

What We Once Were
Titus 3:3
ABC 2/28/21

Some of the hardest words to say are, *I need help. I can't do this on my own.* To admit we need help is hard enough, but to actually ask for help is even harder. *Can you please help me?* We like to help ourselves, & we may like to help others, but we hate asking for help for ourselves. Sometimes we'll go to great lengths to avoid admitting & asking for help. *I can do it myself,* we insist. *I don't need help,* we protest. *I'm OK, I've got this.* This attitude easily carries over into the spiritual world where we think, *I'm good enough for God to accept me. I don't need any help.* But Scripture tells us just the opposite. How does God describe every one of us? We are...

filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, & evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, & malice ... gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, without understanding, untrustworthy, unfeeling, & unmerciful (Rom 1:29-31).

God goes on to say that we...

are all under sin; as it is written: There is no righteous person, not even one; there is no one who understands, there is no one who seeks out God; they have all turned aside, together they have become corrupt; there is no one who does good, there is not even one. Their throat is an open grave, with their tongues they keep deceiving, the venom of asps is under their lips; their mouth is full of cursing & bitterness; their feet are swift to shed blood, destruction & misery are in their paths, & they have not known the way of peace. There is no fear of god before their eyes (Rom 3:10-18).

Still think you can do it on your own? That you don't need help? Turn to Titus 3. The apostle Paul describes himself, Titus, the Christians on Crete, & us in **vs 3**.

The **we** is emphatic. It literally reads, *We were for once also we foolish...* the **we** being repeated for emphasis. This gives us the true picture of each of our desperate, deplorable condition that shows our great need for help to save us from our sin. God, in His mercy & grace, steps in &, without our even realizing our need for help, reaches down & saves us. Look at vss **4-5a**.

We were going to cover vss 3-7 this morning, but there's too much here. We'll look at vs 3 & get an intro to vss 4-7. Let's read **vss 1-8** to get started.

Paul begins this chapter telling Titus to remind the believers in Crete of their duty to the unbelieving world around them. He gives them 7 things in vss 1-2 they need to be aware of & following. Then vs 3 begins with the word, **for**, which shows the connection between the 1st 2 vss. It's easy to become angry & impatient with unbelievers who act like selfish jerks. But if we want to

act as godly people toward them, we need to remember that before God saved us, we lived the same way as these people do (3). Paul frequently encouraged believers to remember their lives before believing in Christ to help them fully appreciate the greatness of God's transforming grace. In addition, remembering the darkness, confusion, & ugliness of being lost can help us relate compassionately to unbelievers that we have contact with. So Paul reminds the believers of Crete that all Christians, including himself & Titus, were once in bondage to sin & displayed the kinds of attitudes & conduct that sin produces. Unbelievers live for themselves because that's all they know how to do. Before we met Christ, we lived the same way. Paul says don't forget what you once were. Don't be upset when sinners act like sinners & don't think their behavior changes our duty as a saved sinner before them. Don't be surprised when pagans live like pagans, instead live in a way that surprises them because you no longer live the way they do. Why? Because God's amazing grace saves wretches like us. We can put up with other sinners because God put up with us. We can show mercy, kindness, love, & grace, because we've received all that & more from God despite our sins. We must not **slander** others, as vs 2 says, because they're made in the image of the God we love, whose Son became a curse for us on the cross. We can be peacable with others because the Prince of Peace made peace with us & God & gives us His very own peace. We can be gentle, humble, & considerate with others because our Lord exemplifies those traits & enables them in us. If Titus found himself frustrated with the Cretans, & if you find yourself frustrated with people around you, he needed to remember, & we need to remember, that we too were once like them. &, but for the grace of God, we'd still be there with the worst of them. It's not clear whether Paul's addressing the question of why we ought to live this life or why we can live this way. Perhaps he's answering both. But Titus is to remind the Cretans to live graciously & considerately toward others in view of their own sinful past. Paul characterizes the seamy side of his, & ours, pre-gospel lives with 7 words or phrases. The point isn't to portray unbelievers in unflattering terms but to remind all believers of what they were before God's saving act on their behalf. Keeping in mind how we used to be helps us treat ungodly people with grace & compassion. Paul now lists 7 characteristics

of unbelievers, of all people before salvation, including us. He tells us what all people are like before God saves them & it's not a pretty picture.

1. We too were once foolish Do you like being called a *fool*? Probably not. But before Christ saved us we had poor judgment & behaved senselessly. Paul's own murderous opposition to Jesus' followers exemplifies this (Acts 9:1). We were all, no exceptions, ignorant, unintelligent, without spiritual wisdom, or understanding. Our minds did not & could not grasp the self-evident truths about God. We didn't know Him & our foolish heart was darkened (Rom 1:21). We vainly thought we were wise, but we were fools. Sin can make really smart people do really **foolish** things. As Paul says to the Corinthians, **a natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; & he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned** (1 Cor 2:14). That describes every one of us before God saved us.

2. Disobedient We were all generally unruly, **disobedient & worthless for any good deed** (Titus 1:16). We rejected God's commands & rebelled against authority (Rom 1:30; 2 Tim 3:2). Our natural bent was to disobey & seek our own way. We didn't obey God & we only obeyed the laws of those in authority over us when it was convenient, to our benefit, or when we feared the consequences of getting caught. We lived for ourselves & whatever furthered our interests. We hated the thought of submission or obedience to any authority, including God. We were self-centered, Satan-deceived insurgents, & we didn't even know it. We were each a rebel without a clue.

3. Deceived We didn't understand spiritual truth & were led astray by Satan. It could have been us Jesus was talking to when He said,

Why do you not understand what I am saying? It is because you cannot listen to My word. You are of your father the devil, & you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, & does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. Whenever he tells a lie, he speaks from his own nature, because he is a liar & the father of lies (Jn 8:43-44).

As Paul said, **the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they will not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God** (2 Cor 4:4). & John tells us the devil, Satan, **deceives the whole world** (Rev 12:9). We were **deceived** into thinking we could find happiness & fulfillment through living as we want. We thought we could violate God's law without any consequences. But, we were **deceived** & were willing to be **deceived**.

4. Enslaved to various lusts & pleasures Although the unsaved person willfully chooses to sin, he does so because his very being is sinful. He doesn't have the desire or the ability to be anything but sinful. We're **enslaved**, we're in bondage to sin. We aren't as free as we think. We're willingly & unavoidably **enslaved** to sin (Jn 8:34; Rom 3:10-18; 6:6, 16-22; Gal 4:8-9; 2 Pt 2:19). Whether the **lusts & pleasures** involve misuse of good things God gives or are inherently evil things, the natural man desires & enjoys them for purely selfish & sinful reasons. Sin enslaves & we were all once slaves to sin (Rom 6:17). At 1st, it seemed as if sin would meet our needs & fulfill us. At 1st it seemed pleasurable. But eventually sins enslave us & ultimately will destroy us. The Greek word for **pleasures** is the root of our word *hedonism*, the pleasure-seeking that marks our day & age. Our very desires are **enslaved**, according to this vs. Our hearts are deceitful, desperately wicked, & incurably sick. As God says in Gen 6:5, every inclination of fallen man's heart is only evil continually. We're all dead in our sins, lifeless, motionless, hopeless, helpless, & godless (Eph 2:1). Sinners may be dead to the things of God, not moving toward Him at all, but they're certainly not dead to the things of this world. No, they're **enslaved** to them. We were all once foolish, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to sin, & ...

5. Spending our life in malice **Spending our life** means living. **Malice** means wickedness characterized by ill-will towards others. We all lived with *an evil attitude ... which manifests itself in ill-will & desire to injure* others.¹ This describes us as having a vicious character who desires to bring good to no one. It stems from selfishness & wanting our own way, even if it means hurting someone else to get it. If we have to lie about a rival to get him fired, that's just life. If we have to cheat someone out of something to get what we want, it's just too bad because that's the way the world works. If we have to spread nasty rumors to make our enemy look bad, it's a dog-eat-dog world. That's malice! As Christians, we're to do away with **malice**. Paul tells the Ephesians, **Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. All bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, & slander must be removed from you, along with all malice** (4:30-31).

¹ Edmund Hiebert, *Titus & Philemon*, p 88

6. Spending our life in ... envy This means constantly wanting what someone else has or desiring to be in the position they're in. It's a continual dissatisfaction with one's own position, possessions, or power as compared to that of others. It's a grudging spirit that can't bear to contemplate someone else's prosperity or success. It's a deed of the flesh & not a fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:21). As Jesus said, **from within, out of the hearts of people, come the evil thoughts, acts of sexual immorality, thefts, murders, acts of adultery, deeds of greed, wickedness, deceit, indecent behavior, envy, slander, pride, & foolishness. All these evil things come from within & defile the person** (Mk 7:21-23). **Envy** & greed are closely connected. By definition, the envious person can't be satisfied with what he has & will always crave more. It's an unquenchable desire to possess what we don't have. These evil desires & pleasures are insatiable. The envious person can't stand anyone having something he doesn't have or having more of something than he has. It was **envy** (& **malice**) which caused the murder of Abel, threw Joseph into a pit & then into slavery, & caused Korah, Dathan, & Abiram to rebel against Moses & Aaron. **Envy** led Ahab & Jezebel to kill Naboth in order to take his vineyard, even though they already had plenty. It made Saul pursue & try to kill David. Envy led the Pharisees to kill Jesus, because He was gaining more followers than they had (Mk 15:10). **Malice & envy** weren't occasional lapses but the standard attitude & action of all of us as sinners. Paul could easily draw on his own experience as a persecutor of Stephen & other Christians (Acts 8:1; Gal 1:13-14). This last one is the result of **malice & envy**.

7. Hateful, hating one another Hate is the natural fruit of **malice & envy**. We were totally absorbed with the destruction of others to preserve ourselves. Few like to admit they're **hateful**, because we like to flatter ourselves as being loving people. But hatred is essentially self-centeredness & disregard for others' feelings & needs. **Hateful** people despise anyone or anything that stands in their way or displeases them. They find themselves **hating one another** & eventually hating everyone. Hatred isn't an appealing sin, even to the **hateful**. But it's what we all once were. If someone hurts me & I respond by thinking or saying, *I wish he'd drop dead*, that's hatred. If I say, *I don't ever want to talk to that person again*, that's hatred. Even if it doesn't take the outward form of trying to hurt or kill someone, we were all **hateful, hating one another** before we came to

Christ, because we all lived for ourselves & were indifferent towards others, unless they could meet our needs. People unreconciled to God will gravitate toward tension, hostility, & hatred, as history has shown. All of us were **hateful. Hating one another** was our natural attitude. We were continually detesting each other. Instead of living a life of love we lived a life of hatred that gave evidence we were deceived by & followers of Satan.

This isn't a pretty picture but is spot on displaying the natural human condition of all of us. The 7 deadly traits we've looked at that Paul gives us here are a slap in the face to all of us. It was a wake-up call to the Cretan Christians to jettison any complacency over assumed moral superiority in their cultural. We all *must never forget that we once harbored the same thoughts about Jesus as His enemies did.*² The warning would also apply to Titus, were he to feel himself better or less spiritually needy than those to whom he was called to reach out to. Titus & those he led should all regard those they minister to with openness fueled by repentance at what they once were & how much they owe the One who has forgiven them (Lk 7:36–47). However bad the Cretans might be (Titus 1:12), Paul knows that he, Titus, & all believers are by nature & past deeds no better. Our only advantage is due to a Person & work clearly not our own.³

But maybe you're thinking, *I was never like this terrible description in vs 3! I was basically a good person, even before I became a Christian.* It's true that not everyone displays all of these characteristics to the worst possible degree. Maybe you had a good upbringing, where your parents taught you to be considerate of others & to be a moral & upright person. But, if you know your own heart as God sees it, every one of these sins was lurking just below the surface. The truth is, on the heart level we have all violated every one of the 10 Commandments (Mt 5:21-30). We're all desperately wicked in & of ourselves. We aren't sinners because we sin. We sin because we're fundamentally, in our very nature, being & core, sinners. Jer 17:9 sums it up this way: **the heart is more deceitful than all else & is desperately sick, who can understand it?** This is who we all were without Christ

² Schlatter, *Die Kirche der Griechen*, p 261

³ Robert W. Yarbrough, [The Letters to Timothy & Titus](#), ed. D. A. Carson, pp 542–543

Again, why does Paul tell Titus, & us, this? Because He knows that in order for us to act with love & good deeds towards unbelievers who mistreat, slander, & falsely accuse us, we need to remember that we used to be just like they are. Remembering what we were should humble & guard us from hating those who are sinful as we were & in need of salvation as much as we did. Rather than hate, we should love as Jesus loved. We should be patient & longsuffering as God is, not desiring that any should perish (2 Pt 3:9). We shouldn't look down on sinners, but should look on them as Jesus looked on Jerusalem, with compassion & tears for their lostness, & a desire that they repent & be saved as well (Mt 23:37-39; Lk 19:41-44). As we recognize that we were rescued from a pit deeper than we could crawl from, that we were saved from a darkness greater than our light could penetrate, that we were delivered from sin greater than our will-power could control, only then are we prepared to reach out to others. Such humility enables us to proclaim the gospel to those who believe they'll never measure up to the goodness they think we've attained by our resolution & strength of character.⁴ Our resolution & strength of character are absolutely nothing in our salvation. All of us, without exception, were once characterized, motivated, & driven by the same sins that are repulsive to us now. That awareness should humble us & be a guard against hating those around us who are sinful & need salvation through Jesus Christ, just as we did. We must look at the unsaved as our Lord looked at them during His incarnation & still looks at them now, with grief & tears over their lostness & a compassionate desire to see them repent, put their faith in Jesus Christ, & be saved.⁵ Look again at vss **3-5a**.

This is how we all once were, **But ... God ... saved us**. Don't you love that? **But** turns the emphasis from remembering our former condition of slaves to sin to the equally important need to remember our present condition of salvation. Here Paul will list 7 categories or aspects of salvation that are revealed in the single sentence of vss 4–7. In this sentence, Paul sweeps across the glorious truths of salvation, every facet of which is initiated & empowered by God alone. There are doctrines here that could be studied & pondered for months without mining all their truth. Since we once were

⁴ R. Kent Hughes & Bryan Chapell, [1 & 2 Timothy & Titus: To Guard the Deposit](#), p 360

⁵ John MacArthur, [Titus](#), pp 149–150

what our neighbors still are, but were delivered through the kindness of God, so we ought to show kindness to those whom we once were like. The point is that we're now able to live differently than before & therefore ought to do so. Praise God, though we as believers, aren't what we should be, nor what we one day will be (1 Jn 3:2), at least we're not what we once were! God has saved us, those who were once enslaved by sin. He's transformed us by the power of the Holy Spirit so that we're now delivered from slavery to sin & empowered to live a new life.⁶ The clear message of vss 4-7 is that salvation wasn't due to anything good in us, but instead is totally due to God's abundant grace & mercy. We were just as Paul describes in vs 3, disobedient, deceived, & enslaved to sin. There was nothing in us deserving of salvation. To the contrary, we deserved God's wrath & judgment because we lived out vs 3. But, because of His great kindness, love, & mercy, He saved us! God is, by His very nature, a Savior.

In vs 3, man is active in sin without God. In vss 4-7, God is active in salvation, without man. Paul doesn't mention faith in vss 4-7 at all. Why? Because his emphasis is on what God graciously did for us. Our salvation wasn't due to anything good in us. Salvation isn't a joint effort, where God does His part & we add our part. It's all from God & not at all from us. God didn't love us because we were worth loving, but because He is love. He didn't save us because He foresaw that we'd believe in Him. That would make us, not God, the cause of our salvation. Apart from His sovereign intervention, none of us would ever have believed. We were completely dead in our sins. He had to take the initiative. Salvation is totally of the Lord. These vss give us the basis or cause of our salvation, 1st, negatively, not by our works; then, positively, by God's kindness, love, mercy, & grace. Paul then gives us the means of our salvation, regeneration, renewal, & justification). Finally, he states the result of our salvation, being **made heirs according to the hope of eternal life**. Note the work of all 3 Persons of the Trinity. The Father took the loving initiative in our salvation. The Son provided His gracious merit to secure our salvation. The Spirit effected & abundantly applied God's salvation to us. Everything in this passage is initiated by God. No text is clearer that salvation is all of God & by God? Look at it again & ponder it in the week ahead. **4-7**

⁶ *International Critical Commentary*, p 305

As you read that, someone might ask, *With all Paul's emphasis on God's part, where is man's part in salvation?* Our part is in vs 3, we're all sinners. That's what we bring to the table, that's our contribution. As has rightly been said, *I did my part, God did His part. I did the sinning, He did the saving.* It's all God's initiative, God's work. That's Paul's point, just like it is in many other passages. Rom 8:30 says it this way, **these whom He predestined, He also called; & these whom He called, He also justified; & these whom He justified, He also glorified.** God is the subject performing all the saving actions, we are the object. We are recipients, He is the Rescuer. Or as vs 5 sums it up in 3 words: **He saved us.** We made no contribution to God's sovereign & gracious work of salvation. We didn't deserve deliverance from sin & death. We didn't deserve to be born again, recreated in the very image of our Lord & Savior. We didn't deserve to become God's children & joint heirs with His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ. We didn't deserve the promise of everlasting life, which we will spend in heaven in the continual presence of God.⁷

God's grace in saving you isn't a matter of His taking a basically good person & giving you a little moral guidance or advice. Salvation is a radical intervention that required the infinite, holy God to send His own Son to be the substitute for sinners. You'll never understand or appreciate God's amazing grace until you see that you were a wretched, lost sinner before He intervened in your life. We all need help even though we don't even realize it. & we get help even though we don't call for it. Martyn Lloyd-Jones brings this out in his exposition of Eph 2:14-16, which states that Jesus is our peace, who reconciled us to God through His death. He says, *In order to measure the love of God you have first to go down before you can go up. You do not start on the level & go up. We have to be brought up from a dungeon, from a horrible pit; & unless you know something of the measure of that depth you will only be measuring half the love of God.*⁸ Paul begins to tell us of God's abundant love & mercy with the word, **but** in vs 4, which takes us back to see the depths of sin from which He rescued us. Then he gives us these glorious vss about God's grace. Our salvation isn't explained by the pronoun *me*. Nor is it the pronoun *we*. *God did this & I helped Him*

⁷ John F. MacArthur Jr., *Titus*, p 153

⁸ *God's Way of Reconciliation*, p 201

out & together we pulled it off. The biblical pronoun is *He*. *He saved me, & whatever I did along the way is traced back to what He did & does in my life.* Paul's point is, if you received mercy when you deserved judgment, then show God's kindness, love, mercy, & grace to unbelievers who don't deserve it. You're thinking, *But he wronged me!* Well, you wronged God, but how did He treat you? He showed you mercy. Show mercy to the unbeliever who wrongs you. *But she slandered me!* You once slandered God, who is perfectly good, but He still showed you kindness & grace. Rather than getting even, show kindness & grace to that person who slanders you. *But she doesn't deserve it!* Neither did you!

If you know anything of God's nature & God's promises, by this point you must have asked yourself, *How is God able to do all of this for us in light of our sin?* God declared that the wages of sin is death (Rom 6:23). We've sinned. How can God keep His word & not give us what we deserve? Because of His kindness, love, mercy, & grace. Many people think of God's mercy & regeneration & renewal & grace coming to us because He simply chooses to overlook our sins. That's what nice people do, right? When someone has wronged us & is truly sorry, but has no means of repaying us, we consider it virtuous to overlook their offense. Isn't that what God is like? No, God is greater than that. Because God is perfectly just, when He says something, it always comes to pass. God never says anything wrong, haphazard, or in ignorance. God never goes back on His Word & so God cannot merely forget about our sins. He cannot simply overlook our rebellion against Him. God's character allows for Him to grieve for us as we await the just punishment for our sins, but it doesn't allow Him to dismiss our sins & just get on with it. How, then, does God's regeneration & renewal & grace come to us & not contradict His justice? The answer is clear in this passage & in Rom 3:22-26.

It is the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction, for all have sinned & fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in God's merciful restraint He let the sins previously committed go unpunished; for the demonstration, that is, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just & the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

Do you see what Scripture says? God doesn't save us by sweeping our sins under the rug. The wages of our sin is death & death there was. God demanded a blood payment for our rebellion & blood He got. That's why this is so significant. Jesus died on the cross in our place, as a substitute for us; His death & blood instead of ours. He received from God what we deserve. In this God was able to justify us & remain just Himself. What's more, the way in which we gain access to God's saving work in Jesus isn't by doing enough good works to work our way into being worthy of being saved, but by believing that we can't & placing our faith in the fact that Jesus could & did. If this is who we really are by nature, people who are sinful & therefore under the wrath of God, then is it not the best news in the world that God, in His great mercy, has made a way of salvation for us? If today you'll believe in Jesus Christ, & turn from your sin, & renounce all forms of self-salvation, the very righteousness of God will be yours as a gift, & replace your unrighteousness for which Christ suffered & died on the cross. I urge you, on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. Trust him for His great salvation. He is the help we need.