

From Cretan to Christian **Titus 1:1-4**

I'm excited to start a new sermon series today on the book of Titus. This series will run 6 weeks, through the beginning of November. I encourage you to consider joining a small group during this time to seek some spiritual refreshment through fellowship and discussion and I will have discussion starter questions each week on the back of the sermon notes. The reason I chose this book is because of how important spiritual growth and transformation is in all areas of our lives when we live in a culture and society that is permeated with wickedness and godlessness.

Most of us are old enough and have enough perspective on recent history to know that our culture and society is headed down a path of increasing wickedness and godlessness. I suppose if you're younger and have grown up in it you might not notice, but for those of us who are older, it's easy to see. We have a steady stream of blatant wickedness, immorality, and spiritual darkness in media and other things and it is seen by many as good or at least normal. There are still many good things that we can be thankful for, but the darkness is definitely more prevalent.

We've been called to be the church and make disciples for Christ in the midst of this culture and we have to consider: How do we do that? How do we make an influence for Christ and continue to carry out his mission in our current cultural context? It's different now than it was 20 years ago. The reputation of Christianity and the church in society isn't the same. There is much more animosity and contempt than there used to be. Christians are seen as being close-minded, intolerant, self-righteous, hypocritical, and ignorant. There's a barrier we have to break through before people will consider what we have to say. So how do we move forward? I really think the book of Titus will help.

Context is key for understanding every book of the Bible and how it applies to our lives, so I want to start with some background information on this book. Titus was written by the apostle Paul. By this time, Paul was a veteran missionary and nearing the end of his life. He had spent most of his life traveling throughout what we know as the Middle East and southern Europe, bringing the gospel of Christ to people and places that had never heard before, planting and establishing new churches, and then revisiting those churches to bring encouragement and

correction. He went on four missionary journeys, three of which are recorded in the book of Acts and one that took place afterwards. And as he went on these journeys he always had some kind of team that went with him. And that's where Titus comes in.

Titus was likely converted by Paul on one of his first two missionary journeys and he then accompanied Paul as part of his team on the second, third, and fourth. So Paul was his long-time mentor and ministry partner. According to the Reformation Study Bible, at the beginning of his fourth missionary journey, Paul and Titus went to the island of Crete and they went from town to town preaching the gospel and planting churches. Once they completed their circuit through the island, Paul moved on, but left Titus there to finish the work of establishing the churches. The book of Titus is a letter Paul wrote to him to give him instructions on how to do that. So at the time, Titus was Paul's representative on Crete, left there to put things in order, after which he would move on.

Now I want to talk a little bit about the history and people of Crete because I think this is key to understanding why Paul wrote what he did. Crete is a pretty large island in the Mediterranean Sea, south of Greece (Picture). It's about 150 miles wide and 25 miles from top to bottom. It has a long and rich history dating back to the earliest human civilizations. I'm not going to go way back, but leading up to NT times, it had become famous for its mercenaries and pirates, which I think is important. They were a rough crowd. The Roman Empire made several attempts to subdue them and was finally successful in the 1st century B.C. After that, Crete basically became a pawn in Roman regional politics. So my impression is that at the time of the NT, it was a rough society made up of descendants of mercenaries and pirates who had a proud history of resistance to rule. According to Titus 1:12, one of their own prophets said: "*Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons.*" That was their reputation.

That was the social climate Paul and Titus were dealing with when they planted churches on the island. The people who made up those churches had that as their background and worldview and the people they needed to reach with the gospel were the same way. So at the time of the writing of Titus there were small churches filled with pretty rough new converts and those churches needed to grow and reach their communities for Christ. How would they do that? Paul's

letter gives us many insights – insights that will also be helpful for us in the world in which we live...

I want to take a few minutes this morning to start to get into this book and read the greeting that Paul gives that tells us why he did what he did and sets the tone for this book. It's a unique greeting, different than any of his other letters. We find it in the first four verses.

Titus 1:1-4

Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the sake of the faith of God's elect and their knowledge of the truth, which accords with godliness, ² in hope of eternal life, which God, who never lies, promised before the ages began ³ and at the proper time manifested in his word through the preaching with which I have been entrusted by the command of God our Savior; ⁴ To Titus, my true child in a common faith: Grace and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Savior.

One of the questions I had when I read this was: Why did Paul write this way to someone who knew him so well? He's writing to a long-time ministry partner and friend, why would he write this way? Would you write like that to one of your friends? It sounds so formal and preachy and says things I'm sure Titus already knew well. Donald Guthrie, the writer of the Tyndale Commentary on this book noticed the same thing and here's what he said: *"In contrast with the other Pauline letters which are addressed to churches, all three (Pastoral) Epistles are directed to individuals, and many of the injunctions are clearly personal. Yet much of the material appears to be designated for the communities to which Timothy and Titus were ministering. Thus they are generally thought to be quasi-public epistles, although their character as true letters must not be overlooked."* In other words, Paul was intending for this letter to be shared with the churches in Crete and not kept private by Titus. And if you think of what those Christians were like and where they were coming from, his greeting makes a lot more sense. So I think what Paul says in it is mainly for the Cretan Christians, not so much for Titus.

As he begins, I think it was important for him to be clear about his authority. For Cretan Christians who could be a bit stubborn and resistant to rule, he makes a point to say he's *"a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ."* 'Apostle of Jesus Christ' is a common phrase in Paul's greetings and Guthrie notes that it

“draws attention to the official character of his service.” He was called and commissioned by Christ himself. But ‘servant of God’ is unique to this book. As his servant, Paul was carrying out the directives given him by God. He wanted the Cretans to know he wasn’t doing his own thing; he was doing what God commanded him to do.

And what God commanded him to do – what Christ appointed him to do as an apostle had some very important purposes, which Paul brings up next. First of all Paul writes that it was for the sake of the faith of God’s elect. He was doing what he was doing as an apostle for the faith of God’s elect – saving faith, trusting in, believing in Jesus as Messiah – the Savior of mankind. Paul went and preached so that people would believe in Jesus and be saved and continue in that faith.

He identifies those people as “God’s elect.” This phrase is used two other times by Paul. One is in Colossians 3:12, which doesn’t give a description. But the other is in Romans 8:33 and a description is given in the preceding verses. Romans 8:28-30 says: *“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.²⁹ For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.³⁰ And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.”* Just a few verses later, in Romans 8:33, Paul refers to these people as “God’s elect”: *“Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect?”*

There’s a lot we could unpack here, and maybe you can do that in your small groups, but for now I just want us to see that’s who Paul has in mind in his greeting to Titus. He was a servant of God and an apostle of Christ for the sake of the faith of God’s elect – so that they would come to faith.

That’s the first purpose behind who Paul was and what he did. The second is for the sake of their knowledge of the truth. Faith and knowledge of the truth went together. There were many philosophies and religious ideas circulating in the ancient world. And then there was the truth – the actual truth about all things – the truth that came from the Creator of all things. God was revealing the truth in various ways in the Old Testament and then more fully through his Son, and now God was spreading the knowledge of the truth through the apostles who were

sent, like Paul, “for the sake of the faith of God’s elect and their knowledge of the truth.”

Knowledge of the truth was critical for the Cretan believers to come to faith. As Paul writes in Romans 10:14: “How are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard?” And then in Romans 10:17: “*So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.*” Paul was sent to Crete to preach the truth – to preach the gospel – for the sake of the faith of God’s elect and their knowledge of the truth. People don’t come to faith without knowledge of the truth and that’s why God sent Paul, according to Titus 1:1.

Paul also says that their faith and knowledge of the truth “accords with godliness,” so their godliness was another purpose why Paul was sent. Faith and truth don’t just happen in the mind, they affect the whole person and result in godliness – and this is so important in this whole book. Christianity wasn’t just about faith and knowledge of the truth, it was also about godliness – transformation – walking in obedience to Christ – putting off the sinful deeds of the flesh and putting on the righteous deeds of Christ.

The Cretan believers were coming out of, but still living in a culture filled with wickedness and rebellion. What did God want for them? How would they make a difference and have an influence on the people around them? This book is filled with instructions to help them grow in godliness: godliness in their new Christian community, godliness in marriage and parenting, godliness in their work, and godliness in the public spectrum. Cretans were known as “liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons” and as these new believers went from being Cretans to Christians, it would be a radical transformation – a transformation that would become evident to the people around them. They wouldn’t blend in with the wickedness going on around them, they would be noticeable as lights in the darkness. And they would make an influence through their godliness and the transformation people would see in their lives.

The final purpose for which Paul was sent was “the hope of eternal life.” Paul’s work wasn’t just for the immediate experience of faith and knowledge of the truth which accords with godliness. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15 that if in Christ we have hope in this life only, his preaching is in vain and our faith is in vain. The hope we have is that our faith and knowledge of the truth that accords with

godliness will result in eternal life! Paul says this was God's promise all along – before the ages even began – this was a core truth that God was revealing in Christ and in the Gospel and through Paul's preaching. This will all be worth it because someday we will be with Jesus forever! Free from sin and condemnation, saved from judgment and hell, and setting out on an everlasting existence in the paradise of God where we will be in perfect communion with Christ – with perfect joy and fulfillment.

These are the reasons Paul gave to Titus and to the Cretan believers for why he did what he did and as we go through this book, we will see the importance of one of them in particular – godliness – transformation in all areas of their lives. That would be key for their own growth, but also for their impact on the people around them.

As we think about how we can make a difference in the world in which we live and continue to carry out Christ's mission to make disciples in a society and culture that's becoming more resistant to Christianity, I believe that godliness and transformation is going to be a huge factor. People will need to see the gospel in us before they'll be able to hear it and believe it. As we experience greater transformation in our lives, I believe we will also find open doors to share about our faith and why we live differently than the rest of the world. So as we go through this little book, we will look at what transformation looks like in many areas of our lives.