

## **God's View of Eternity**

### **Titus 1:1-4**

Who are you? How would you describe yourself? We often think of ourselves in terms of what we do or who we relate to. If you attend some function and you're being introduced to others, how's it go?

- This is George. He works in the Sales Department.
- This is Rose. She's the wife of Henry who's in charge of the factory.
- This is Juanita. She's the daughter of the Board Chairman.

Or maybe you're invited to a fairly private dinner party – but it's one of those dinner parties where the guests don't really know each other. And so, the host will introduce the guests to one another in terms of their relationship to himself.

- This is Graeme and Heather. Graeme's my boss at work.
- This is Robert and Annie. Robert and I were at school together at Kings.
- This is Phillip and Helen. Phillip's the pastor at the church I attend occasionally.

And so it goes on.

And so that's how we come to see ourselves and to think about ourselves – in terms of what we do and who we relate to. Some people think that's good. They've got high paying jobs and mix in snobbish circles. Some people think it's bad. They haven't got the high paying jobs and they don't mix in snobbish circles.

Paul describes himself here with two phrases:

- a slave of God; and
- an apostle of Jesus Christ.

It's a bit like our introductions – isn't it? He describes himself in terms of what he does – slave and apostle. He describes himself in terms of who he relates to – God and Jesus.

### **The Greetings**

We'll think about that in a bit more detail in a minute – but first, let me get rid of one other matter. This morning we're looking at the first four verses of Titus. This is the bit of the letter that people usually call the greetings. It was the standard way of writing letters in those days. It consists of three parts:

- identifying the person writing the letter;
- identifying the person or the people to whom the letter's written; and
- some good wishes from the person writing to the people being written to.

So with this particular letter:

- Paul's the person writing it – you can see he identifies himself straight off at the beginning of verse 1.
- Titus is the person being written to – you can see that at the beginning of verse 4.
- And the good wishes have to do with grace and peace from God. That's halfway through verse 4.

Now, I don't usually spend an entire sermon on the greetings. That's a bit like getting a letter and focusing all your attention on the "Dear George" at the beginning and the signature at the end. Yes, they are important parts of the letter.

- For example, if your name's not George, you've

probably got no business reading the letter.

- And if you don't know the person who's signature appears at the end, you may not bother paying much attention. You may even throw it in the bin without reading it at all.

So, those bits are important. But usually we don't pay a great deal of attention to them – we're more interested in the content of the letter itself.

So why am I paying so much attention to the greetings this morning? Because of the extra bits Paul puts in. There's quite a bit in there between the opening word "Paul" and the mention of "Titus" at the beginning of verse 4. That's what we'll focus on this morning. It's that which tells us a good deal of Paul's purpose in writing this letter and even more than that – as we shall see.

### **Paul: a Man with Titles**

And that bit starts off with Paul identifying himself as:

- a slave of God; and
- an apostle of Jesus Christ.

How do you think people would react to that at your average dinner party these days? Would that be an advantageous way to introduce yourself? Where would it put you on the pecking order? Would it mean the other guests would gravitate towards you – make you the centre of attention? Or would you be isolated and left as something of a wall-flower?

Slave doesn't sound too good, does it?

What do you do for a crust?

*I'm a slave.*

O, sorry. I thought you were one of the guests. Can you get me a refill?

Not much point continuing the conversation, is there? Not much point trying to insinuate yourself into this person's inner circle. They can't do anything to help you advance up the social scale or the employment scale or any other scale you're interested in. Why waste any more time speaking with him. Slaves should just get on with their tasks invisibly.

Slaves were owned by masters. Obedience to the master was required. The master was the boss. The master was in control. The master determined what was to be done. The slave simply did it. In terms of job prospects, there wasn't much future in being a slave – not much potential for self-advancement. It wasn't the sort of position you aspired to in the Roman Empire. The general populace looked down on slaves. They were on the lower rungs of society. You didn't want to be introduced as a slave in polite circles.

And it may be that's Paul's emphasis here – it's a title to emphasise the lowliness of Paul's position as being in humble submission to God. You find that sort of thing in both the Old and New Testaments. Jesus was very big on pushing the idea of serving others and of leading in that area by example.

However, there's also another strand in the Old Testament. It's not that those ideas are left behind. Humility before God and submission to God are still important. Yet, the title *servant of God* could be used as a title of honour. It was applied primarily to Moses, but also to Abraham and Jacob and Joshua and David – people given special tasks by God within the history of His people. It was a title picked up by Isaiah in those passages that refer

to the Suffering Servant – passages that the New Testament picks up and applies to Jesus. There's one part of Isaiah's servant passages that Paul seems to apply especially to himself. It's Isaiah 49:6

*It is too small a thing for you to be My servant  
to restore the tribes of Jacob  
and bring back those of Israel I have kept.  
I will also make you a light for the Gentiles,  
that you may bring My salvation to the ends of the  
earth.*

Paul talks of his conversion in Acts 26:15

*Then I asked, "Who are you, Lord?"  
"I am Jesus, whom You are persecuting," the Lord  
replied. "Now get up and stand on your feet. I have  
appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a  
witness of what you have seen of Me and what I will  
show you. I will rescue you from your own people and  
from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them to open  
their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and  
from the power of Satan to God, so that they may  
receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those  
who are sanctified by faith in Me."*

When you combine that with the second title – *apostle of Jesus* – it seems Paul's emphasising his position and authority at the beginning of this letter. *Apostle* is a much more palatable term in its own right – although the New Testament writers use it in a different way to the normal usage of the time. There are two main elements to the function of an apostle.

- First, they've been sent by someone else.
- Secondly, they carry with them the authority of the person who sent them – at least for the purpose for which they've been sent.

They're a bit like an ambassador. When the Australian government sends ambassadors to various countries of our world, those ambassadors don't go out on their own authority. They're sent by the Australian government. They've got the authority of the Australian government behind them. It's a position of some honour – as long as the Australian government is perceived to have honour.

Likewise, Paul's been sent by Jesus. Thus, he's got Jesus' authority behind him in the things he does for Jesus. So, in his mission, he's to be considered as acting with the authority of Jesus. He acts on behalf of Jesus. In what he writes in this letter, he's to be considered as acting with the authority of Jesus. He writes on behalf of Jesus. He's been given this job to do by Jesus – and those who encounter him in the course of him doing that job need to remember that he's acting with Jesus' authority.

### **Paul: a Man with a Mission**

So what's the job? Some people are tempted simply to parade their titles. They think having the position's the important thing. That's where the glory is. Not Paul. Being the servant of God and the apostle of Jesus isn't an end in itself. The servant is subject to God's will. The apostle is sent for a purpose. That will and that purpose have to do with others – as Paul goes on to tell us. In this case, those others are God's elect. His purpose has to do:

- with their faith; and
- with their knowledge of the truth.

So, who are God's elect? In Old Testament times, God's elect were Israel. Out of all the nations of the earth, God chose them to be His special people – not because they were more numerous than others, nor because they were

stronger or better or smarter – but simply because God chose them. Thus, God rescued them from Egypt. God established His covenant with them. God gave them the land of Canaan. God dwelt among them.

The New Testament takes over that language and applies it to Christians. It's no longer a racial thing – Jews versus the rest. It's now a Jesus thing – those who believe in Jesus and submit to God as opposed to those who don't believe in Jesus and refuse to submit to God. Paul's been given a task for these people:

- to bring them to faith – that is, to bring them to the point where they trust Jesus, and Jesus alone, to get them into right relationship with God; and
- to bring them to the knowledge of the truth – especially the truth about Jesus.

Note the *and*. It's faith *and* knowledge. Some people calling themselves Christians want to force a wedge between the two. They think knowledge is for studious types and academics and they can't be bothered with that sort of thing. They're too busy to dig into God's word to try to understand what God's saying. They just want to put all the emphasis on faith.

That's not the Bible's position – and it's certainly not Paul's position. Sure, Paul recognises there is a certain approach to knowledge that puffs up – people who just want to acquire more facts in their heads so they can show off and that's all they do with it. Paul's not interested in that sort of thing. He's interested in the sort of knowledge that's the truth on which you base your life. It's knowledge that reshapes your worldview and determines how you live. It's knowledge that comes from a

growing understanding of God's truth and who God really is and how He's put the world together and what place He's given us in the scheme of things – and having come to understand that, bases its life on that truth.

Faith doesn't exist in a vacuum. You can't simply say: I've got faith – and think that's enough. Faith in what? Faith's the same as trust. You can't simply have trust. It's got to be trust in something or someone. And such trust is based on knowledge – on whether that something or someone is trustworthy.

If I were to say to you: There's this great new company. It's called Faith Enterprises. It's going to list on the Stock Exchange later this week. You should get all your cash and invest in it. If you haven't got any cash laying round, go and borrow some. Make sure you get a piece of this action. Would you go and do it?

- Wouldn't you want to know a bit more about me and what my credentials were to give such advice and why I was convinced this is such a good idea?
- Wouldn't you want to know a bit more about the company itself and what it's going to be doing and how it will generate such great profits?

Wouldn't you want some more knowledge before you placed your faith in this company? I certainly would.

You can't separate faith and knowledge. Certainly Paul wants them to exercise faith in Jesus. That's the mission he's been given. But such faith must be based on true knowledge of who Jesus is and what He's done. That's why Paul spends so much of his mission providing such knowledge for people – and arguing against the false knowledge that's around the place.

### Paul: a Man Wanting Results

Yet, we still haven't got to the end of Paul's mission statement. Even this faith and this knowledge aren't ends in themselves – it's faith and knowledge that leads to godliness. For some people, godliness is one of those airy-fairy words that doesn't have a great deal of content – like the word holiness.

- They know godliness is something that's desirable and something they should aim for.
- They know they lack godliness in some sense and they probably ought to do something about it.

But as long as they don't think too carefully about it and don't define it too closely, they can quite happily continue to be ungodly.

Godliness is a word that captures all that's right and good and rejects all that's wrong and evil. It covers all aspects of our lives. It's about what you do and say and think. It covers all areas of your morality. It has to do with your integrity. It includes your inner attitudes and desires and motivations. It's about having all those things lining up with what God wants.

Paul's a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus to bring about faith and knowledge in people so that it leads to godliness. If you have a faith and knowledge that's not leading to godliness, then it's not the sort of faith and knowledge Paul's on about. There is this spurious faith and knowledge about.

- Some people go through a religious phase in their lives. It may be one of any number of phases they go through. But they come out the other side of it. It's just a passing fad. It doesn't lead to ongoing

godliness.

- Other people have a shallow thing that looks like Christianity on the surface. They go to church, read their Bibles and get involved in all sorts of Christian activities. But there's been no underlying change. There may be a surface appearance of a form of godliness, but the heart's still self-centred rather than God-centred.

Paul's mission has as its aim godliness. Under normal circumstances, you can't particularly see faith. You can't particularly see knowledge of the truth. But you can see godliness – not all aspects of it, but a significant part.

The question that leaves us is this: Is our faith and our knowledge of the truth leading to godliness? Are we continuing to advance in this matter? Or have we given up? Have we simply settled for a form of faith and knowledge and ignored this aspect of godliness? If that's the case, how do we rectify it? By growing in faith and knowledge of the truth.

### Paul: a Man under God

Verses 2 and 3 remind us this is all part of God's plans – from beginning to end. That's already there because Paul's a servant *of God* and an apostle *of Jesus* – but now it's made even more explicit. This isn't something Paul's made up. It's something revealed by God and given to Paul. Paul's task is related to God's promise:

- a promise made before He created – so certainly before Paul was around on the scene;
- a promise that carries on into eternity – because it has to do with eternal life; and
- a promise that's been revealed to us when God decided it was the right time to reveal it to us.

It's that promise that's the foundation of our hope of eternal life.

How sure is that promise? It's as sure as God Himself. And, Paul reminds us, God doesn't lie. We're not going to get to the end and find that the promise will fail.

- As if God will say: Sorry, it's too hard for me. You're not getting eternal life after all.
- Or as if God will say: Sorry, I've changed My mind. There is no eternal life.
- Or: What I meant by eternal life was actually annihilation for you – you won't have any ongoing existence – but I'll keep you in my memory forever.

And so our hope isn't some sort of wishful thinking – like

- I hope it won't rain tomorrow; or
- I hope the price of petrol will come down.

They're things we may wish for – but we have no guarantees about them one way or the other. Our hope of eternal life isn't like that. It's still future – that's why we call it a hope. But it's not uncertain – because it's based on God's promise – and God doesn't lie.

And so we come back to faith, knowledge and godliness.

- Faith – trust in the God who doesn't lie and what He's promised about eternal life.
- Knowledge – learning that eternal life is about living in the perfection of God's presence in God's kingdom under Jesus' rule and learning more fully what that is and what's involved in it.
- Godliness – if eternal life is all about living according to God's perfect will and if that's the goal towards which we're heading, it means we should be growing towards that goal already. We should

be heading towards it, not away from it.

And so we also come back to Paul's mission. By God's command, he's entrusted with preaching the message of God's promise. In Paul's time, God had recently made known the fullness of His promise in Jesus.

- The promise itself was much older than that. It goes back to before creation.
- The promise had been revealed to Israel in Old Testament times – but it was done in a veiled way. They knew God was up to something big, but they didn't know much in terms of the details.
- In Jesus – and especially in His death and resurrection – the promise is now very clear. We have the details. This was God's chosen time. This was the focal point:
  - when Jesus died in our place for our rebellion against God;
  - when God offers us forgiveness and eternal life because Jesus died for us.

That's the message Paul preached. That's at the heart of the knowledge of the truth he wants us to understand. That's what he asks us to trust God about – to believe that God's done it for us and to accept His free gift.

### **Paul and You**

So, what's that mean for us today? Three things. First, are you trusting this message? This is what God's doing in human history – the promise He made from before creation about what will happen for us for eternity. This is the purpose of our existence on earth – that we rely on God's promise and stake our eternal future on it. The message won't change. This is what God's always been doing. Do you trust God's word on this crucial matter?

Do you trust God?

Why wouldn't you? One reason may be that you don't have enough knowledge. I've spoken fairly briefly about this – you may want to find out a bit more about the promise or about Jesus or about what's involved in trusting God. If that's the case, come and talk to me about it later. That's one reason why you may not be ready to trust God – that you don't have enough knowledge. Are there any other reasons? It seems to me that anything else you come up with boils down to one of two things – that either you don't believe God or you don't want to believe God. Either way, when it comes to the end, you'll miss out on God's promise. You'll miss eternal life – and face eternal judgment instead.

Secondly – the second thing it means for us today – are you growing in godliness? Have you developed a godly dissatisfaction with ungodliness? Does your faith and knowledge affect your life with the result that you're growing in godliness? Are you dissatisfied with:

- a lying mouth?
- a proud spirit?
- a greedy mind?
- a selfish and self-centred heart?
- a hope that focuses more on this world than eternal life?

We can't afford to be content with a Christianity that doesn't impact the way we think and behave. We can't afford to be content with a Christianity that's indistinguishable from middle-class Australian culture.

Thirdly, our mission must follow the same lines as Paul's. We're not Paul. We're not servants of God and apostles

of Jesus in the same sense Paul was. We don't have his authoritative place in church history. Yet, our mission remains essentially the same.

- God's promise hasn't changed – nor will it change – for God does not lie. We still have the same promise today. God still makes that same promise to others today.
- The message entrusted to Paul also hasn't changed and won't change. For those of us who are Christians, that's the message we know and trust. For those who aren't Christians, that's the message they need to know and trust – for there is no hope apart from that.

So, as we preach and teach that message today, what are we looking for? Are we looking to give people:

- a social network to which they can belong?
- a comfortable ride through life?
- a strategy for climbing the social ladder?
- a trouble-free existence?
- a formula for economic success?

Some people think that's what the church should be about. Some churches look like that is what they're about. But our goal must always be to produce faith and knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness. Anything other than that is not true Christianity.