

Ash and I just had our first married Christmas. One of the things we did was get a *real* tree. I must confess, it brought out the worst in me. I couldn't get it straight, I was getting covered with sap, the tree was losing needles, limbs needed cut off, I didn't have a saw, so, to my shame—I must admit again—I needed *something* to chop the lower branches off. I didn't have a saw. What has a serrated edge? Aha! I used the wife's bread knife, and we *finally* did it. But again, I was not very kind to my wife during the process. My sin came out! I was mean.

Why share all that? Later, after apologizing for how I acted to Ash, I reflected on how moments like that show me that I still have places in my life where I need God's help to grow.

That kind of thinking is part and parcel of this time of year. At the end of one year, as we head into another, quite often our minds turn to think about places we need to grow. So many resolutions and goals are made this time of year: get out of debt, get in shape, eat better, save for retirement, reduce stress, find a spouse, become a better spouse, make more room for faith...I could go on and on, right?

Our text is Titus 3. At the time he's writing Titus, the Apostle Paul, after many years of fruitful ministry, has entered his final years. He has preached the gospel, withstood persecutions, and written letters. He has planted churches, he has made disciples, and he has raised up leaders in his wake. In Ephesus, he left young Timothy in charge. On Crete, he left young Titus, and he writes to him, "To Titus, my true son in our common faith: Grace and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Savior" (Titus 1:4). And then Paul adds this: "The reason I left you in Crete was that you might put in order what was left unfinished..." (Titus 1:5).

So, he writes to Titus

- In chapter 1: "Titus, **appoint** elders in every town..." (1:5)
- In chapter 2: "Titus, **teach** what is appropriate to sound doctrine..." (2:1)
- In chapter 3: "Titus, **remind** the people to be subject to rulers and authorities..." (3:1)

Now, when the Apostle Paul put pen to paper to Titus, he wasn't waiting for the ball to drop on a new year, and he wasn't so much concerned with his personal life as he was the life of the church, but the theme of "ordering" still stands. Paul knows there are things Titus needs to "put in order." It's interesting though. Amid all these instructions, Paul, above all else, tells Titus that there is something he wants him to **stress**! What is it Paul wanted stressed above all else? Let's just call it "remembering **Our Great Salvation in Christ Jesus.**" Why that? Because Paul knows that any building that Titus might do or that we might do needs a proper foundation.

As any athlete knows, if you swing a bat, tackle a running back, or throw a pass without first getting yourself in "ready" position, you're liable to fall on your face! What we're talking about today from Titus 3 is the spiritual equivalent of getting in "ready" position so that we can *do* well.

What is it we need to stress related to **Our Great Salvation in Christ Jesus?** Three things:

1. Our NEED

Here's how Paul begins: "At one time we...were once foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another" (Titus 3:3).

In other words, Paul is saying we need to remember that:

- "Foolish, disobedient, deceived" = we're intellectually lost
- "Enslaved by...passions and pleasures" = we're morally enslaved
- "Malice and envy, being hated and hating one another" = we're relationally broken

I'll illustrate the problem with a metaphor. Imagine a teen (this teen will illustrate all three layers) who asks his dad, "Can I go outside and play?" and his dad says, "Yes, but just don't go play in the dirt." Upon leaving the house, what's he do? He goes and plays in the dirt. Why though? First, because he thinks, "Did dad really say not to play in the dirt? Surely, I won't get dirty." You can imagine he plays and at first it seems all right. He puts some in his hand; it falls right off. He thinks, "Maybe dad doesn't get it; maybe dirt's not actually dirty." He plays and plays in the dirt and slowly but surely layers build. Imperceptibly, dirt gets into every crevice, every nook. It's trapped under his fingernails until he's caked with dirt. He's so dirty that, as his sister walk by and he touches her, he gets her dirty too. When she chastises him for it, he gets mad and throws it on her!

That's *our* situation that Paul is describing!

Paul is saying that, yes, it would be bad if we were like kids who play in the dirt when dad says not to (**intellectually lost**). But it's worse than that. We not only play in the dirt, but spiritually speaking, we've also got dirt under our fingernails that we can't get rid of (**morally enslaved**). Pretty bad, no? But it's even worse than that. We not only play in the dirt when dad says not to, we not only have dirt under our fingernails, but we also drag little brother or sister into the dirt and fling mud on them (**relationally broken**)! That's our issue!

This is exactly the portrait Paul paints: rebelling against our heavenly Father, enslaved to dirty desires we can't scrub away, and hurling mud at the people around us. That's our situation apart from Christ. So, that's **#1: Our NEED**, which leads us to...

2. Its SOURCE

Recently, someone shared with me about the Berlin Airlift. Back in 1948 after World War II ended, multiple nations were vying for control of Germany. Caught in the middle of this chaos was the city of Berlin and its residents. Because the Soviet Union wanted control, they cut off all supplies brought in by the U.S. and the U.K. Food, fuel, and other supplies were blocked. If help didn't come from the outside, they would starve. So the Allies launched the Berlin Airlift—planes flying in day and night, bringing what the people could not provide for themselves. Here's the kicker: Berlin wasn't saved because the people tried harder or broke through the blockade; they were saved because help came from above.

Listen to what Paul writes:

But when the kindness and love of God our Savior 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 Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life. (Titus 3:4-7)

There are two things to notice about the source:

First, it's *trinitarian*. Did you catch the source? It's

- From **God our Savior**, specifically his **kindness** and **love** and **mercy** and **grace**.
- Through **Jesus Christ our Savior**, in whom God forgives our sin. It's Jesus who absorbs the wrath of God. It's Jesus who dies so we don't have to!
- By the **Holy Spirit**, specifically His **rebirthing** and **renewing**.

Father, Son, Spirit. One God, three persons working harmoniously to bring about our salvation!

Second, it's *external* to us. Paul says that the kindness and love of God our Savior *appeared*, which tells us that salvation is outside of ourselves. As Paul writes in verse 5, this salvation is "not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy."

Here's the implication: If salvation is in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and is *external* to us, what does that tell us? It means that salvation is not found *anywhere else*!

Which means what? It means that salvation isn't found in Islam or Sikhism or Buddhism or Hinduism. It means that salvation isn't found by looking inward and getting in touch with your "true self." Salvation isn't found in good deeds or in "being a good person." It's not found in self-reliance or by picking yourself up by your bootstraps or by being spiritual but not into organized religion. It's not in this health program or that influencer. It's not found in A.I. or in transhumanism. It won't be found in ascetic or mystical practices or stoic philosophy or eastern meditative techniques. It's not in positive thinking, mind over matter, or manifesting your own destiny. It's not in sticking it to the man and toppling down the system. It's not in crystals or meditation or astrology, in witchcraft or Wicca, in ayahuasca trips or any other psychedelic. You won't find salvation in crypto or the stock market, in gaming or virtual reality. You won't find it in trad aesthetics or subverting traditionally Christian sexual norms. It's not in therapy, in politics, in education, or even in avoiding aspartame, Red Dye 42, or seed oils! Need I keep going?

Here's where salvation is found: in the Triune God of the Bible—the Father sending the Son, the Son assuming human nature accomplishing salvation on the cross, and the Spirit working to *apply* that saving work to weary sinners.

In an economic landscape like ours where for every product there's a multitude of suppliers, there's only One who deals in grace that truly saves: the God who is Father, Son, and Spirit. He owns the market! As Paul ends, it is God alone who gives us the hope of eternal life.

So, we have #1 **Our NEED** (we're sinners) and #2 **Its SOURCE** (the Triune God); now here's the third thing we want to say.

3. Its MEANS

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 Savior, 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. (Titus 3:5b-8)

Notice three things about the means. First, salvation is *by grace*. Paul says we are justified by God's grace. To be justified is to be declared righteous. It's the gavel going down and the judge declaring, "Set free!" Grace, then, is unmerited favor. It's us getting what we don't deserve and what we couldn't earn.

I remember that when I was little, I'd be asleep after a long drive and my dad would pick me up out of the car, carry me in his arms, and put me in bed. The next day, I'd wake up and behold! I wouldn't be in the car, in the darkness. I'd be at home, in bed, and it'd be day! How'd I get there? Not through my doing, but through the work of my father!

Paul is saying that salvation is rooted in us being declared righteous even though we don't deserve it! Salvation is by grace.

But salvation is also *through faith*. Notice Paul references those who receive this gift of grace and justification as those who have trusted in God.

Go back to when I was little and my dad carried me inside. While I didn't do anything to be brought inside, I trusted him to do the heavy lifting. I recognized his voice, felt his embrace, and let him carry me in.

Faith is open hands, awaiting God's provision. God wants to give us the declaration of righteousness, of forgiveness! We only need to receive it.

So, it's by grace, through faith, and, lastly, salvation is, normatively, *in baptism*. In other words, baptism is the *time and place* where God applies the saving work of Christ to us. As Paul says, "He saved us through the *washing* of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit." That phrase "washing of rebirth" is coupled with another phrase, "renewal by the Holy Spirit."

It's like the moment when my dad picked me up, brought me inside, took off my street clothes, put on my home clothes, and then put me in bed. The same kind of thing happens at baptism! Baptism is the time and place where God births new spiritual life in us and where God renews us!

Now, let me pause here for a second. Here's what I love about this: Christian baptism is great because we can point to it. It's objective. It's not based on my subjective feelings. When it comes to "being saved," how often do we feel in or feel out or feel like we're on God's side or feel like we haven't been doing so hot so we wonder if God still loves us or if we're going to heaven? If you've

been baptized and then you have a time to which, when the evil one assails you, or sin tempts you, or doubts dissuade you, you can point back and say, “No! God saved me!”

So, that’s salvation’s need, it’s source, and means (by grace, through faith, in baptism).

Let’s end where we began: with our *doing* and our *putting things in order*. Paul says to Titus, “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. These things are excellent and profitable for everyone” (Titus 3:8, emphasis added).

When I was a kid, I’d have chores to do around the house. Instead of immediate obedience, I was lazy and wanted to play video games. I’d either not do the chores or ask, “Why?” To answer the “why” question, my mom would sometimes say (and I know you know it), “Because I brought you into this world!” Or, in other words, “Because I gave you life!”

In a similar way, although with much less exasperation, God’s gospel leads to our doing what is good. Why? Because he has given us spiritual life!

Here’s the implication: with all our doing and ordering, we must remember the gospel for three reasons.

(1) To **humble** us—We need to remember that, because of sin, all our doing can become towers of Babel, effigies to our own greatness, creating pride. But the gospel reminds us we’re sinners, not better than anyone else, and in need of God’s help day by day!

(2) To **propel** us—We’re not saved *by* good works but *for* good works, and when setbacks come, we don’t take it personally. We can keep our head up. Why? Because God loves us!

(3) To **orient** us—Your doing can be self-serving or God-glorifying; only one will make a difference

My encouragement as you think about where you’ve been and where you’re going this new year, as you think on “ordering your life,” is to think on these words from Paul. Get yourself in “ready” position. Remember the *need*, the *source*, and the *means*.

Then devote yourself to doing what is good: to learning Christian doctrine, to helping your kids memorize Scripture, to living with contentment, to funneling your ambition to bring good to society, to making your workplace the best place for people to work, to volunteering in the neighborhood, to putting God first with your money, to Scripture, to serving the poor, to holiness!

Why? Because, as Paul says, “These things are excellent and profitable.”