

**Did God make man in a breath of holy fire?
Or did he crawl on up, out of the muck and mire?**

Titus 1:1 – 4

Fairview Evangelical Presbyterian Church

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The burden of the self alone: the predicament of the modern world

I think that most people would agree that there seems to be a strong modern sense of discontent among many, if not most, people in our nation. We are more prosperous, with health care and living standards second to none, yet psychological and emotional illness runs rampant through our society. We are blessed with great material prosperity, yet many in our world struggle with drug and chemical dependencies. We live in the freest nation the world has yet produced, a nation of great opportunity with a shining future, while at the same time many of our fellow citizens feel incapacitated by fears of crime, terrorism, personal health, job loss, and economic uncertainty. We have so much, yet our lives seem so unsure. Our prosperity is unmatched, yet our sense of insecurity is greater than our confidence. Everything about the modern world seems designed to empower us and yet at the same time we feel so powerless within our world.

Why is this so? How is it that a people so richly blessed find themselves feeling so disconnected from the world in which they live and breathe?

I would argue that in our modern therapeutic age we have placed too great a burden upon the role and centrality of the human *self* in life. We ask our *selves* to do more, to carry more, to take more responsibility, initiative and authority than was common in the past. We expect more of our *selves*.

Let me illustrate this by contrasting ancient popular literature with modern popular culture. Remember the classic Greek tale of the Iliad. The Iliad is the story of a clash of civilizations, between Troy and Ithaca. It is a great story. Among the characters of the story is Achilles, the nearly invincible Greek warrior. Achilles plays a key role in the story but, as talented and gifted as Achilles is; his is only one part of the wider chronicle. Other warriors play equally important roles: Patroclus, Agamemnon, Odysseus, Ajax, Nestor, and Menelaus; not to mention the Trojans, Hector, Priam and Paris. As memorable as the person of Achilles may be, he is not the center of the story.

Contrast this with the modern popular culture trend towards solitary heroes such Superman, Batman, Spiderman, Rambo, Indiana Jones, and nearly all of the characters played by Clint Eastwood in his younger days: The Preacher, the Man with No Name, The High Plains Drifter, Dirty Harry and Josey Wales. These are men without homes and families, living apart from the typical matrix of human relationships. If there happens to be a love interest in their story, it is always a relationship that is ambiguous, always threatened. For these men

there is never the settled reality of a wife and home. These are the heroes of the modern world. If a modern day writer were to pen the Iliad, undoubtedly Achilles would be the only character of focus.

What is the message of the heroes of our popular culture? They teach that what matters is the individual. Teamwork and relationships are not important. These stories say to us that the problems we face in our world must be tackled and conquered by the solitary individual. The solution is solitary. It is not a team effort. It is an individual effort. In our world we have so elevated the importance of the self that it is the self alone that matters. The assumption at work today is that the meaning of life is found in the exertion of the individual. You have to do it. You have to make it happen. You only go round once in life so it is up to you to make it count.

The difficulty, of course, is that this is not how God has made us or his world.

God's intent in creation is that we find our way through life through a matrix of relationships: no man is an island - Genesis 2:18

Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him."

In creation God wove various facets of life together into the matrix of human existence. There was work. Adam was the steward of the Garden of Eden. There was permission. Adam was encouraged to enjoy all the pleasures the Garden might offer. There was a prohibition: there was one tree, a tree at the center of the garden, which was designated as off limits. There was creative expression and dominion: Adam named the animals God created. And, at the center of creation, there were relationships. Adam had a relationship with God but God recognized that that spiritual relationship was not sufficient for Adam. "It is not good that the man should be alone." God says. What was needed was another human, a woman, Eve. It was from Adam's relationship with Eve that all other human relationships are birthed and find their place and meaning. Marriage is woven into creation. Its place in the creative ordering of God is at the center of human existence. From it the meaningful relationships of life are formed and nurtured.

God has not sent us into life as a solitary individual combating the forces of evil unleashed upon us. We are not built to go it alone. It is not God's intent that we live in the world on our own, asserting our own rights, pursuing our unfettered dreams or desires. It is not God's intent that we, Atlas-like, carry the weight of the world upon our shoulders. It is not the assertion of the self that carves our place in the world about us.

God has made us for relationships. It is in the relationships of life that satisfaction and fulfillment are found. Within the typical unfolding of human life,

our first relationships are with our parents and siblings and extended families. These are relationships that should endure. Upon entering adulthood, God's intent for most is that they enter into a marriage, establishing their own family, the union of man and woman; creating a home where children can be welcomed and nurtured. Other venues of relationships--neighbors, friends, and co-workers--are also important; though they will almost always be of secondary importance to family connections.

In today's world, I must also say that the relationships that matter are ones built face to face, not electronically. Screen time does not count in building relationships. It is good to take a Sabbath day's rest each week from social media.

In addition to these relational networks that ground us and support us in the world, there are also spiritual realities available to us. In his salutation to Titus Paul touches upon these spiritual realities and I want us to look at them in greater detail.

Paul provides for us an example of the spiritual realities that are available to support God's people in the unfolding of their lives

Our Master – Paul, a servant of God

Whom do you serve? In today's world, most people wish to serve themselves. The attitude is *me* first. The problem, of course, is that serving ourselves first results in all sorts of social, personal and spiritual pathologies. It is with good reason that the first step of all Twelve Step groups is to dethrone the self: admitting that you have made a mess of your life to this point and turning to God.

Some people are surprised by Paul's self description. The translation "bondservant" softens Paul's words a bit. Paul actually is saying that he is a "slave of God." In the modern world slavery is such a detested institution that we cringe at any imagery of slavery, even if it is servitude to the almighty ruler of the universe. Imagine someone dressed as a clown, handing out calling cards. On the one side the card reads: "Fool for Christ." On the other it asks, "Whose fool are you?"

Good question that. Bob Dylan's song, *Gotta Serve Somebody*, gets it right.

You may be an ambassador to England or France,
You may like to gamble, you might like to dance,
You may be the heavyweight champion of the world,
You may be a socialite with a long string of pearls

But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed
You're gonna have to serve somebody,
Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord
But you're gonna have to serve somebody.

In describing himself as a slave of God Paul is saying that he has no will of his own. His time and purpose belong to God, not himself. His priorities are God's. His duties are God's. His work is God's. He is not his own. He knows whom he serves.

That is the first spiritual reality to orient us in our world: know whom we are to serve. The second is to know our mission.

Our mission – and an apostle of Jesus Christ,

Paul's mission was unique: apostleship. He was an apostle of Jesus Christ. We cannot follow in his footsteps in that regard. His place is unmatched.

But this is not to suggest that God is uninterested in our particular places and purposes in his creation. I do believe God gives vocations. We each have a role to play. A vocation is the work God has assigned to us. It is our reason for being, our task to accomplish, our work on earth. Adam tilled the garden. He kept it. He was a steward of what God entrusted to him. The point is to be what you are—assuming its an honorable vocation (it is impossible to be a “Mafioso for Jesus”)– to God's glory. Thus one can be a banker or a barber for Jesus, or a stock broker, or garbage collector, or truck driver, auto mechanic, novelist, home maker, student, painter, soldier, policeman, politician, computer technician, nurse, musician and so on. The point is to see your work as given to you by God. Do your work to his honor and glory. Imagine the customer you serve as Jesus Christ your Lord. Try and imagine how God uses you to fulfill his purposes in the world.

We are oriented spiritually in the world first by seeing God as our liege Lord and secondly by seeking to perform the work we do in the world to his honor and glory. The third is our foundation, believing that we are members of the household of God's elect.

Our foundation – for the sake of the faith of God's elect

On what is your faith based? What is its foundation? In the modern world, as I have shown, the emphasis falls upon the self, upon what I do and what I choose. Regrettably, this dynamic is at work in some theological thinking as well. Sometimes the emphasis falls upon my choice, my action, and what I do, suggesting that that is what really matters in salvation. We choose God. We find Christ. We do what is really necessary.

You may have heard preachers declare an invitation to come to Christ using an argument that runs something like this: “God has done almost all that needs to be done. God has thrown the life preserver, you need only reach out and grab it. God has done ninety-nine percent. You need to only add your one percent in turning to him and asking him to come into your life today.” The problem with such illustrations is that they place the emphasis upon what we do, upon human choice. The self is still in control. The self may only add its one percent, but its one percent is the one percent that really matters. According to this understanding, everything that God has done means nothing until *I choose*. The self is still on the throne. The self is still in control. God is kept at arms length until the self says that he is on the invitation list.

In contrast, Paul writes of our foundation as being the faith of the elect. It is faith that is given. God elects us before we ever choose him. This doctrine says that God chooses me before I am able or willing to choose God. In God’s election, we are chosen by God to have faith. If God did not first elect, we would never turn in faith towards him. He must turn us, if we are to turn to him.

A parent may say to their child, “I loved you even before you were born.” This is a declaration of immeasurable love. When we say that God calls those who are his, this is to declare God’s love for the elect. He thought about us ahead of time. We are not an addendum, a postscript, an appendix, or an afterthought. The knowledge of God’s predestination assures us of God’s determined love for us and, whatever trials we may face at present; those trials are not the end of the story. That is a comforting thought.

We are oriented spiritually in the world first by seeing God as our liege Lord. Secondly, by seeking to perform the work we do in the world to his honor and glory. Thirdly, by knowing and believing that we are members of the household of God’s elect. Fourthly, in recognizing that our life’s goal is the pursuit of godliness.

Our life’s goal – and their knowledge of the truth, which accords with godliness,

We are tempted to view the significance of our lives in categories that assess what we accomplish and what we do when, in fact, God is often more interested in our character, in who we are. Sam Walton said that no one gets to the end of their life and says, “Oh, I wish I had spent more time at the office.” It is not what we do that matters so much in God’s eyes, it is who we are.

Paul points to knowledge that leads to godliness. Not all knowledge leads to godliness. Some knowledge debases and corrupts. Some knowledge creates pride. Some knowledge puffs us up. Paul’s emphasis falls upon that spiritual knowledge that motivates us to want to grow and be more Christ like, the

knowledge that motivates us to greater godliness. This is the stuff we want to cultivate and pursue in our lives.

What is that knowledge? I believe that it is the knowledge of God's grace. It is the knowledge that comes from deepening our understanding of who God is, and what he has done on our behalf through Jesus Christ. I took a class once on the doctrine of justification, taught by R. C. Sproul. This was a high-powered class. You can imagine my surprise the first day, when I learned that the man seated next to me, was a retired lay person. I asked him why he had taken the class. He replied that such study "intensified [his] relationship to Jesus Christ." He was saying that understanding his beliefs more fully deepened and intensified his faith. Such knowledge motivates us to grow in godliness.

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Our hope – ²in hope of eternal life, which God, who never lies, promised before the ages began

It is the hope of life to come that gives meaning to here and now. Those who close the universe find it difficult to sustain conviction in the belief that life has meaning, purpose or value. If there is no God, "then eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die." Life is like a pinball machine: put in your quarter, play for a while, and then it's over. The title of today's sermon is a line from one of Bruce Springsteen's songs.

Did God make man in a breath of holy fire?
Or did he crawl on up out of the muck and mire?

It makes a difference how you answer that question. If we simply crawled up out of the muck and mire, then upon death we simply crawl back to it. Oblivion beckons. Justice fades. Meaning evaporates. Hope is illusory. Dust to dust, and nothing more.

In contrast, if God has made us in his image, then there is eternity in man's heart. We hope that things will be made right, that we will be joined in heaven with those whom we love, in a house not made with hands. We trust that God will wipe away tears. We hope for a new heaven and new earth where all that is good on this earth will be found and all that is bad will be destroyed.

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household of God's elect. Fourthly, in recognizing that our life's goal is the pursuit of godliness. Fifthly, we are oriented by our hope in the promise of eternal life. And finally, we are oriented in our world through the spiritual resources God provides.

Our resources – 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;

We are blessed to have printed Bibles available to us inexpensively. One of the highlights of our time living in Peru, for Lois Ann, Benjamin and me, was being able to participate in the Bible dedication of the translation of the New Testament into the language of North Conchucos Quechua. If you would like to hear some good stories, ask Benjamin and Lois Ann about those trips high into the Andean mountains and kudos to Wycliffe Bible Translators for their work in translating the scriptures into the languages of the world.

At the time Paul writes to Titus, books were relatively rare and rather expensive. Books were hand copied. They were kept as scrolls. In the ancient world very few individuals possessed books. Many could not read. Literacy was the exception, not the rule. For the Jews, God's word was studied in the synagogue. In the early church the knowledge of the faith was passed on in preaching. It was through the preached word that most people came to know their Bible. Today we are blessed to have Bibles in our homes, on the pew racks, upon our laps; but preaching is not eclipsed. It is still the primary means by which God's truth is delivered to God's elect.

Close

⁴To Titus, my true child in a common faith: Grace and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Savior.

To be healthy in today's world requires a matrix of both social and spiritual relationships and realities that serve to hold us in place and support us as we face the various challenges of life. No man is an island. We need these relationships. The self alone is not sturdy enough to withstand the challenges of life. The central relationships of life are found in marriage, children, parents and extended family. These relationships are augmented by friendships, neighbors, and co-workers. But, even these networks alone, are not sufficient. We are spiritual people, made to interact with God who is Spirit. God gives to his people spiritual resources for them to draw upon. We are oriented spiritually in the world first by seeing God as our liege Lord. Secondly, by seeking to perform the work we do in the world to his honor and glory. Thirdly, by knowing and believing that we are members of the household of God's elect. Fourthly, recognizing that our life's goal is the pursuit of godliness. Fifthly, we are oriented by our hope in the promise of eternal life. And finally, we are oriented in our world through the spiritual resources God provides, particularly preaching.

Let me add briefly in closing one more way in which God seeks to support us in the unfolding of our lives. When we read the Bible, we modern people tend to gloss over the genealogies we find there. We do not read them. We jump over them. But that is a mistake. The genealogies teach an important truth: we are interconnected with that which is centuries old, millenniums old. The gospel message we proclaim has staying power. There is something enduring to it. God is at work in the sweep of time. We moderns tend to think that it is only the modern world that matters. What is important is only of the moment, the new, the hot, that which is trendy.

In contrast, genealogies remind us to anchor our heart and soul to the things which last. There is a place for the old, the enduring; for that which has stood the test of time. We want to stand in the deep water of faith, and not blow this way and that with every wind that blows.

As we close, I invite you to follow the example of the Apostle Paul and place your faith in Jesus Christ. Trust him. Believe in him. And be saved.

Say "Amen" somebody.

Titus 1

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 began³ 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;

⁴To Titus, my true child in a common faith:

Grace and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Savior.