

# Titus #1

*Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ to further the faith of God's elect and their knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness – in the hope of eternal life, which God, who does not lie, promised before the beginning of time, and which now at his appointed season he has brought to light through the preaching entrusted to me by the command of God our Saviour.*

*To Titus, my true son in our common faith:*

*Grace and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Saviour.*

Titus 1:1-4

Today we're going to begin a series of talks looking at a letter written by the Apostle Paul to Titus, one of Paul's co-workers in the preaching of good news of Jesus Christ.

I've chosen it for a number of reasons.

- It's short. At mere three chapters long, it would take you about 7 minutes to read it from start to finish.
- It is one of the New Testament's 'forgotten' books. Can you remember hearing a talk based on the book of Titus?
- One of its primary themes is advice on how followers of Jesus should conduct themselves in a corrupt culture that is hostile to the Christian faith. Hmm...

So, let's begin...

The Book of Titus is one of Paul's later letters, written around AD 64, after his release from his first Roman imprisonment.

We know from the book of Galatians that Titus was a Greek convert to Christianity (Galatians 2:3), probably through Paul... which is why in today's reading Paul calls Titus his 'true son in our common faith.'

One of the areas where Paul did a lot of his missionary work was in an area to the right of Italy.

We know from comments Paul makes in 2 Corinthians that Titus previously served at a church in Corinth (2 Corinthians 8:6, 16-17).

Titus later met Paul in Philippi (remember Philippi?) and Paul wrote that he was pleased with Titus' ministry (2 Corinthians 7:6-7, 13-14).

Several years later, Titus and Paul travelled to the island of Crete, a large island off the coast of Greece.

Paul then moved back to the mainland, visiting cities including Ephesus.

Paul wrote the letters we call 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus during this time.

Titus continued working with the Christian communities that were forming as people responded to the gospel message.

Paul wrote this letter to address a number of issues that Titus was facing.

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Titus received this letter, probably delivered by Zenas (a lawyer) and Apollos (a Christian preacher) who are named later in the letter. (Titus 3:13).

As we learned when looking at the book of Philippians, the letter would have been read out loud to gatherings of the Christian communities, and its contents would be explained, discussed and debated.

And now, just under 2000 years later, we're going to take a look at this letter, and see what it has to say to us.

The letter opens with Paul describing his credentials,

*...a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ...*

Titus 1:1a

First and foremost, Paul sees himself as a servant of God. Remember that the Greek word for ‘servant,’ (doulos) is the same word used for ‘slave.’

It is also the word from which we get the English words ‘minister’ and ‘deacon.’

Paul is also an apostle, the root meaning being ‘one who is sent,’ but which in this context means someone who has met the resurrected Jesus, and who has been given special authority to preach, explain and protect the gospel message.

As Paul goes on to explain...

*...to further the faith of God’s elect...*

Titus 1:1

When writing this letter Paul was becoming aware that he would not always be around to help people like Titus (2 Timothy 4:7). And he wants to make sure that his friends are equipped to care for the Christian communities that Paul has worked so hard to establish.

Paul’s primary mission was to point people towards faith in Jesus Christ. And faith is not a one-off event.

Our Christian journey begins *with* faith, God’s free and undeserved gift, and our journey continues *by* faith, as we grow in knowledge of God’s truth, and put it into practice in our lives.

We are ‘God’s elect’ not because we are special, or have done something to deserve being loved by God, but because God *is* love. And this is not a New Testament innovation.

As Moses said to the Israelites when God rescued them from Egypt...

*For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession.*

*The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your ancestors that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt.*

Deuteronomy 7:6-8

The reason for God making Israel his 'chosen people,' his 'elect,' was not that Israel was more righteous or loveable than any other nation, but because of God's loving character. And Israel's purpose was to demonstrate and proclaim this loving character, as a community of God's people, to the other nations of the world.

Sadly, Israel rarely embraced this mission. One of the aspects of Jesus' ministry was to embody what Israel was meant to do. Jesus was a living demonstration of God's truth, love and goodness to the world.

And the body of Jesus, the worldwide Christian Church, of who we are a part, continues this mission today.

Authentic faith in God leads us to...

*...knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness...*

Titus 1:1

God does not wait for us to be good before he saves us. He saves us so that we can become good, so that we can become 'godly.'

Paul was painfully aware that he didn't deserve to be loved by God. Jesus reached out to Paul (then known as Saul) as he was on his way to persecute Christians.

When we begin to understand and experience the depths of God's love for us, especially in the way it is revealed to us by the life and teachings of Jesus, it inspires us to be like him. That's what 'godliness' means.

However, as all of us in this little church community know, being a follower of Jesus does not guarantee an easy life.

In fact when Paul became a Christian there are many ways in which his life took a turn for the worse, including imprisonment, beatings, shipwrecks, and having his life ended by a Roman sword.

If death is the end, there are many Christians who could quite justifiably wonder if their life was really worth the sufferings they went through.

As Paul wrote to the Corinthian church...

*If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.*

1 Corinthians 15:19

But, for the Christian, there is good news, because we live our present lives...

*...in the hope of eternal life, which God, who does not lie, promised before the beginning of time, and which now at his appointed season he has brought to light through the preaching entrusted to me by the command of God our Saviour...*

Titus 1:2-3

Physical death is not the end for Christians, it is the next stage in our lives, an even better and more glorious, eternal life, which God planned even before there was such a thing as time!

Do you believe that? Do you *really* believe that?

If like me, you regularly find it a bit too good to be true, ask God the Holy Spirit to help you believe it, because it really does help to give your life a fuller and more hopeful perspective.

As Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians...

*Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light*

*and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.*

2 Corinthians 4:16-17

This is Paul, battered, bruised and tired, speaking about his 'light and momentary troubles.' But he knows that these troubles are part of a package, achieving 'an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.'

But back to Paul's companion, Titus.

Paul concludes his introduction by addressing Titus directly, wishing him...

*Grace and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Saviour.*

Titus 1:4b

Notice how Paul refers to both God the Father and Christ (Messiah) Jesus as our Saviour.

As I regularly emphasise, Jesus did not become a human being to rescue us from an angry, vengeful God. To the contrary, a loving God chose to save us from our self-chosen separation from him by fixing that separation through Jesus, God the Son's life, death and resurrection.

Paul now moves to Titus's mission...

*The reason I left you in Crete was that you might put in order what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you.*

Titus 1:5

Paul starts with instructions on leadership structures in the Cretan Christian communities, which may sound a bit 'unspiritual,' but is of great importance to the flourishing of the Cretan churches.

'Why?' I hear you say... well, let me explain...

There are Christians who look back at the early Church with rose-tinted spectacles, seeing it as a group of Spirit-filled, miracle-working people,

triumphantly sweeping across the world with the good news of the gospel.

Now there is a sense in which this is true. But most of these Spirit-filled, miracle-working people were from the lower classes of society. Many of them were slaves. They spent the majority of their time engaged in hard, thankless manual labour for their masters and mistresses.

Part of the good news of the Good News is that every human being has been made in God's image, that each and every one of us has huge value.

To 1st century slaves, whose owners saw them as property to do with as they pleased, whether that was to sell them, have sex with them, beat them or kill them, this was amazing news!

But they were still slaves. Although they now knew they were forgiven and loved by God, they still had to serve their masters each day. What had changed was that they had a new vision of life, their life now had purpose beyond gutting chickens and clearing open sewers.

However, these new believers weren't always good at handling this new-found freedom.

We all have a strong tendency to put ourselves first. It is one of the chief symptoms of our fallen nature. And the Christian message can be easily twisted to justify it. If I am as valuable as every other person, why shouldn't my ideas be as (or more) important than anybody else's?

The Book of Acts describes how quickly things went from...

*All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had.*

Acts 4:32

to a believing couple deciding that...

'we'll keep some of the money to ourselves, but let people think we gave all of it.' (Acts 5:1-2)

And if you don't know how that story ended, look it up later!

Many of the New Testament letters include instructions on how to deal with the problems of what happens when people's mindset goes from slavery to freedom.

Paul knows that enduring freedom requires structure.

While it sounds like a contradiction, we know from experience that this is true.

Whether that is training a dog properly so that it can be trusted to run around a park without attacking people, or exercising the self-discipline it requires to keep our own bodies healthy and mobile, we don't get enduring freedom without structure.

And for the emerging Christian communities, this meant they required proper leadership.

First on the agenda is to appoint 'elders' in every town. The fact that there are Christian communities in every town is encouraging, but the task of setting up leadership structures is never an easy task.

Paul had instructed Titus to do this while he was still on Crete. That he is reminding him of this at the beginning of this letter means that Paul may have got word that this work was lagging.

Just as possibly, Paul's experiences of establishing Christian communities means he suspects that Titus may already be struggling with this, and wants to make sure he does not let this important but difficult task get put to the bottom of his 'to do' list.

So what is an elder? How long have you got?

Suffice it to say that most church denominations have different spins on what the exact definition is of an 'elder'.

Baptist churches tend to split church hierarchy into 3 bands...

1. Pastors to teach and shepherd the flock through the word of God.

2. Elders, to teach and to concentrate on that shepherding, focusing on prayer and encouragement.
3. Deacons, to spiritually serve by helping the needs of the church.

The Greek word that we translate as elder is 'presbyteros', meaning 'old man,' hence 'elder' (and, of course, the more churchy word 'presbyter').

What follows is a description of what qualifies someone to be an elder.

*An elder must be blameless, faithful to his wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient. Since an overseer manages God's household, he must be blameless – not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain. Rather, he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined. He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it.*

Titus 1:6-9

Wow... quite the list...

Paul is aware that people regularly choose leaders for the wrong reasons. Often people in leadership positions are there because they enjoy the prestige, rather than because they want to serve their community.

Paul's criteria is different, Paul wants elders to be 'blameless.'

The Greek word translated as 'blameless' does not mean 'perfect.' It is more like 'of unquestioned integrity' or 'unimpeachable.' Someone who is honest and law-abiding.

And, if the elder is married and has children, this means someone who is faithful to his wife, and who is a good father to their children.

There is no such thing as a perfect Christian, but there is such a thing as a Christian who is doing their best to live a good and honest life,

someone who is not overbearing, quick-tempered, given to drunkenness, violent or dishonest with money.

And there are many Christians who are hospitable, love what is good, and are actively working on being self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined.

As leaders of a Christian community, elders also need to hold firmly to the gospel message, encouraging others to stick to its truths, and be capable of defending its truth against those who oppose it.

Goodness and truth is a powerful combination.

The most convincing displays of Christianity are good, loving, honest, generous Christians who proclaim the truth of the gospel to those around them.

Whether that is Billy Graham or our departed sister Janet Yau, people notice and respect people who 'walk the talk.' Not perfectly, but authentically and wholeheartedly in every area of their life.

And when those people give credit for their attitude and way of living to Jesus, it lends credibility to what they say.

And you don't have to be a leader for these verses to be relevant.

It is the calling of every follower of Jesus to seek to be 'blameless.' Not to gain God's acceptance, but because we have been accepted by God.

So, let's be encouraged to daily accept God's gift of faith and spend time reading his word, the Bible, so that we can, 'hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that we can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it.'

Amen