

A Faithful Saying

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[0 : 00] Our reading this morning is in the book of Titus, which you'll find on page 1199 in the Bibles in front of you. Titus chapter 3, verses 1 to 8.

Titus chapter 3, verses 1 to 9.

We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. But when the kindness and love of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy.

He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.

This is a trustworthy saying. And I want you to stress these things so that those who have trusted in God may be careful to devote themselves to doing what is good.

[1 : 33] These things are excellent and profitable for everyone. This is the word of the Lord. Thank you, Katrina.

Thank you, Martin. And thank you, everyone, for your warm welcome. Let's pray as we come now to God's word. Faithful God, you caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning.

Help us so to hear them, to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and the comfort of your Holy Word, we may embrace and always hold firmly to the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Amen. Do keep your Bibles open, or if you've closed them, as I tend to do, sort of automatically, it's 1199 in the Church Bibles.

What is God's strategy for Glasgow? I think he's got a strategy for Glasgow. A strategy is a plan of action designed to achieve an overall aim.

[3 : 01] A plan of action designed to achieve an overall aim. We have just witnessed, haven't we, lots of political party strategies for Glasgow. And the verdict of the electorate.

Well, God's overall aim, in the context of this short letter of Paul to Titus, is shown in chapter 2, verse 11.

It's one of the great books that you can see the whole book in front of you. Chapter 2, verse 11. And it's summarized as salvation to all people.

And that fits with what God says throughout our Scriptures, the Bible. From beginning to end, that is the underlying theme.

Salvation to the ends of the earth is like a summary statement of what is God's great strategy. Isaiah 49, verse 6 says this.

[4 : 02] God is outlining the mission of his servant. And he says, That is the overall aim that God has in our world, and therefore in Glasgow.

In our passage, in Titus chapter 3, the same overall aim is revealed in the main verb of what Paul describes as a trustworthy saying.

Verse 8, but, oh sorry, verses 4 and 5. But when the kindness and love of God, our Savior, appeared, he saved us.

A Savior saves. In its simplest form, that is the strategy of God for Glasgow. It is salvation.

It is a rescue plan. Because that's his overall aim throughout Scripture for all people. But what is the plan to achieve that overall aim?

[5 : 25] In other words, how is it that God is going to bring that aim about? And that is the focus of Paul's faithful saying in our passage. I've been spending a little bit of time in recent months looking at what it referred to as the five faithful or trustworthy sayings of the Apostle Paul, which occur in what are called the pastoral letters, 1 Timothy, Titus, and 2 Timothy.

1 Timothy has three trustworthy sayings. Titus has one, which is in our passage. And 2 Timothy has one as well.

Now, a trustworthy saying, which we see in verse 8 in our passage, can be understood if one realizes that none of the Gospels had at that time, when Paul was writing, had not been written. Well, what are those who did become Christians, as we were hearing from Josh, as they have in the Angle Peninsula in Wales? What about those who become Christians who don't have access to all that I have with a Bible open this morning?

Particularly thinking of the people that Paul was directing towards who came from a pagan background like those in Crete. How were they to grow in their new trust in Jesus with perhaps at max only elements of the Old Testament?

[6 : 56] Well, I think the answer lay in some of these key sayings or epitomes, which is a short summary, an embodiment of a wider thing.

It's a kind of a condensed summary. And it would help them. These short sayings would help the Cretans to remember key elements of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

For example, we read one earlier in 1 Timothy chapter 1 and verse 15. Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance.

Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. You can almost imagine that was written to Timothy and the churches in Ephesus, the city of Ephesus.

And you can almost imagine the believers as they bumped into each other in the streets. There's a kind of greeting in the streets around the temple of the great goddess Artemis.

[7 : 58] Greeting each other. Good morning! Christ Jesus came into the world. And the answer comes to save sinners. There's an easier way to...

It might be good for us sometimes to do that sort of thing as well. Well, in Titus, the trustworthy saying possibly is more like an early statement of belief or a creed, as we often say in Anglican churches, a summary of what we believe.

So back to our passage and to God's plan for the salvation of Glasgow. What does God teach us through this short letter written so long ago by Paul to his colleague Titus, who, according to chapter 1 and verse 5, he had left in Crete, that he, Titus, might put in order what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town as I directed you.

Well, the letter is also written to members of the Cretan churches because it finishes the whole letter saying, Grace be with you all.

And obviously Titus is one of the all, but he's not the only one. So it is written and they're being expected to be read out in the churches and in the towns of Crete.

[9 : 26] So there are lots of things that one could pick out from this wonderful passage, but let me restrict myself in this passage and draw our attention to a number of aspects of God's strategy, his rescue plan for Glasgow.

And the first point I wanted to make, which comes from verses 1 and 2 in chapter 3 of Titus, it involves God's people living godly lives in God's world.

God's people living godly lives in God's world, verses 1 and 2. Well, I don't know what is conjured up in your minds when you think of Christians or perhaps what others who aren't Christians think of Christians.

Maybe you're not a Christian yourself. I don't want to assume that everyone is here this morning. And if you are a Christian, maybe you can think of what others maybe have told you. But some of the things that I have come across are these sort of descriptors.

I wonder if they fit with yours. Hypocritical. Judgmental. Misogynist. Bigoted. Narrow.

[10 : 44] Serious. Holier than thou. I don't know whether those are maybe some of the descriptions that you may have heard. And sadly, there is usually more than a grain of truth in these.

And recent scandals in the Christian world have not helped. There are few things worse than hypocrisy.

Not practicing what we preach. And Paul is concerned here in verses 1 and 2 that nothing should be allowed to undermine the message of salvation, the rescue that he has on offer.

So, reading those two verses, 1 and 2. Remind the people to be subject, that's the people being the Christians in churches, to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good, to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and always to be gentle towards everyone.

Well, as in other New Testament passages, Paul emphasizes here a correct relation between Christians and the churches to the governing authorities.

[11 : 59] And obviously that's very relevant here as we've just been electing governing authorities. But the gist is best conveyed at the very end there. Always, he says, be gentle towards everyone.

So it's more than the governing authorities, it's everyone in the world around us. Now, the word gentle here is closely related to the word for humility and is often shown in our attitude or lack of it towards God.

It's been described, humility has been described as that temper of spirit in which we accept God's dealings with us as being good, even if they're difficult.

And therefore, without disputing or resisting or protesting, it's an inner work of God in the Christian and is displayed in our dealings with the world around us.

Well, this is the attitude that we're to have, according to Paul. And as Paul later says in verse eight, these things are excellent and profitable for everyone.

[13 : 06] The non-Christian world should have little genuine reason to oppose God's people if we display this kind of attitude.

The problem is that it's not natural. And ever since the fall, when humankind rebelled against our loving God, it has been an aspiration and it's been an aspiration throughout Titus.

And in our passage, it's summed up in that verse eight, so that those who have trusted in God may be careful to devote themselves to doing what is good.

Those things are excellent and profitable for everyone. So God's plan for Glasgow involves God's people living godly lives in God's world. I, as you heard earlier, lived with my family in South America for a number of years and was involved later in sending Christian workers to many different countries around the world and to many different contexts.

And we did it through a mission society called Crosslinks. And I think one of the things it took me longest to learn in the 18 years I was doing that was the even greater importance of Christian conduct and behavior in cross-cultural settings.

[14 : 32] Only then can the wonderful gifts and experiences and trainings that these people would often have be deployed fruitfully. However gifted a person is, if they do not live a Christian life that can be seen by others, then any of the benefits of those abilities and giftings and training in the people deployed are wasted.

So I was over-impressed on occasion by people's wonderful gifts. I always felt I was surrounded by people who had far much, far more to offer than I did.

But if it wasn't combined with Christian character, they could make a complete disaster of their service. So that's the first point of the strategy.

Secondly, it involves, the strategy involves, an honest and unflattering recognition of what Christians were. Verse 3.

Crete was not a place, one might say, of high moral values, standards, and behavior. It was a major trading hub in the eastern end of the Mediterranean, and it was possibly not a huge different, hugely different from perhaps what many of us hear about, whether it's true or not, about Glasgow.

[15 : 59] But its people in Crete were notorious even by their own estimation. They didn't challenge this. And in chapter 1, verse 12, it says, one of Crete's own prophets has said, Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons.

The Christians in the Cretan churches needed to remember that they had been and often continued not very different from the world around them.

And amongst others, it says, they were marked by malice and envy. Malice is the desire to harm someone, to cut them down to size.

It's often referred to in this part of the world as the tall poppy syndrome. We don't like people who are sort of prominent, so we pull out the ground from underneath them. Envy is the discontented attitude often behind malice and demonstrated in resentment of what others have.

So they're better than us, so we want to pull them down or we want to heave ourselves up so that we're at least on a par with them. And Paul, interestingly, in verse 3, seems to include himself in this diagnosis.

[17 : 25] Notice it's the we. We, too, were foolish, disobedient, deceived, enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another.

Now, I described a judgmental attitude which is often associated by people who are not Christians about what they perceive Christians to be, that we have a judgmental attitude. And a judgmental attitude is very unattractive and it is conveyed not just by what we say, although it is conveyed by that, but also by all kinds of unsaid elements of non-verbal communication. So it's quite hard sometimes to actually pick it up. But judgmentalism is not easy to maintain if we recognize the mess from which God has rescued us and which is revealed in this verse 3. Humility, on the contrary, is much more attractive and is made much easier when we remember where we've come from, this true view of ourselves.

[18 : 38] So God's strategy for salvation of Glasgow involves God's people living godly lives in God's world. Secondly, it involves an honest and unflattering appraisal of ourselves because few things can be worse than for Christians to deny the messiness of our lives, either by the impression we give or by the words we use.

We need to understand that we and other people need to know that we are messed up. My mother, to my knowledge, I don't know, never became a follower of the Lord Jesus and when I became a follower of the Lord Jesus in my teens, she would often point out a part of my character, a part of my behavior as a Christian and she would say, you call yourself a Christian and you do that or you think like that and she was dead right and the way to answer, I found, was not actually to try and defend myself or to excuse myself but to say, yeah, that's actually why I am a Christian.

I am a person who is deeply messed up and I need a savior. I need someone and so do you. Well, I didn't often add that last bit. I was very respectful and it certainly was reflected, humility was deeply reflected as a characteristic in those I was looking for in candidates to deploy for cross-cultural service around the world and I would say for service in churches in this land as well.

Thirdly, God's strategy for the salvation of Glasgow is precisely that. It's God's strategy verses 4-7. Here, in a highly condensed form, a summary that we're only going to touch on is a summary of the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ in this creedal form and we have the magnificence of God, the Holy Trinity revealed.

[20 : 49] God, the Father in love, effected this rescue through Jesus Christ, the Savior, in his appearance in history and in his justifying death on the cross and applied that to us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit who was poured out on us generously on God's people.

Well, we could spend sermons on the language and glories of that description but Paul seems to be drawing one particular point to our attention.

It had nothing to do with the Christians in Crete and it has nothing to do with us. We were saved, we were the passive recipients of this, we were saved by God in his mercy and mercy emphasizes the resource of the one to whom we go.

So I can ask for someone greater than me to give me mercy, whatever that means, but I cannot show mercy to someone who's greater than me and it emphasizes the resource on the path of the one who gives and the need that I have for it.

We were saved, secondly, through the washing of rebirth and the renewal by the Holy Spirit. It's God's work that applies what Jesus has done to my life.

[22 : 28] We were justified, as he says, made right with God by God's grace. It's his undeserved love that has led him to do this in Jesus Christ and as a result, we, God's people, became and were made heirs with the hope of eternal life.

And to underline this point, the point that seems to be behind what he's trying to say is that it is all by God's initiative and action and he therefore adds the negative, not because of righteous things that we had done, but because of his mercy, verse 4.

why do we think that Paul so emphasizes this? Well, apart from the fact that it's true, if what Christians have is because we have received it by grace from someone that we have no claim on, we are humbled and have no grounds to feel superior to anyone else.

So this attitude of judgmentalism or the tall poppy or whatever it is, we have no grounds whatsoever, I have no grounds whatsoever to look down on anyone else at all.

Why is this important? Well, because our natural inclination as Paul has already shown in verse 3 is to want to do something, anything to point to our contribution, our deserving of God's goodness so that we can preen ourselves and look down on everyone else.

[24 : 08] And because Paul is writing to Titus and to the Cretan believers in the context of false teaching where they were being told, yeah, but you can make some little contribution towards this

great rescue.

There is something that the Lord sees in you that is making this a contribution. So God's strategy to save Glasgow involves his people living godly lives, God's people having an honest and unflattering perspective of what we were and often are, and that it is God's plan, it is God's initiative, it's his achievement, it's his work, not ours, that gave us this wonderful rescue.

Finally, what is God's purpose or goal in doing all this? In other words, what will be the evidence that we should look for of this great strategy?

verse 8, so that those who have trusted in God may be careful to devote themselves to doing what is good.

If God in grace has saved us, saved us, even us, a people marked by foolishness, disobedience, deception, enslavement to all kinds of passions and pleasures, by malice and envy, by mutual hatred, without waiting for any sign of any contribution or reciprocation by us, God just did it.

[25 : 47] He didn't wait. Then a demonstration that we are truly his people now, is that we would and should emulate his grace in the way that we live our lives before other needy people.

And doing what is good, as we've seen earlier in verses 1 and 2, doing what is good regardless of whether there's any way in which the people that we're doing good to deserve it or not, because that is what we've received from God.

And this is what Paul wants Titus, as he says in verse 8, to stress in his teaching ministry in and amongst the Cretan churches, and that he should appoint godly, competent elders in every town to equip the God's people in those towns for works of service in the world, to remind us all of our great need and our great mess, so that we will draw others to the salvation that is open and free and on offer to all.

Well, in conclusion, that was God's strategy for Crete and it is his strategy today for Glasgow, God's people living godly lives in God's world, recognizing that we're a mess and yet receiving the wonderful salvation offered by God in his pure grace and mercy and it's all done so that we might show his grace to others.

That is God's strategy. That is God's strategy for the ace convocation that we've been speaking about, whose representatives have been meeting here this weekend in Glasgow.

[27 : 41] We aspire to see faithful local congregations pioneered, established, and secured right across this needy continent of Europe, led by godly, competent elders who are there to equip the saints, the people of God for works of service.

That's what God's strategy is. So let's pray. In 1 Timothy, Paul says to his other colleague Timothy, he says this, I urge then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession, and thanksgiving be made for all people, for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.

This is good and pleases God our Savior, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man, Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people.

Father, we do thank you for that amazing strategy, that rescue plan. We thank you for those of us who have already received that. We acknowledge that we deserved it no more than anyone else.

In other words, not at all. And we pray that we would live in the light of it and demonstrate your grace in the needy world around us here in Glasgow.

[29 : 21] For Jesus' sake, Amen.