

Toowong Uniting Church
Titus Chapter 3
29th January, 2012

On the little Island of Crete in the first century AD, a young man was seeking to reinvigorate groups of Christians, first generation Christians who, just like us, were struggling to put their faith into practice. And to encourage this young man and offer him some reliable, hard-earned advice, a veteran church-planter and leader, by the name of the apostle Paul, wrote to that young man, whose name was Titus, and the contents of that letter are what we call the book of Titus in the New Testament.

As we have been looking at this letter over the past two weeks, we have seen two significant themes emerging. Two things are important in the life of a Christian person: sound doctrine and good deeds. But these two things often don't match one another. Where there is a gap between people's beliefs and behaviour, Paul offers a remarkably simple remedy to help close the gap. He unapologetically articulates a very high standard of behaviour and tells people to follow it and he states with great clarity a set of beliefs which he expects and believes will motivate that very behaviour.

The main focus of the passage we looked at last week from the book of Titus was the high behavioural standards expected from Christian people. This week we are going to look primarily at the beliefs one might possess to provide the motivation we need. Motivation is such an important thing in all aspects of life – including in our spiritual lives. Motivation is the fuel that drives our engine on the journey of daily living.

A teenager lost a contact lens while playing basketball in his driveway. After a fruitless search, he told his mother the lens was nowhere to be found. Undaunted, she went outside and in a few minutes returned with the lens in her hand. "I really looked hard for that, Mom," said the youth. "How'd you manage to find it?"

"We weren't looking for the same thing," she replied. "You were looking for a small piece of plastic. I was looking for \$400." Motivation makes all the difference!

One other thing we have noticed about the book of Titus is that the word Saviour is used in this book of the NT more than in any other. This puzzles a lot of people when you refer to Jesus as a saviour. We can accept he was a great teacher, a remarkable moral example, even an inspired human being. But to call Jesus our Saviour means that, by implication, we have to be saved from something. And that's a bit hard to grasp isn't it? Talk to the average person on the street about their need to be saved and the response will be a blush, a frown, a snigger, probably a laugh.

What could I possibly need to be saved from? I'm a nice person. I don't appear to be in any immediate danger. Why on earth would I need to think of Jesus as my saviour?

Without apology, the Christian faith asserts that there is something wrong with the world. This is not a uniquely religious claim. Many philosophies and world-views address perceived problems and offer hope that the world can be made a better place.

Is there something inherently, fundamentally wrong on our planet? Those who believe there is, easily offer supporting evidence. Why is it that millions die of poverty-related causes

when the means are available to correct the problem? There is actually plenty of food to feed everyone, but human choice prevents it being distributed. Why has there been no decade in the last thousand years without a major military conflict somewhere on the planet? Why is virtually every scientific development intended to help the human race eventually turned into a weapon or used for destructive purposes? Why are race, gender, religion and age still dividing the bulk of humanity? How could (in recent history) so many of the world's 'civilised' people's perpetrate genocide? Why is pornography the most profitable internet market? Why is loneliness epidemic in an age of social networking? Why did Australians lose 4 Billion dollars in gambling with the majority of that being thrown away by people who can't really afford it? I could go on and on.

Numerous reasons are suggested as the cause of these problems. Some say lack of education others say too much information. Some suggest a *lack* of basic necessities is the cause. Others say the issue is based around the desire for too *many* material possessions. Others think a particular type of government or political system is the reason for our problems.

Jesus answered the question 'What is wrong with the world?' by suggesting that 'the heart of the problem is a problem of the heart'. In his teaching Jesus consistently referred to the need for people's hearts to be made new. He believed the world would become a better place when human hearts were changed. Without question the world needs better structures and governments, policies and practices to address the sorts of issues mentioned above. But too often we don't dig deep enough. Our diagnosis is too shallow.

We have to go right down deep into the human heart to find the source of the problem. There we discover an inclination, an orientation that the Bible usually labels 'sin' (which has largely become an unmentionable three letter word in our society – terribly unfashionable to talk about it – running rampant everywhere but we can't use that word to refer to anything) that leads us to think, speak and act in ways that offend God, that hurt other people and that diminish ourselves. This is what's at the heart of all other problems. The violence and destruction of two warring nations is simply a more complex expression of the same tendency to self-interest you might find in two fighting children. This is in all of us. Some of us mask and control it better than others, but it lies crouching at the door, waiting for an opportune moment.

Nicky Gumbel, creator of the Alpha Course: "I used to think I was a nice person because I didn't rob banks or commit other serious crimes. Only when I began to see my life alongside the life of Jesus Christ did I realise how much there was wrong." Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the Russian Nobel-prize laureate, wrote, "The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor through classes, nor between political parties . . . but right through every human heart and through all human hearts."

The problem with the world exists within each one of us. The invitation Jesus makes is to let God's light shine into our hearts, exposing what is wrong there and beginning the process of participating with God, using resources beyond our own capacity, to be dynamically changed. Then we can contribute to the world becoming a better place. God's call to the human race is to change the planet one life at a time, starting with me.

Many years ago, The London Times ran a series of articles under the heading 'What is Wrong With the World?' The public were invited to write letters to the editor, outlining their understanding of the world's problems. Various letters were published outlining issues of

war, poverty, education. The journalist G.K. Chesterton, a Christian, wrote the shortest letter indicating what is wrong with the world.

Dear Sir,

I am.

Yours sincerely,
G.K. Chesterton.

Chesterton's letter reminds us, that we cannot sit back, smugly thinking badly of all 'those others' who are the problem. What we have to realise is the same greed and self-interest that perpetuates global problems exists in our hearts as well. We are all the problem

That's the context out of which the Christian faith speaks of salvation and the need to be saved. Though we might live comfortable middle class lives we still need to be saved. Perhaps more so if we are comfortable and middle class, for the illusion self-sufficiency can easily blind us to our spiritual need. And everyone who is a Christian, every person who has looked to Jesus Christ as their Saviour so save them from their sins, knows that there was once a time when our lives were marked by the hallmarks of self-interest.

Paul describes them here in Titus Chapter three. "At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived, enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures." So often we think the person who lives by every whim of pleasure and self indulgence to be amongst the freest of people in society. But the truly free person is not the one to indulge themselves, anyone can do that. The free person is free not to be controlled by their passions and desires, and you don't find many people in that category.

Paul continues: "We lived in malice (wishing others to be in a lower state than yourself) and envy (which is wishing yourself to be in a higher state than others) with life being marked by discord and cycles of hatred."

But . . . all of a sudden, something appeared. The word appeared here is essentially the word epiphany. A sudden, unexpected, often not fully understood appearing of something from a world and realm beyond our own experience. So there is really no room here for the quite popular idea that finds expression both in ancient Gnostic teaching and modern new age philosophy that humanity will be saved by finding the spark of light that exists within each of us, and if we could just trust more in ourselves, we will be OK. No the image here is that it is pitch black in the dark of night and suddenly the dawn breaks on a distant horizon, and light comes flooding into our situation.

Paul says, "We were saved when the grace and love and kindness of God suddenly appeared in Jesus Christ, allowing us to be saved, not because of 'righteous things we have done' but because of his great mercy." His salvation involved the 'washing of rebirth', which was something done to us by God, washing the slate clean, giving us a completely fresh start. God doesn't repair our old selves, he instead places new life, divine life, spiritual life within us. As someone has said, "When you become a Christian it is not that you get a new start to life, rather God gives you a whole new life to start." It's like beginning again, starting from scratch, being born a second time. A young man who became a Christian in our church recently sent me an email to describe his experience (obviously from another country):

**hello dear Simon, how are you? i hopefully you & your family are good
I'm very well, I pray for you every week at church i go to church every week as a
Christianity.
i went to church today with my wife, i talking to her about Jesus & new life every day
and she was interest to come with me to church, they accept us going to church.
she had good feeling same as me,we pray together and say thanks god for every thing, i
think Jesus help me everyday in my new life because this is my feeling.
i try to study English more for more conversation *because my feeling is same as a
newborn baby and my eyes are open now for watching new life,*
thank you Simon and thanks God, you are in my mind always when i pray.**

That all happened suddenly and unexpectedly. But there's no real salvation in *only* giving people a new start, because the new life that we have is within our old bodies and there are habits and patterns of thinking and acting that need to be changed. There are emotions from past experiences that need to be dealt with and processed and healed. There are relationships to be restored, restitutions to be made. All of that is going to take time. It is a process, a process of renewing that the Holy Spirit continues to work within us. So the washing of rebirth is complemented by the renewing work of the Holy Spirit.

I could spend hours teasing out the nuances of the phrases here and the richness that each contains. But I won't. Paul seems to sum up the extraordinary height, depth and breadth of our salvation with the phrase the 'grace of God'. He uses it again and again. It's as though he is asserting, if you want to grasp the essence of all that God has done, the word grace is probably the only word large enough to encompass it.

But here's the thing. God's grace, God's undeserved action offered to us freely when we were living in darkness, was designed not only to save us but also to teach us. "For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say 'No!' to ungodliness and worldly passions and to live self controlled upright and godly lives in this present age while we wait for the blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and saviour Jesus Christ who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good. Later Paul says, I want those who have trusted in God to devote themselves to doing what is good.

The message here is clear. Not only does the grace of God save us it also instructs. Not only is God's grace a life saver, someone who pulls you out of the dangerous surf and resuscitates with life giving breath (which is a remarkably apt analogy when you consider that the Hebrew word used of God's Holy Spirit is *ruach*, which literally means breath), but God's grace is also a tutor, someone who sits down one on one and helps you apply the richness and reality of God's salvation to your situation. As you daily fail and fall short of God's calling, God's grace is there ready to pick you up, ready to get you going again, holding up before you once more a picture of what you used to be, reminding you of the emptiness and hollowness of life before God's grace broke into your world and the Holy Spirit began his work of transformation within you.

But wait there's more! Not only are we motivated by God's grace, but also by Christ's glory. Did you notice that in the passage I just read? There are two motivating factors: the Grace of God which has appeared, but also the glory of Christ which is yet to appear. You see Salvation has three dimensions to it. On the front of last week's newsletter I shared the

classic story of a Salvation Army girl approaching the Greek scholar, Bishop Westcott, on the street and, not knowing who he was, asking if he was saved. Westcott replied, “My dear, do you mean *sotheis*, *sesosmenos* or *sozomenos*?” Though a little arrogant, he asked a valid question. He was referring to the three tenses of the Greek verb saved, all of which appear in the New Testament. He was asking, “Do you mean have I been saved, am I being saved or will I be saved?” Three quite different things!

We *have been* saved! We say that with confidence because our salvation depends not on our goodness or effort but on Christ’s finished work on the cross.

But although I *have been* saved, I’m not fully and completely saved yet, because God’s ultimate intention is to do much more than just forgive me, he wants to completely transform me. And one day he will bring that work to completion and perfection and I *will be* saved in the future, though not in this life.

I *have been* saved and I *will be* saved. But there’s a third reality – I am being saved. That refers to the present and involves our choices.

Let me put it another way: our past salvation saves us from the *punishment* of sin, our present salvation is about gaining victory over the *power* of sin and our future salvation will finally free us from the very *presence* of sin. This means salvation is not a static thing you possess, it is a living, dynamic process you enter into and live in and walk in every single day.

And what Paul is saying here is that the best motivation you can find in life to say no that that which we should avoid and to say yes to what we must embrace (experiencing present salvation) is to remember God’s grace offered to us in the past and to consider God’s glory which is yet to be revealed in the future. We have to do spiritually what is physically impossible: look in two different directions at the same time – God, you see, is going to have the final word, he is going to complete that which he has begun in your life and mine, and in this world which largely ignores and rejects him.

The implications of that are staggering. It means that nothing we do now is wasted, or will be overlooked. Every godly word thought and deed counts toward that final appearing of the glory of God. Yes we struggle and wrestle with life. God knows we strain under the burden of pain we experience here and now, but we struggle whilst possessing a quiet confidence and courage. Jesus’ resurrection and the Spirit’s presence and work in our lives is the deposit, the guarantee that God is directing all things towards a glorious outcome and plan and purpose.

I would argue that the most effective social reformers in the history of the world have been motivated both by a living experience of having received the Grace of God, the salvation of God and by a vision of the world to come: Lord Shaftesbury who worked tirelessly to free children trapped in the mines and factories of 18th century England disclosed his motivation as he wrote at the top of every letter he penned: “Even so, come Lord Jesus”. But the same is true of many others: William Wilberforce (abolishing slavery throughout the British empire), William Booth (founding the salvation Army), John Wesley (pioneering Christian work in prisons and mongst the poor), Mother Teresa (loving the untouchables of India).

The Christian faith isn’t pie in the sky as you die. It is verve in your nerves as you serve.

One final thing to say! A person of faith could take this the wrong way. As they listen to Paul describing the grace of God and the glory of Christ, as motivation to respond with a life of good deeds and godly living they could hear that through a filter of guilt. We do this at a human level. Have you ever heard a parent saying to a child: After all I've done for you this is how you behave this is how you act, this is how you show your gratitude. Well God could say that to me After all I've done for you, the grace I've shown the glory I've promised – and this is how you thank me, this is how you live? You continue in your selfish ways, you ignore the needs of people around you and that would all be true. But that would be a motivation based primarily on guilt and what Paul wants us to internalise that God motivates not by guilt but by grace: an offer of freedom and acceptance when it is least deserved. Let me give you a quick example of grace.

On the 9th June, 1972, a photo appeared on the front page of the *Washington Post*. A young girl running towards the camera, her arms outstretched, her clothes burned off, her skin blackened by napalm, screaming in pain! It was taken by photojournalist Nick Wood. The girl's name was Kim Phuc which means 'golden happiness'. After 14 months in hospital, 17 operations she returned home worried that her wounds were so ugly that no one would ever want to marry her. Nick Wood's photo won a Pulitzer Prize and became an emblem for an entire nation questioning its reason for being in Vietnam.

Some years later she read the New Testament in a local library and she became a Christian. Before this Kim had struggled to forgive the Americans who had so disfigured her body. She said this, "It was the fire of the bomb that burned my body, it was the skill of the doctor that mended my skin, but it took the power of God to heal my heart." She resumed her medical studies in 1986 (14 years after the bomb) and her burns still required daily washing and medication. A fellow Vietnamese student named Tuang offered to carry the necessary buckets of water up to her apartment and it wasn't long before he was touched by the loveliness of Kim's Spirit. And they were married in 1992 and defected to Canada. In 1996 Kim agreed to speak at a Veteran's day ceremony held in Washington DC. She took her place on the rostrum flanked by US military dignitaries before a huge crowd of veterans. She stood before a sea of uniforms, it must have been a terrifying sight for her bringing back the memories of the war. Addressing the crowd, she said this. "I have suffered a lot, both from physical and emotional pain, sometimes I thought I could not live but God saved my life and he gave me faith and hope." And then she uttered healing words of grace and forgiveness. She said, "Even if I could talk face to face with the pilot who dropped the bomb, I would tell him we can't change history but we can try to do good things for the present and for the future to promote peace. This is the hope God has given me."

When she finished her remarks, the veterans rose to their feet, broke into an explosion of applause, many of them in tears. "It is important to us that she is here," one veteran said. "For her to forgive us personally means something." One man was overcome with emotion. He rushed to the MC and scribbled out a note and asked him to deliver it to Kim. *I am the man you are looking for*, the note read. Officials brought the man over to her car and when the reporters had left, Kim turned and looked straight into the man's eyes and then held out her arms, same arms she held out as she ran along that road in agony from her burning skin. And she hugged the man and he began to sob, "I'm so sorry" he pleaded over and over again to which she replied I forgive , I forgive over and over again, echoing her favourite bible verse, forgive as the Lord forgave you. Forgive and you will be forgiven.

Kim Phuc embodied a response of grace. She could have sat there and laid a pretty heavy guilt trip on him, demanding that he beg her forgiveness. But she didn't. But the grace she showed, broke the man's heart and you can guarantee his life was changed by that.

The problem, I've concluded, for most of us is that we don't really believe God has forgiven me and accepted me and saved me. I know God is forgiving, but that's not really the issue. I'm sure he has forgiven other people, but still we don't really believe he has forgiven me, not completely, do you know what I've done, if you knew what I'm like, if you knew the battle that rages in me, the battle between darkness and light, if you knew the thoughts I harbour, the hatred that lingers in me, you'd know that although God might be big on forgiveness he probably has a special category for me. He's probably reserving his judgement with regard to me. That's what so many of us think.

Listen, the offer being extended to you by the nail pierced hands of Jesus, held out in grace, held out in forgiveness, held out in acceptance is to be forgiven, and accepted and saved. Not slightly forgiven, not almost forgiven, not conditionally forgiven (subject to you later turning into a wonderful Christian), but completely forgiven. If you can grasp that it can't help but change your life.

And can it be that I should gain
an interest in the Saviour's blood.
Died he for me who caused his pain,
for me who him to death pursued
Amazing love how can it be
that thou my God should die for me.