

Letter from Babylon



Reflections on living in a land under judgment

by 'Mishael'

One of the easiest things to forget as a Christian, whether in Babylon or anywhere else, is that if we don't live by grace, we don't live at all. We can look at the evils in the world, decide that we're not too bad compared to all that, and live like everyone else. Or we can rise to condemn what we see and insist on God's standards. Either way the world will call us hypocrites – and though their motive is to divert attention from their own addiction to sin, they will in Biblical terms be right.

Blaise Pascal said, 'There are only two kinds of people – the sinners who think they are righteous, and the righteous who think they are sinners.' Paul unpacks just such an idea in an interesting passage in Titus 3. His usual method, in the best tradition of evangelical preaching, is to teach theological truth, and then develop the application. Here, however, he does the reverse.

In the first chapter he wants to counter false teaching by appointing elders whose main qualification, it seems, is righteous living. In chapter 2 these people are to teach all kinds of people how to live righteously. In chapter 3 he starts by making exactly the same demands in our public dealings – by obeying authority, by living peaceably and humbly, and so on. So Paul clearly understands that to live as a Christian means to live God's way.

So it's a slight surprise when he takes a diversion to remind us that we used to be just like everyone else. 'Foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved' are the words he uses. What changed us? Not education, not reforming our character, not choosing the right way. No, 'he saved us, not because of



righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy.' So, to paraphrase verse 7, having been judged in the right purely by the Father's generosity and the blood of Christ, I have a sure promise of eternal life. In other words, the Gospel says, 'You'd be thoroughly bad if I hadn't decided to call you good. As it is you're my heir.'

It's reminiscent of that first announcement of the New Covenant in Ezekiel 36, when God says, 'I want you to know that I am not doing this for your sake. Be ashamed and disgraced for your conduct, O house of Israel.'

The surprise is that Paul uses this reminder of our failure and of God's undeserved mercy as the powerhouse for the righteous living God requires. '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.' Remember you're a sinner and you'll live as a saint. Why? Because you will remember your total dependence on Jesus for anything good, and live out His righteousness rather than your own. And you'll do it joyfully because the gratuitous nature of His mercy means you are assured of eternal life.

People notice that kind of righteousness. The knee-jerk accusation of 'hypocrites' may still come, but it will ring hollow. After all, it was seeing God's love and righteousness in others that brought most of us to Christ, wasn't it?

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