

Made New to Be New

Titus 3:3-8

I once picked up an old cabinet. It had three or four shelves, a couple of hinged doors and an unusual section on top with an opening lid. I can't remember whether I picked it up at a garage sale or a council clean-up. It was old and somewhat the worse for wear – a couple of broken hinges; scratches, stains, that sort of thing. But it looked like nice wood. It looked like it had once been a beautiful bit of craftsmanship. I thought I could work on it – sand it back, fix it up, revarnish it – make it look presentable and usable once again.

It sat in our garage for five years. I'd look at it every now and then and think of the possibilities. Then I'd get overwhelmed. My skills aren't really in that area. I had other more pressing things to do. And so it continued to sit there gathering dust and taking up room. When we came to Bathurst, it went out in the council clean-up. Maybe someone else would provide the tender loving care to restore it.

That cabinet was broken down. It needed fixing. I had a great dream of what it could be like. That's what it was like before – this is what it could be like after. I could see the dream in my mind. Unfortunately, that dream was never realised. I didn't have the capabilities or the time or the determination.

The Before Picture

Paul says we were just like that cabinet. In a manner of speaking, we were broken and scratched and stained. Verse 3:

At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another.

It's not a particularly pleasant picture. Six things – you could turn them into eight if you worked at it:

- *Foolish* – lacking spiritual understanding. Perhaps quite wise by society's standards and making my mark in this world, but not knowing what life's all about because I'm not paying attention to God.
- *Disobedient* – primarily to God; not paying attention to His will and His desires; doing what I want instead of what He wants. In the context of verse 1, that disobedience may also have spilled over into how I thought about and related to authorities.
- *Deceived* – led astray. Once I'd shut my mind to God and His take on life, I was open to all sorts of wrong ideas on the purpose of life and how life's to be lived. I was easy pickings for any wrong philosophy that came my way.
- *Enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures*. I'd do things I thought were wrong. I'd try to resist, but found I couldn't. I didn't want to get angry, but I did. I didn't want to lash out with hurtful words, but I couldn't control my tongue.
- *Living in malice and envy* – I competed against others. I wished them evil so I could climb over them. I resented those I saw as being above me and wanted what they had. I had to win.
- *Being hated and hating one another* – as I competed with them, so they competed with me. It's a dog-eat-dog world, and only one dog can come out on top.

That's Paul's picture of what we were like. That's Paul's picture of what non-Christians are like.

You may be thinking to yourself: that's a bit strong. It's not as bad as all that, is it? Surely that describes only the sorts of people we lock away in prisons. They're nasty pieces of work. But the rest of us aren't as bad as all that, are we?

Well, yes, we can always find someone who hates more than we hate. We can find someone who's more disobedient than us. We can point to times when we were tempted to do the wrong thing and we didn't. We can imagine all sorts of wrong things that we haven't in fact done. But the overall pattern remains the same.

- We were disobedient to God – and all sorts of authorities that God established.
- We did all sorts of things that we didn't really want to do and regretted once we'd done them.
- We said nasty and hurtful things to others.
- We envied the possessions and success of others.

We learnt to cover up a lot of it with an acceptable social veneer – so that others thought we were basically nice people. But the pattern was there. We were the broken cabinet. We could point at other cabinets that looked worse than us – but that didn't change the reality about us.

And the reality is: this is God's assessment of us. This isn't simply Paul's list of what people were like before they became Christians. This is God's word. This is how God describes the non-Christian state. You can disagree with God about it if you like. You can try to downplay God's assessment:

- It wasn't that I really hated other people, just

disliked them.

- It wasn't that I was totally self-centred, I just had to make sure others didn't walk all over me.

We can find all sorts of way to justify our rebellious life-style – or to describe it in ways that don't sound quite so nasty. In the long run, God's assessment will stand. God states things accurately. He has no need to lie – and doesn't lie.

The After Picture

Yet, Paul's talking about all that in the past tense. That's what we were like – before, previously. Unlike me and my cabinet, someone has come along and fixed us up. They haven't just stored us in the garage with some lofty, unattainable dream in mind; they've taken action to put the dream in place. Verse 4:

But when the kindness and love of God our Saviour appeared, He saved us, ...

God has acted to save us.

When did this happen? Paul uses past tenses – it's not a future thing; it's something that's already happened for these people. I think it's important to consider the when question from two angles.

- From one angle, God saved us when Jesus came – that's what's meant by saying the kindness and love of God *appeared*. Paul refers to the coming of Jesus – and especially to His death for our sins. It's because Jesus died for us that we can be saved. Apart from His death for us, there'd be no salvation. This is the global aspect of salvation. Jesus died for our sins at a particular point in history.
- Yet, from another angle, they're saved when they became Christians. This is the personal aspect of

salvation. It's when what Jesus did at that point in history becomes part of my personal history – when I understand what Jesus did for me and when I submit my life to that. For these Christians in Crete, that was a past event when Paul wrote. For us Christians in Bathurst, that was still a future event when Paul wrote – although it's a past event from our current point in history. If you're not yet a Christian, that's still a future event for you – a possible future event.

Second Question: On what basis did it happen – this being saved? Look at the first half of verse 5:

He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of His mercy.

Again, think of the question from two angles.

- From the global angle, how was it for God? When He looked at humanity, did He see a significant number of people who looked pretty good? A significant number of people doing the right thing? A significant number of people paying attention to Him? Did God send Jesus to save us – to die for us – because we'd done a fair bit of the work ourselves, but we just needed a little extra help with the last tiny little bit? No. God didn't send Jesus because of anything we'd done that deserved Jesus being sent. The reality was that all humanity – without exception – rebelled against God. We'd all disobeyed God. We'd all lived without paying proper attention to God. God sent Jesus because of His mercy. Nothing else.
- And it's exactly the same from the personal angle. If God says all humanity's rebelled against Him,

then that includes me. And so, how am I saved? Am I saved because I'm such a nice person? Because I'm such a good person? Because of the righteous things I've done? Is that why Jesus died for me? Of course not. I didn't deserve to be saved. I'm saved solely on the basis of God's mercy.

It's important for this to sink in. We tend to think so highly of ourselves that we think it natural that God step in and rescue us. But it's not natural.

- When a housewife sees a cockroach setting up home in her pantry, is her natural inclination to turn that cockroach into a pet?
- When a farmer sees a rat helping itself to his grain stores, is his natural inclination to go out of his way to make life as comfortable as possible for the rat?

Now, I know you can find exceptions to the reaction of the typical housewife or farmer. And maybe you think it's a bit different because God made us – and the farmer didn't make the rat. The question remains: why should God save us?

- We've rebelled against Him and treated Him as our enemy.
- We've told Him we don't want to let Him be God in our lives – we'd rather do that function ourselves.
- We're this list of horrible things in verse 3.

God doesn't save us because there's anything in us or anything we've done that somehow deserves saving. We deserve punishment and judgment. God saves us solely because of who He is – His mercy.

Third question: What's this salvation look like? What's it consist of? Pick it up again in the second half of verse 5:

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.

Four things. First, it's through the washing of rebirth. In order for us to be in right relationship with God, our past must be dealt with. Something must be done to cover our sin and rebellion. We need to be cleansed. Jesus does that for us in His death. He dies as punishment for our sins. Thus my sins are dealt with; they're removed, they're washed away; I'm cleansed. In Romans, Paul puts it in terms of:

- I've died with Christ;
- I've been buried with Christ.
- I've been raised with Christ.

That is, I've been joined with Jesus in His death, burial and resurrection. Thus, I've died to my old sinful life. I'm reborn with a clean slate.

Secondly, I'm saved through the renewal of the Holy Spirit. Cleansing in itself is not enough. I'd simply go back and do it all again – rebel against God again. If I'm to be in right relationship with God and to stay in right relationship with God, I need to be changed. I need to have the ability to pay attention to God and the desire to do His will. I don't have that ability in myself. I need God's Spirit to renew me to enable me to do that. Paul says, when God saved us, He poured out His Spirit on us generously for that very purpose.

These first two aspects of our salvation are brought together in one passage in the Old Testament – Ezekiel 36:24-27.

- God promises to sprinkle water on His people to cleanse them from their idolatry and impurity.
- God promises to remove their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh.
- God promises to put His Spirit in them so they can follow God's will.

Paul says: this is what's happened when God saved you.

Thirdly, coming back to Titus, I'm justified by His grace. *Justified* is a legal term. When a person's charged with a crime and brought before a court, there are two possible outcomes as far as the court's concerned: guilty or not guilty.

- The court can say: Joe Bloggs is guilty of this crime, and we'll record a conviction against him.
- Or the court can say: Joe Bloggs is not guilty of this crime – or we don't have sufficient evidence to convict him of this crime – and so there's no conviction recorded against his name.

It was the same in Paul's world – except, instead of using guilty and not guilty, they used the words condemned and justified. *Condemned* corresponds to guilty and *just-ified* corresponds to not guilty. In other words, when I come to stand in God's courtroom and stand charged before Him with all sorts of crimes against His law, what verdict will I hear?

- There's no doubt I deserve to hear the verdict guilty – condemned – convicted as charged.
- But, says Paul, I'm going to hear justified.

Why?

- Because I'm pure and innocent? Hardly – I'm guilty through and through.
- Because there's not enough evidence to convict me? No. For God knows the evidence even better than I

do.

- Because I've got a good lawyer who finds a loophole for me to slip through? No one can pull the wool over God's eyes.

It's because of His grace – His mercy. It's because Jesus died and took the punishment for me.

Fourthly, I'm now an heir of eternal life. I'm now treated as God's son – as someone who'll inherit – as someone who'll receive something as a possession from God. And the possession I receive is eternal life – an unending life with God. That's not simply a matter of duration – a life that goes on and on and on. It is that, but it's more than that. After all, who'd want an unending life that was still plagued with wickedness and disease and the ravages of old age? It's life with God. It's life in God's kingdom. It's life where there's no more sin or sorrow or suffering or disease.

So that's a quick summary of what the after picture looks like. You were this broken and battered cabinet – dirty and stained, no longer serviceable in terms of the purpose for which you were made. But God had a dream for your future. God saved you.

Living in the After

But that's not the end of the passage. Verse 8:

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. These things are excellent and profitable for everyone.

There it is again. Why's Paul writing about all this? Why's he reminding Titus of these things? Why's he

want Titus to remind the Christians on Crete of these things? So they may *devote themselves to doing what is good*. You'd just been lulled into a false sense of security hadn't you? You thought we'd got away from this topic. You were having nice warm fuzzies about what God's done for us and not worrying too much about what He may want us to do for Him. It's still here. Paul's still focused on godly living. Remember the beginning of this letter. Our knowledge of God and our trust in Jesus is to increasingly lead to a godly lifestyle. We're to look like cabinets that God's restored. We've been restored so we may function the way God made us to function in the first place.

It really shouldn't have come as a surprise to us because the idea's there right at the beginning of today's passage. There's a word I left out – and I left it out because the NIV leaves it out. It's the word "for". Verse 3 should read:

For at one time we too were foolish ...

Paul writes verses 3 to 7 as an explanation – as a reason – for why they're to live verses 1 and 2.

He draws a contrast.

- Verses 1 and 2 describe what godliness looks like. This is the sort of lifestyle that pleases God.
- Verse 3 describes ungodliness. This is the sort of lifestyle that doesn't please God. This is the sort of lifestyle you used to live before God saved you. You can see that some of the terms are a direct contrast with verses 1 and 2 – disobedient versus obedient; lived in malice and envy versus peaceable and considerate.
- But God did save you. He saved you from that sort

of lifestyle. So, two things.

- First, since you've been saved from that and for this, stop living like that and start living like this.
- Secondly, since you've been saved from that, you can understand what it's like for those still living like that. They're foolish, deceived, enslaved. That should help you not to slander them. That should help you to be peaceable and considerate towards them. That should keep you truly humble.

An important question is: Why should I live a godly life? What should motivate me to live the sort of life described in verses 1 and 2?

There are some wrong motivations. A common wrong motivation people have is they think it'll get them into God's good books. They think if they do enough good things and don't do too many bad things, then God'll be so impressed with them that He'll let them into heaven. You hear this assumption expressed at funerals all the time: he was such a good bloke – she was such a nice lady – of course, she's up there with the Big Fella looking down on us. This passage says: No.

He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of His mercy.

We don't get saved on the basis of what we've done. The Bible makes that clear time and time again.

So why should I live a godly life? There are a number of things that could rightly motivate us:

- That non-Christians see our example of being different and thus become interested in Jesus.
- That God made the earth and us and knows how He

put it all together and so it makes sense to follow His instructions.

The reason Paul gives here is: because this is what you were and this is what you are now. This is what you were like before God saved you; this is what you're like now God has saved you.

Let me change the illustration. We'll get rid of the cabinet – because a cabinet can't think. Imagine a person who's gone on a weight-loss programme – maybe one of the contestants from *The Biggest Loser*. They've lost 40kg. They've done it through sticking to a proper nutritional diet and steady exercise. They've kept the weight off for six months. A friend comes by with a chocolate mud-cake. It looks great. It smells delicious. They remember what they're missing out on. They start thinking about going back to their old eating habits. How would you motivate that person to resist that cake?

- You could show them a photo of what they looked like back then and ask them to compare it with what they look like now.
- You could give them the doctor's diagnosis from a year ago of what would happen if they didn't lose weight.

That's like what Paul's doing here. He pulls out the before picture. He pulls out God's diagnosis. He asks: why ever would you want to go back to that? Look at what God's done for you – why would you want to go back to living the old way?

Now, I know that's not a perfect illustration. The dieter could have a piece of mud-cake without going back fully to their old habits. They could have their cake and spend

an extra five hours on the exercise bike. So please don't twist that illustration in the wrong way. The dieter can still dabble with some of that stuff in a way that we can't continue to dabble with our previous anti-God lifestyle.

This passage is written to Christians. Paul's writing it to his fellow-pastor Titus – and he's telling him to remind the Christians on Crete of these things. He's preaching to the converted. Why? Does he want them to be saved all over again? No. He does it so they'll live godly lives. This is what you were; this is what you are now.

Between Before and After

So, it may be you've got one question left: can God do it? Remember my cabinet? I didn't have the ability or the time or the determination to bring my dream into reality. Will it be like that with God as well? Is it too hard for Him? Am I too far gone?

As I look at my life now – and as I compare it with verses 1 and 2 – it still seems to come up short. I don't always do what's good. I still slander people. I still exhibit more pride than humility. Is it too hard for God to save me? Am I beyond hope? Will He just put me back on the council clean-up heap as a dream that's in the too-hard basket?

No. God has both the ability and the time. In His wisdom, He's chosen that it's not an instantaneous process. While He has saved me, I'm still going through the process of restoration. I haven't been fully restored yet. He's still sanding me back, fixing up the hinges, putting the varnish on. He's growing me in godliness.

- He points out to me that there are still quite a lot of

wrong attitudes within me – pride, selfishness, envy, greed, malice, and so on.

- He points out that there are still positives that I'm not perfect in yet – love, patience, kindness, goodness, self-control, and so on.

His Spirit's still working on me – renewing those various aspects of my life.

But more than that. I have His promise that when Jesus returns, I'll be changed. He'll make the final changes. I'll be perfected. I'll be renewed so that I'll delight to do His will in all things and for all time. And, if you're a Christian, that's what it'll be like for you too.

In the meantime, says Paul, be careful to devote yourself to doing what is good.