

*For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works. Titus 2:11-14*

This morning we officially enter the traditional Christmas season in the church with the lighting of the first of five candles on the Advent wreath. As was said, the word *Advent* means *arrival or coming* - and the word carries with it the sense of an arrival that has been eagerly awaited and now has finally come! The Church uses the word *Advent* to describe the four-week period prior to Christmas to celebrate the fulfillment of God’s promise to send fallen humanity a Savior into the world.

It is ironic that in the midst of all the hustle and bustle that we all go through to get ready for the Christmas season, that the first Christmas came on suddenly and out of the blue, both for those who were witnesses of the birth of the Savior and for those within the world at large. In fact we read of no special preparation in Jesus day for the Christmas season, nor do we read of any Christmas celebration in the gospels or in the New Testament. As far as the world was concerned Jesus *just appeared* – and that seems to be how the first century church celebrated the coming of the Savior – as an *appearing*. The apostle Paul uses this concept and this kind of language in his letter to Titus.

The book of Titus in the Bible is a pastoral letter from the apostle Paul to a Christian named Titus who was the overseer of the churches on the island of Crete. Paul’s purpose in writing this letter was to offer encouragement and wisdom as Titus endured ongoing opposition from false teachers and false prophets within his congregations. We been seeing that same problem repeatedly in all the early churches, as have been going through the books of Acts - and we know that we still see it today.

Paul opens his letter to Titus by reminding him of the need for godly leadership in the church. If those in the church are going to understand and grow in their walk with Jesus and live out their faith for Jesus – those who are leading the church must be not only be of humble and godly character but also they also must be deeply knowledgeable of who God is: “*He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it*” (Titus 1:9). Throughout the rest of chapter one the apostle Paul then goes on to describe who the false teachers are, in direct contrast with how he had just described who the elders in the church should be. Paul then begins chapter two by describing how followers of Jesus Christ are to walk with Jesus Christ and live out their lives for Jesus Christ – both in the church and out in the world. And then, in our text for today, Paul writes of how they – and how we - can do the same.

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In these words we read that the grace of God in the gospel through Jesus Christ not only saves us but also trains us to live out our lives for Him. In other words, God did not send Jesus into the world *just* to save us, but also to transform us so we would live out our lives for Jesus for the glory of God. We see that in our text when the word “*appear*” appears twice. One *appears* begins our text (“*For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people*”) - the other *appear* occurs in the middle (“*waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ*”).

The first *appearing* - “*for the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people*” - was the appearing of Jesus Christ over 2000 years ago - the entire thirty-three years of the his life and his ministry; from Jesus’ birth and to his death; from his crucifixion and to his resurrection; from Bethlehem to the Mount of Olives to the empty tomb: from where the shepherds heard the voices of the angels singing, to when the disciples looked up and saw Jesus rise up into the clouds of heaven.

The second *appearing* - “*waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ*” - is the promise of Jesus’ return - which is still is affect today, 2,000 years after these words were written. We are today “*waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.*” Paul calls this “*the blessed hope.*” This “*appearing*” is the “*blessed hope*” that we have in the fragile, violent, self-centered, troubled world we live in. Sometimes - it seems the return of Jesus Christ - “*the appearing of the glory of . . . God*” - may be drawing near.

The first *appearing* is called the “*appearing*” of “*the grace of God*” - while the second *appearing* is the “*appearing*” of “*the glory of . . . God.*” These are two very different things. We are currently living between the time when the *grace of God appeared* and when *the glory of God will appear*. We are entering the season when the church celebrates Jesus’ *first appearing* – when the grace of God appeared to bring the offer of salvation to all people. We read of that when the baby Jesus appeared to Simeon in the temple, who took the newborn Jesus in his arms, looked up to God and declared: “*Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples*” (Luke 2:28-31).

The nature of Christ's first *appearing*, the season we celebrate, is clearly described for us in God’s Word - from Bethlehem through the darkness of Calvary to the glorious light of the Resurrection morning. We read this in John 1:14: “*The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth*” (John 1:14). The *appearing* of Jesus Christ was “*the grace of God*” - as a sovereign and holy God lovingly reached out to rescue fallen humanity from the wages of their self-centered sin. John 1:16 says: “*From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.*” Jesus first appeared as the grace of God. Of this G. Campbell Morgan once wrote: “The song of the angels to sighing humanity is the beginning of the infinite mystery of the Incarnate God. From this all light is streaming, all songs are coming, all hope is flaming.”

From the moment sin first entered the world *grace* has been the first subject on God's agenda. God’s heart as always been bent on love, not judgment. There are many today who fear that if they draw near to God, the first thing God wants to talk about is condemnation, that it’s His desire to punish them for their sins. But the Bible tells us that: “*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him*” (John 3:16-17).

God's first concern and plan for our lives is not judgment. Jeremiah 29:11 says: “*I know the plans I have for you,*” declares the Lord, “*plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.*” The *nature* of the grace of God is that it always has been Gods’s desire to restore us back into the relationship with Him we were created for. Since the first appearing of Jesus, and over the last 2,000 years, God has continued to reveal the nature of his grace – despite our ignorance and rebellious willfulness, as we continue abuse and misuse the beautiful gift of life He has given us. Most often we don’t see the nature of God’s grace until we painfully rub against the grain of God’s plans and purposes. It’s then we are then faced with the stark reality that it is only by God’s grace alone that we can know any kind of hope, healing and restoration in the struggle, pain, and heartache of this world. God sees and understands our desperate needs, then supplies what is needed by His grace. The foundational of the nature of the grace of God is to forgive, redeem, reconcile and restore.

*“For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people.”* Not only is the *nature* of Jesus’ appearing clearly described here for us as *“the grace of God”* - this *“grace of God”* is also the *purpose* of Jesus’ appearing. Paul said: *“For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people.”* The *purpose* Jesus *“appeared”* was for the *“salvation of all people.”* Now this doesn’t mean that *“all people”* – everyone – will be saved because the Bible tells us that not everyone will be saved. This confusion is solved in knowing that the word *“all”* in the original Greek is most often translated to mean not *“all”* (everyone) but *“all kinds”* (all kinds of people). The grace of God has appeared so that all kinds of people can be saved. That being said, while it is God's first intention to give all kinds of people the gift of His grace - the truth is, by God’s sovereign grace, kinds of people will ultimately reject *“the grace of God”* and will seek instead some kind of grace of their own grace. It is then that God does eventually move from His love and His grace to His condemnation and His judgment.

*“For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age.”* It is by the grace of God that we are saved. But God’s grace does not stop at salvation. The *“grace of God”* is God’s unmerited, supernatural, divine empowerment - for both salvation *and* for passionately living out our lives for God. It was God’s grace manifested in the person of Jesus Christ that brought us salvation. And as a *result* of our salvation, God’s grace empowers us to live for Jesus. Grace not only brings about initial change; it also enables us to become more and more like Jesus. This grace of God is a powerful force in our lives through the indwelling of Holy Spirit. By the grace of God the Holy Spirit transforms us and trains us and empowers us *“to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions.”*

As long as we are on this earth, we will always possess hearts that are always looking for an opportunity to sin. And so there is always the possibility that we can be guilty of *“ungodliness”* or yield to *“worldly passions.”* Without the *“grace of God”* we would not be able *“to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age.”* These three words – *“self-controlled, upright, and godly”* - each look in a different direction. *Self-control* has reference to ourselves; *uprightness* is toward one another; and *godliness* is toward God. By the *“grace of God”* we can live peaceful and balanced life within ourselves, with each other and with God. When we cooperate with the work of the *“grace of God”* in our lives, we will *“renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives”* – and every area of our lives (self-ward, human-ward, God-ward) will be at peace and pleasing to God because a true understanding of the *“grace of God”* will affect the desires of our hearts. The *“grace of God”* is Jesus himself *“appearing”* in our lives - bringing salvation, living in us, imparting power, preserving purity, imputing righteousness, filling us with grace upon grace.

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By the *“grace of God”* the *“blessed hope”* of Jesus’ return is assured. We will know that *“blessed hope”* immeasurably and indescribably better than any hope we could ever imagine. Revelation 21:3-4 tells us that on that day a loud voice from the throne of God will proclaim: *“Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”* On that day we will see *“the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ”* - and we will be with him forever!

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In the last two verses, the apostle Paul reminds us here what Jesus did for us when he appeared the first time: he “*gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.*” Jesus “*gave*” himself up to death on a cross as a sacrificial payment to cleanse us and redeem us from our sin, so we might be restored back to God. Paul’s words here would not have escaped the notice of Titus and the false teachers in the church. The “*grace of God*” was an abused concept in the church in Crete as some people were defining the “*grace of God*” in such a way that turned it into a license to sin. They taught that followers of Christ could continue to live in sin because in Christ they were no longer under Law that was received through Moses. Of course this was and still is a false teaching. While it is true that those who are truly saved by the “*grace of God*” through Christ, are no longer under the Law of God, it is also true that living under the “*grace of God*” is a much greater responsibility than being under God’s Law.

Jesus’s death on the cross was for our redemption; the penalty for our sin has been finally and totally paid for. Jesus has purified our souls: his shed blood has cleansed us of our sin – and we are no longer under the requirements of the Law of God. But there is more. Our great God and Savior Jesus Christ gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession – so that we would be “*zealous for good works.*” To be “*zealous for good works*” means to follow Jesus; to live for Jesus; to obey Jesus, to serve like Jesus; sacrifice like Jesus; and to die for Jesus. Jesus defined being “*zealous for good works*” when he said: “*If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me*” (Luke 9:23).

The power of the grace of God is the crucified and risen Jesus Christ, as Lord and Savior. Without Jesus Christ our natural desire, our strongest motives will always be to love and please ourselves. But when, by God’s grace, we truly do come to faith in Jesus we are overwhelmed with the undeniable powerful truth that in reality *only God matters*. And as we give ourselves away to that truth, it then works its way through our hearts and lives and manifests itself within every fiber of our beings.

Salvation means being totally possessed of a deep and mighty desire to love and please God. And when we do live our lives to love and please God, we will live “*self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age.*” A Christian man was once asked if he believed in the miracle of changing water to wine. He said, “Of course I do.” He was then asked, “Have you ever seen Jesus change water into wine?” To which he then answered, “No. But when I met Jesus I saw him change beer into furniture in my own home.” The grace of God still appears to perform such miracles today.

The mystery, the secret of how to “*live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age*” is to allow God Himself to live His life in us. “*The grace of God*” is Jesus appearing in our lives, living in us, imparting power, preserving purity, imputing righteousness, giving grace, changing beer into furniture. Jesus is “*the grace of God.*” Jesus is the only answer in a world, in a life full of uncertainty and questions. Jesus is the “*blessed hope*” we have beyond our troubles, beyond our struggles, beyond our deepest wounds.

*It is by the grace of Jesus Christ that our eyes blink, our hearts beat, and our lungs breathe air. By His grace he provides food and clothing and adequate shelter and meaningful work and the blessing of family. By His grace we know forgiveness and love and hope and peace and glory. By His grace Jesus heals broken hearts. By His grace he mends wounded spirits. By His grace he breathes eternal life into souls that are dead in their sin. By His grace Jesus turns beer into furniture, beggars into kings, broken children into healed adults – fallen, self-centered sinners into restored, God-centered saints. Calvin Miller once said: “the difference between what God wants for us and what we ultimately become rests in how we break the thrall of those appetites that chain us to selfish lifestyles and selfish life goals.”*

The question we each must answer today is not about what God wants for us - as much as about what we have ultimately become – because every person who claims Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior is still a work in progress. None of us is immune to failing in our attempts to be “*self-controlled, upright, and godly . . . in the present age*” because we are all sinners in desperate need of God’s grace. The problem for many who claim to have a faith in Jesus Christ is that they live out our lives as if God’s grace expired right after they came to faith. Since then they haven’t grown much in their relationship with Jesus Christ because they are chained to the grace of their own making.

You see salvation is not merely a reserved seat in heaven, or an insurance policy against going to hell. Salvation is the grace of God which compels us to renounce self-centered, worldly desires so we might then live out our lives that for God that reflect the grace of God in the gospel through Jesus Christ. The transcendent mystery of the birth of Jesus Christ is that God became a man. We are entering the season when we celebrate the reality that God became flesh. But the transcendent mystery is also the truth that that same Jesus Christ is ready, willing and able – by the power of the grace of God - to come into our hearts, souls and minds - and save us and transform us so we can live our lives for him. I pray in this Christmas season we will all celebrate the of power of Jesus, the grace of God within us.

*I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen. Ephesians 3:14-21*

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