

Prayer

Father, we worship You and adore You. Be careful with us pray, so when our lives do not make sense and nothing appears to work out for good, then touch us with Your compassion and make us aware of Your presence. May we bear the heartaches and enjoy the thrill of the lives You have given us, and may we catch a glimpse of the life You have prepared for us in Your Kingdom: AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Fire Services

In most country there are services responsible for helping us fight fires. Those who have this job do difficult work on our behalf, so pray for them, and any fire-fighters you know.

On-going prayers

- *Pray for small businesses struggling to keep going*
- *Give thanks to God for safety whilst you travel*
- *Pray for people in Tibet and the political problems there*

Meditation

Save us Lord, Creator of all things. Open our eyes to see you.
For people own so much and think they can do what they want,
Yet really, You have given us everything:

Everyone can communicate easily using the internet,
But it is You with whom we need to keep in touch:

Many people drive miles for work, leisure or enjoyment,
But You are with us wherever we are:

Doctors perform marvels, can even reconstruct a human face,
But only You can mend a broken heart:

Trained engineers know how to utilise the world's resources,
Yet You hold all mysteries and secrets of the world:

Save us Lord, Creator of all things. Open our eyes to see you.

Bible Study - Titus 3:4-7

⁴ But when the goodness and love of God our Saviour appeared, ⁵ He rescued us, not because of any righteous deeds we had done, but according to His mercy, through the cleansing of rebirth and renewal of the Holy Spirit, ⁶ that has been poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Saviour, ⁷ so that, having been put right with God by His grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

Review

This wonderful and inspirational passage follows on directly from Paul's advice (which we looked at yesterday), advising God's people about moral and ethical forms of behaviour. Whilst it is necessary and important for all of us to be challenged about how and why we speak and act as we do, it is the heart of the Gospel that must surely be our exclusive

guide. In every place Paul writes lists of 'do's and don'ts' (3:1-3) it is almost always part of a larger piece of advice which includes his urging of his readers to keep in close contact with the Gospel of salvation. Frankly, unless we begin with the full Gospel of the living God, then Paul's moral advice does not stand; it is like a dangerous set of impossible demands which only set up ordinary folks for a fall. Only by the power and mercy of God, as found in the salvation of the world can any of us find the route towards such moral goals.

Kindness and love The way in which Paul expresses the Gospel here in these few verses of Titus is inspirational. The first verse is not like other sentences found in his writing, and the words for 'goodness' and 'love' are not the ones he normally uses. The first word (Greek 'chrestotes') means kindness, with the added sense of doing what is right; in this way, Paul wanted us to know that when God acted for the salvation of the world through Jesus Christ, He was indeed 'doing what was right' for the whole of His creation. Salvation, you might say, must always be right, but remember, God's salvation is a salvation which demands our choice, and the hard facts of it are that many people, when faced by the facts, do not choose to take up the Lord's supreme offer of eternal life. We should never forget that, and this should mean that we must always be ready to argue for the 'rightness' of what God has done to other people, for the sake of their salvation. The second word in this sentence is translated 'love' (Greek 'philanthropia'), but it contains the idea of hospitality, generosity and openness. Sometimes we treat the love of God as if it was a private benefit, but this word reminds us that our Lord is constantly seeking to make Himself available to all people in a completely free and open way. If we make Him into our private God, then He will break out of the bounds we seek to place upon Him.

Rebirth and the work of the Holy Spirit The next part of Paul's description of salvation is fairly standard, and explains directly the chief characteristic of the redemptive work of Christ; it is not achieved through anything we can do or decide, but only through the supreme mercy of God found in the act of re-birth (3:5). Paul does not use the word 're-birth' very much, but it is obvious to any reader of the New Testament that there is connection here between the writings of Paul and of John. It is in John's Gospel that we find the great explanation given by Jesus to Nicodemus that in order to enter the Kingdom of God we must be 'reborn', not physically, but spiritually (John 3:5-10). Indeed, although Jesus preached a great deal about repentance, He never taught a theology of 'water' baptism, but he did teach a distinctive and clear theology of spiritual re-birth by the Holy Spirit, and this is particularly clear within John's Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles.

Baptism? Paul uses the language of baptism here because this is so central to the Gospel of salvation. Baptism (in whatever way we practice it) is a matter of spiritual rebirth by the Spirit of God, or it is nothing; but when we celebrate this gift, we do need to display the essentially hospitable nature of God, because His offer of salvation is to all and the grace and favour of God has been made available to us all! This is the 'rich' blessing 'poured out' on us (3:6), for which all God's people are eternally grateful. This is what makes Christian people excited, zealous and enthusiastic, a people who have a message and a purpose, and the energy to pursue a witness to faith which should be the envy of others. We can almost hear this energy and vitality come through as Paul says 'so that ... we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life!' (3:7).

If we look at the original Greek sentence structure of the letter of Titus, we will find that the first seven verses of Titus 3 are in fact one sentence. Like other famous instances where Paul is genuinely excited about the Gospel, this excitement shows in his tendency to write long sentences (see also Ephesians 1, e.g.). For us, the Gospel becomes alive in our midst as we allow the Holy Spirit to fill us and enthuse us, so that we, too, are excited and thrilled at everything the Lord God has done and will do in us. We are His partners in the glorious enterprise of the Kingdom of God, by which the world is being saved!

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Discuss in your group whether this passage contains a full explanation of the Gospel, and if not, why not? What does the text convey to you?
2. What is different about the 'rebirth and renewal of the Holy Spirit' and the 'salvation of our souls in Christ Jesus'? Should there be any discernable difference?
3. What does it mean to you to be heirs of God?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

No letter of Paul would be complete without some expression of excitement concerning the Gospel of Christ. You may not know this, but some scholars reckon that because the language of this passage is slightly different from Paul's usual mode of speaking about the Gospel, they think it may have been written by someone else. I am not sure that this is a worthwhile analysis. Why cannot a person write in a different way about things at different times? I certainly know that my own writing has changed over the years, and also the way that I explain some things about my faith. I prefer to think this passage is indeed typical of Paul's expressive delight, and also a fascinatingly different explanation of the Gospel that connects well with other scriptures. Paul did not write in isolation. He was part of the vibrant life of the early church community that was growing day by day.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *In what ways do you get excited about the Gospel? How often do you tell anyone else about how you were saved, or seek to explain this to someone, whether interested or not? Try to let yourself be free in the Spirit to be enthusiastic about your faith!*
- *Pray for all who find faith hard, or find it difficult to express their faith. Pray that God will bless them with the gift of joy and expressive language!*

Final Prayer

Let me hear Your voice tonight, faithful God and Lord of all. Speak to me so that I may know Your will, whether it be hard or easy, comforting or challenging, exciting or mundane; and let me value each and every word, the instruction You give for Your servant's life. Thank You Lord; AMEN