church so that it will one day be ready to be presented to Him as His glorious and perfect bride. And Paul describes that process as *“the washing of water with the word”*. The water is a picture of the cleansing effect of the word of God.

And so here in these verses, in Titus 3:5-6, I believe, Paul is teaching us that our new birth, our fresh start, was brought about by two things, the life-giving power of the Spirit of God and the application of God’s word to our minds, hearts and consciences.

Justified by His grace

The first part of Titus 3:7 says that we have been justified by His grace. To be justified is to be pronounced righteous by God. Being justified goes far beyond being forgiven. Generally speaking, if you have been forgiven for something, your guilt is not in question. It is just that, for whatever reason, the person who might have borne a grudge against you because of whatever it was that you did to them, has decided not to let it spoil your relationship, so you have been, as we say, “let off”.

But to be justified! - ah, that is vastly different. It means that God declares that you are completely in the right, as though you had never committed the offence at all, even though, as a matter of historical fact, you did.

How can this be? How can God (who never lies, as Titus 1:2 (this very book) declares) and who never fudges any issue, possibly declare that you have not sinned when you and everyone else knows that you have? Isn’t this a huge miscarriage of justice?

Well, in a certain sense it is, but it is one which God allows because it is entirely at His own expense. The miracle of what took place at the cross when the Lord Jesus died is that all of your sins, and mine, and the responsibility for them, the obligation, that is, to answer for them before God’s throne, were transferred from us to Christ with His full and irrevocable agreement. How can we hold back from shouting “Praise the Lord!”?

How can we ever find language adequate to give thanks and praise to God that we have been, if we have trusted Christ, justified by His grace?

Heirs according to the hope of eternal life

Finally, the second part of Titus 3:7 takes us to our final destination, the end result of this amazing intervention of our Saviour God in this ruined world. It is that we may become heirs according to the hope of eternal life; and the word “hope” here doesn’t carry the sense of uncertainty which is normally implied when we say we are hoping for something. The “hope” of the New Testament is a confident expectation. We have a sure and certain hope.

It has been well said that the Christian life is full of ups and downs, but that the last one is always an up. However great the joy which we may sometimes experience as we journey through the Christian life, for the Christian, and only for the Christian, it is always true that “the best is yet to be”.

We began this talk by looking at Titus 3:3, with its stark and uncompromising description of the kind of people we were, as seen by God’s all-discerning eye. We have then been looking in detail at the magnificent rescue operation which God our Saviour has mounted, at such incalculable cost to Himself.

If we have really taken on board this amazing story, that we are no longer under God's condemnation on account of our sins but have been gloriously liberated, then nothing will be able to stop us from shouting aloud for joy, and bursting forth into endless praise to God and to the Lord Jesus, who endured the cross for our sakes, in order that this deliverance may be ours.

But such are the unsearchable depths of the love of God our Saviour that He doesn't stop there. He is not content just to lift us out the pit where we were and set us free. He wants to give us so much more. He wants to bless us beyond our wildest dreams!

When God first created man, as recorded in Genesis 1:26-28, the first thing the scripture says that He did, His first action towards us, was blessing, and God's intentions towards us have never changed. So in the final verse of today's passage, Titus 3:7, we see that the ultimate goal of God's purposes towards us is that we should become heirs, those who are due to inherit a vast fortune, a world of quite unimaginable and indescribable bliss, referred to here as eternal life, which awaits all who have accepted, in simple faith, the goodness and loving kindness of God, which appeared at Christmas when the Lord Jesus came.

Thank you for listening to this *Truth for Today* Christmas message entitled "When the kindness of God appeared" talk number 1074.

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