

The Unlying God

Titus 1:1-4 | August 26, 2018 | Bryce Beale

The promise God has given his elect is eternal life.

In the dying silhouette of our Savior on Calvary we see the death of death. “Death, be not proud,” the Christian poet dares. “For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow // Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.”¹

An empty tomb on the morning of the third day displays not a mere curiosity of the past, but the promise that no tomb can be permanent anymore. The sun peaks its head over the mountains and, at this particular dawn, assures us that we, like our Lord, will live on in one eternal day.

No tumor is malignant for a Christian, for to be malignant is to intend our harm. But what can harm us? We have the promise of a better life after we live out this lesser one; and if a tumor means to bring us to that better life, it is as benign as a kind escort.

No cancer is terminal for a Christian; we cannot be terminated. The church father Augustine was wise to correct himself when he spoke of our present existence as “this life which leads to death – or should I say, this death which leads to life?”² A life of endless duration and supreme quality awaits us, just across the narrow river, and when we cross we leave all that is less and weak and sad and corruptible behind us. “O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?”³

For this reason, the Christian's life is a comedy. I do not mean that in the modern sense of “funny,” although there is humor involved. I mean a comedy in the classical sense, like a comedic play, which begins with some sad circumstance but ends in bliss. And therefore every scene in the comedy takes on a brighter hue.⁴

To be promised eternal life is to know that the story has a happy ending. We are like movie-goers who have already read the book; we know the protagonist does not die. And so though we may flinch at the dangers

¹ John Donne, “Holy Sonnets: Death, be not proud,” *PoetryFoundation.org*, The Poetry Foundation (accessed Aug. 25, 2018).

² *Confessions*, trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin (London: Penguin Books, 2003), Kindle ed., 25.

³ 1 Cor. 15:55 (ESV).

⁴ See chapter 6, “Tragedy and Comedy: The Literature of Damnation and Salvation” in Gene Edward Veith, Jr., *Reading Between the Lines: A Christian Guide to Literature*, Turning Point Christian Worldview Series, ed. Marvin Olasky (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1990).

he must endure, we can enjoy them too. We know he will get out ok in the end.

Christian, that is your life. The villain of death is doomed, your happiness is sure. So, what should you do in the interim? How does someone who is certain of salvation conduct himself, or behave herself? Paul's brief letter to Titus, which we begin today, is an answer to that question.

You will find in the coming weeks that this letter is quite concerned with the happy ending. Often we read of God as God our Savior, or Christ as Christ our Savior—in fact you will find both those phrases before we have even left its introduction. Twice in the letter, in chapter 2 and then in chapter 3, we find exceptional descriptions of salvation. Yet the theme of this letter is not merely a future salvation, or eternal life to come. Paul's primary concern throughout is this question: How should we live *now*?

And as his introduction today will show, how we live now depends upon how we view the ending. We speak of a "knowledge of the truth, which accords with godliness." Are you confident that eternal life awaits you? Do you believe God's promise true? We will say much in the coming weeks about the Christian's conduct, but today we must start at the very root of that conduct. Are you convinced that what God has promised is fact? Do you believe that God has lied about eternal life, or that he has spoken honestly? Your answer will determine how you live whatever time you have left in this world.

TITUS 1:1-4

Paul is an apostle in the hope of eternal life, an ambassador who is intent on convincing the elect that eternal life awaits them, that there is a happy ending for the people of God. If you find it hard to hold fast this idea of eternal life, to remember it so that your life is shaped by it, this passage is for you. For Paul writes it as an apostle, and as an apostle he was appointed "for the sake of the faith of God's elect." You say, "It is just so hard for me to really understand this truth." God knows. Hence we have the writings of an apostle appointed also for your "knowledge of the truth."

Paul has claimed what we need to believe—that for the believer, the best life lies before us. And for the sake of our faith he offers us good reasons to believe his claim. Let us consider those reasons.

God cannot lie

First, see where the promise of eternal life comes from.

If we could find a beating heart in this passage, one part that sends out by veins the lifeblood of the whole, it would I think be found in a single word in the Greek, which is translated into three in the English: “God, *who never lies*,” or “*who cannot lie*.”⁵ The original word is the combination of *pseudes*, “lying,” with an alpha attached to its front to negate it, so *apseudes*. In English we might say “unlying.” God is an “unlying” God.

And why is this the passage’s very heart? Because the way you choose to live your life—whether you will live self-controlled and godly, with a focus on others, or selfishly and in pursuit of worldly lusts—hinges upon your belief in what is to come. God has promised eternal life to the believer; do you believe him? Can he be taken at his word?

Paul’s position is given in no uncertain terms: God cannot lie. He is an unlying God. You can, verse 2, hope in eternal life—why? Because “God, who never lies, promised” eternal life.

Think of Ignatius, that leader of the church in Antioch not long after the days of Jesus. Convicted of being a Christian, he was brought through Asia Minor to Rome, that he might there give up his life for his offence. Rome could have done little to better help the Christians they were wishing to destroy, for as they brought Ignatius from Antioch to the capital city he wrote his now famous letters.

The most famous of them all, his letter to Rome, shows the kind of faith residing in this ancient believer’s heart. His greatest fear was not the lion, not death, but his friends who were trying to save him from the lion.

For my part, [he said,] I am writing to all the churches and assuring them that I am truly in earnest about dying for God – if only you yourselves put no obstacles in the way. I must implore you to do me no such untimely kindness; pray leave me to be a meal for the beasts, for it is they who can provide my way to God.⁶

What faith! What knowledge of the truth! He was a man convinced of heaven’s glories, and certain in his hope of eternal life. But why was he so sure?

Perhaps we find the clue we seek in this: though *apseudes* appears no other place in the New Testament, it can be found in Ignatius’ letter to

⁵ ESV and NASB respectively.

⁶ “Epistle to the Romans,” 4 in Andrew Louth, *The Apostolic Fathers: Early Christian Writings*, trans. Maxwell Staniforth, ed. Betty Radice (London, England: Penguin Books, 1987), Kindle ed.

Rome, when he speaks of Christ as an “unlying mouthpiece” of God’s truth.⁷

He knew the nature of his Savior, that he could not lie. Eternal life was promised him and would be his, after a short encounter with the lion.

Think again of Polycarp, the leader of the church in Smyrna who spent time with Ignatius while he was on his way to Rome. After a span Polycarp himself was put on trial for his belief, and sentenced to death by burning.

The account of his martyrdom is one of the most well-known in all of history, perhaps in part because of his great confidence in the face of it. He almost jests with his accusers; he encourages them to do what they intend, to get on with it. It is almost as though he thought the tale of his existence had a happy ending, so that each scene of it were really a comedy.

How could he stand with confidence before the hateful crowds, as they prepared the fire that would eat him? Well, it should not surprise you if I say that, in his final prayer before his death, he appealed to “the unlying and true God.” Again, *apseudes* appears!

Here is a word for martyrs. How could these men look indifferently at the lion’s teeth as it approached for them, or spurn the threat of flames? What reason did they have so deeply and daringly to trust that eternal life, a better life, awaited them on death’s other end?

Because “God, who cannot lie, promised.” *Apseudes* is the reason.

If you would face death with confidence, you must know God familiarly. The many things that tempt us to fear when we consider departing from this life—such as the pain involved, the inner suffering of others at our death, or the uncertainty of what it will be like to leave the body—these are resolved by a simple faith in God himself. Is he *pseudes*, or *apseudes*? If he is unlying and he has promised you a happy ending, believe the ending will be happy. Leave to him the details of it. Take him at his word.

No doubt this is the very reason that Paul in our passage, as he begins his letter to Titus, is adamant about his own apostleship. “Paul,” he writes, “a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ.” And in verse 3 he speaks of “the preaching with which I have been entrusted by the command of God our Savior.”

It is as if Paul were saying, “I really am nothing, do not let me get in the way. This promise of eternal life, it is not my own invention. I am only

⁷ Ibid., 8; “unlying” is my translation.

God's servant, doing his will. I am only his apostle, sent by him to bear this message. He has entrusted these words to me and has commanded me to pass them on to you. I am only, as was told to Ananias at my conversion, a chosen vessel to bear the name of Christ to the nations. I am an ambassador; you can be sure, my message is the message of my Master. I am telling you the words of the unlying God."

Yes, we hold Paul in high esteem, but he is not the ground of our confidence in the life to come. We do not suppose, as some do, that Paul or Peter, Ignatius or Polycarp, have deposited the excess of their merit into a treasury from which we draw salvation. No, these men are only men, and what mere man could ever redeem another? It is too costly, he should cease trying forever.

Our hope is not in Mary, as much as we esteem her holy example. She was not in her life the unlying Mary, and she is not now attending to the prayers of mankind.

Our hope is in God our Savior, who has promised eternal life for those who believe. Our confidence is in Christ our Savior, who appearing has secured it. As for Paul, he is a coffee urn to us. He received the gospel as though it were coffee poured into an urn; he carried that gospel with him; and then, as the opportunity presented itself, he pushed the handle and a rich stream of the gospel flowed out. We know an urn is not intended to make coffee; it only carries it. The apostle did not invent his message; no, the promise of eternal life came from God, the unlying God.

He is *apseudes*, and we can die with confidence because of that word.

God cannot change

First then, we can wholeheartedly hope in eternal life because it has been promised by an unlying God.

But if that were not enough, we are given another reason to believe, which is an extension of the first. We can have a certain hope because our God cannot lie; and what is more, we can have a certain hope because our God will not change.

Think briefly of the man who first received this letter.

We find him mentioned in verse 4: "To Titus, my true child in a common faith," and he is given that great greeting, "Grace and peace from God our Father and Christ Jesus our Savior."

Titus was a Greek who spent his life in the first century. He is not named in Acts, but from Paul's mention of him in several letters we can construct some sense of his involvement in the work. According to

Galatians 2, Titus accompanied Paul to Jerusalem, probably during or just before the Jerusalem Council at the end of Paul's first missionary journey.

During Paul's third journey, he seems to have entrusted Titus with his second letter to the Corinthians, and Titus was privileged to see those Corinthians repent at the reading of it. This was no doubt a highlight of Titus' career, whose heart was bound with the Corinthians.⁸

At the end of Paul's first journey he was arrested and sent to Rome for his first imprisonment. Best we can tell, he was released and at that point travelled with Titus to Crete. A church was established, and Paul left Titus in Crete to set it in order. Some time afterward he would have written the letter we are now studying.⁹

Titus did not stay at Crete, but was probably replaced by Artemas shortly after the time of this letter, and, we may assume, joined Paul at Nicopolis, before moving on to Dalmatia. This is where Titus was during at least a portion of Paul's second imprisonment, which ended in the apostle's execution.¹⁰ Tradition suggests that afterward Titus returned to Crete as the leader of its church, though we do not know this for certain.

So then, here is a man who really lived, in a particular place and time. He has this task of ordering a church composed of reformed ruffians, of whom it was said, "Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons." Beyond this there appears to have been a Judaizing influence in the church that Titus had to fight, as we will see in weeks to come. So Paul's letter comes to him to help him in the situation he finds himself.

Here is a man not unlike yourself; yes, he is involved in rather important missionary work, and his name is written in the world's most popular book. But he is human; he has a nature like ours, with ups and downs and all the rest. He is by no means a prominent figure in the Scriptures, and we know him mainly from brief passages on the pen of Paul.

How can this obscure figure—obscure like the rest of us—be sure eternal life shall be his? Let us say we do not doubt the unlying God, and that he has promised eternal life to his saints and will keep that promise unfailingly. But now we must take that final and most difficult step of asking, "Has he promised eternal life *to me*? When I die in relative obscurity, will he remember me, personally? How can I be sure that I will not be forgotten?"

⁸ 2 Cor. 7:5-8; 8:16.

⁹ Titus 1:5.

¹⁰ Titus 3:12; 2 Tim. 4:12, 10.

Turn again to our text, and see why Paul is an apostle in verse 1: “for the sake of the faith of *God’s elect*.”¹¹

It is irrelevant to us whether a man or woman has won the esteem of millions or of only one or two, or of no one at all. Elijah felt himself alone and universally despised in his own day—but he was *chosen of God*. Daniel and his three friends were the objects of hatred and envy in a distant land, far from friendly faces; their enemies conspire against them, they face lions and fire not unlike the early martyrs. But what does it matter, for they were chosen by God to be his own.

That is the meaning of that phrase, “*God’s elect*.” It means that, if you have responded to the gospel in true faith, God has thought directly and affectionately of you.

“But I feel that God is far away, and here I am, one speck on the speck of earth.” What does distance matter? If you were a speck on a speck of the speck, would it be any harder for God to find his own?

We have just studied Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, in which he says God “chose us in him before the foundation of the world.”¹² If you think yourself to small to be remembered by God, to be visited with eternal life, remember that God chose you when you were much smaller than you are now. You were nothing but a thought in his mind when he set his affection upon you.

“Ah,” you think, “surely others can enjoy eternal life, but I have failed God too many times. There are so many things I ought to do that I have not.” Yet God chose you, if you are his elect, before you had done anything at all.

See the very nature of this promise of eternal life. Yes, God has made it and he cannot lie, so it is sure. But in case we should harbor any doubt, we are told when the promise was made. Verse 2: “God, who never lies, promised [it] before the ages began.” If you have believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, your final salvation was as sure before the ages began as it has been at any point in your present life. Before you had done either good or bad, that God’s purpose might stand, eternal life was promised you.

God swore by himself, for he could swear by none greater, while he was by himself, for there was none other, and our salvation was secure. Satan did not yet exist to accuse; our good works and our failures contributed and detracted nothing.

¹¹ Emphasis mine.

¹² 1:4.

God's purpose was set, eternal life was promised. And so, as we find in verse 3, it could not be otherwise than that "at the proper time [God] manifested [it] in his word." Of course it was the proper time, for it had been set by God in eternity past by an eternal and unchangeable decree.

Within the hidden counsel of God, before the world began, the Trinity decided on your salvation. The hand of God's purpose stretched from that point onward, into and through the corridors of time, with eternal life in it.

See how Satan labors in that pristine garden to build a wall of vines, to foil the purpose of God. Adam and Eve sin and are cast from God's presence; death enters, and it seems that eternal life must now give way to corruptibility. But God's steady hand continues and rips through the wall of vines as though they were but thin thread. His purpose continues, unchanged. His hand proceeds on its way with eternal life for you.

Now jealous Naman builds his high tower against God's purpose, thinking to extinguish the Jews, from whom the Savior Christ will come. The hand reaches the wall and brushes it aside. Haman's plan is foiled; it must be foiled, so that God's plan may proceed.

See how the hand continues steadily through the ages, unstayed by any obstacle, for the promise is sure.

But now it finds its greatest hindrance. The blood of a perfect sacrifice is necessary if we are to be redeemed, and the only blood that ever could dare to qualify is the blood of Jesus himself, the Son of God. Surely as the hand makes its way to Calvary outside the walls of Jerusalem it will stop or turn aside. Surely that hand will not crush the beloved of heaven.

Yet here is the mystery revealed to us, that God's promise before the ages included the agreement of the Son to die in our stead. And see on Calvary how it is first manifested; we thought him stricken by God, and we were right, for the hand of God's purpose crushed him. And as it did, for the first time it opened to reveal what was within it: eternal life.

This is the gospel we proclaim: God has promised eternal life to everyone who believes on Christ our Savior. The hand proceeds and pummels death to the ground, raising Christ back to life.

And finally that hand reaches our own age, two millennia afterward, still intent on its end, still set on granting this eternal life which it carries to those who believe.

Do you think you can turn the hand right or left? Yes, it leveled kingdoms and devastated death itself—but do you think you have better building materials than Babel by which you can put an effective wall in its way?

You say, “I am a speck, a worm; I am not a saint who deserves eternal life. I am too small to receive eternal life.” But if you believe, I say, “You are too small to stop God’s hand from giving it to you.”

Conclusion

Brothers and sisters, let us hold fast to “the hope of eternal life, which God, who never lies, promised before the ages began and at the proper time manifested in his word.”

This word, this gospel, makes life a divine comedy. If anyone has cause to forget their fears, it is us. The overwhelming relief one feels after a near-death experience is the relief in which we live our whole lives. Eternal torment was our portion, but no more. We live; we must live, or the unlying God will be proven a liar. Eternal life is ours.

And the individual who grasps this hope cannot be the same. He who takes hold the truth of the gospel takes hold a truth “which accords with godliness.” There is a way to live for the one who is convinced of a miserable and tragic ending: “Let us eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die.” But for the one who knows a happy ending is ahead of us, there is another way to live: godliness.

The specifics of that godliness are given to us in this letter to Titus, and I am eager to consider them with you in the coming weeks.

But now, I close with an appeal for the faith of the elect. The eagerness of Ignatius for the lion, or the bold wit of old Polycarp before the flames, were not natural to these men. By nature, these were no different than you or me.

But they heard the promise of God and set their seal to it. They saw the hand of God proceeding through the ages, eternal life within its grip, and cast their wager on the certain chance that it would succeed.

Beloved, it has not failed yet. Whatever your doubts or excuses may be, if you believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, you will be with him in Paradise. For everyone who believes in him will live, even if they die.

Do you believe this?