



THE EPIPHANY OF GRACE AND GLORY TITUS 2:11-15

DEC 1, 2024
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Today, December 1, is the first day of what we refer to as Advent. It is the launch, so to speak, of the Christmas season. So, what does the word "Christmas" bring to mind?

Some of you might say, "It reminds me of God's love as seen in the sending of his Son." *Yes, but for what purpose?*

Someone else might respond by saying, "Christmas is all about the conception of Jesus in the womb of a young virgin girl named Mary." *Yes, but for what purpose?*

Others would point to the marvel of the incarnation, the fact that God became a human being in the person of Jesus. *Yes, but for what purpose?*

Still a few might appeal to a text like Galatians 4:4 where Paul says that "when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law." And that too, is true. *But for what purpose?*

The purpose in all these definitions or descriptions of Christmas is found in the words of an angel who appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will **save** his people from their sins" (Matt. 1:20-21). It was the same answer that the angel Gabriel gave to Mary when he said, "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a **Savior**, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11).

Did you hear the two words in those verses, the two words that answer the question, "For what purpose did God send his Son to be born of a virgin?" The two words are the verb to "save" and the noun "Savior." ***The purpose of God in the Christmas story isn't Santa Claus or the exchange of gifts or the singing of carols or the reunion among family members after a time of separation. The purpose of God in Christmas is the salvation of sinners. The love of God sent the Son of God to endure the wrath of God so that through the power of the Spirit of God we might become the children of God.***

Christmas, from beginning to end, is all about salvation. Everything else is subordinate to that one primary goal in God's heart and mind. The virgin birth, the incarnation, the visit of the wise men, the announcement to the shepherds, the sinless life, sacrificial death, and bodily resurrection of Jesus were entirely for this one all-consuming purpose: the salvation of sinners like you and me.

The term "salvation" is not here used with reference to self-realization or the experience of being delivered from low self-esteem. We often speak of being "saved" from perilous circumstances, political oppression and tyranny, famine, plague, or the many and varied threats posed by natural catastrophes. But the focus of Scripture is on our deliverance or salvation from the well-warranted judgment of an infinitely holy and righteous God.

The greatest threat to the human soul is not economic collapse or militant fundamentalism or psychological distress or a global pandemic. The Scriptures consistently speak of our desperate plight apart from Christ. We are alienated from God (2 Cor. 5:18-21), subject to his righteous wrath (John 3:36; Eph. 2:1-3), and hostile to him (Rom. 3:9-18). We are, in fact, his enemies (Rom. 5:10), and under the curse imposed by divine law (Gal. 3:13-14).

Thus, when we speak of the operation of God's grace to save, we have in mind what Paul referred to in Ephesians 2:8-9 where he spoke of our having been **saved** by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Christmas is first and fundamentally, from beginning to end, about God's gracious and merciful design in saving sinners from a well-deserved hell.

And one of the most explicit affirmations and explanations of our salvation is found in Titus 2:11-15. This passage is all about Christmas. This text answers the question I repeatedly asked: For what purpose has God done all that we know about Christmas?

Look again with me at this remarkable paragraph in Titus 2.

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. Declare these things; exhort and rebuke with all authority. Let no one disregard you.

Epiphany!

There are three words most often used in the NT to describe the second coming of Jesus Christ. The term “parousia” (*parousia*) means arrival, presence, or coming (see 1 Thess. 3:13). The word “apocalypse” (*apocalupsis*) means revelation or disclosure or unveiling (as, for example, in 1 Cor. 1:7; 2 Thess. 1:6-7). The third word, “epiphany” (*epiphaneia*; or its verb form, *epiphainō*), refers to a manifestation or an appearing (1 Tim. 6:24; 2 Tim. 4:8; Titus 2:13). This third term tells us that when Christ returns in the clouds of heaven, he will not simply come but will be manifested. There will appear for all to see the magnificence, power, glory, and majesty of our Lord and Savior.

Of interest to us is that Paul also makes use of the verb *epiphainō* to describe our Lord's first coming. We see this in 2 Timothy 1:10 and now here again in Titus 2:11. Of course, in this latter text it is “the grace of God” that has undergone an epiphany, but only because the incarnation and death of Jesus was itself a manifestation of God's determination to graciously save sinners. ***Thus, if Christ's first coming was an epiphany of grace (2:11), his second coming will be an epiphany of glory (2:13).***

It seems clear that when the apostle Paul conceives of the Christian life, your Christian life, from beginning to end, from salvation past to salvation future, he portrays it as being caused, controlled, and characterized by the two epiphanies of Jesus Christ. The first epiphany at his first advent or coming was the manifestation of God's grace in Jesus, and the second epiphany at his second advent or return to earth will be a manifestation of God's glory in Jesus.

What the First Epiphany of Jesus Christ has Accomplished for Us

Human sin and depravity are often portrayed in terms of darkness and blindness (see 2 Cor.4:4, 6; Eph. 4:18; Acts 26:18). Much the same could be said of the original state of the universe, until by the word of the Lord light burst forth. This is how Paul conceived of Christ's first coming. Just as God said in the midst of darkness, “Let there be light!”, he says in the darkness of human sin, “Let there be grace!”: In that epiphany of divine grace, the saving power of Christ Jesus has dispelled the darkness of guilt and condemnation. Salvation has appeared in the person of Jesus!

Try to envision being locked in a room with no window, no door, no crack in the wall for light to penetrate. Not the slightest ray of light is given access, when suddenly someone turns a switch and the room is flooded with bright light. This is how Paul conceived the world prior to and then in consequence of the first coming of Christ Jesus.

Like the sun that gradually appears above the horizon and slowly but surely dispels the darkness of night, from the moment of his conception in the womb of Mary until the day of his resurrection from the grave, Jesus Christ has shined the light of saving grace in the midst of darkness. It is in him, in his person and work, that the grace of God has made its appearance, its epiphany, to bring the light of salvation to sinners, driving the darkness of sin and guilt from our hearts and shining the light of love and the knowledge of God into our hearts.

To whom has this light been given? The translation of v. 11b is disputed. Is it that God's grace has appeared, “bringing salvation to all people,” or grace has appeared “to all people, bringing salvation”? Some reject the latter on grounds that not all people have been exposed to saving grace. But if “all people” is read in light of Titus 2:1-10, it would refer to *all kinds and classes of humanity*: older men and women, younger men and women, and bondservants, and not necessarily to all mankind universally. His point is that neither age nor gender nor social status nor ethnic origin is a barrier to God's grace in Christ.

But God's grace in Christ does not merely save, it also sanctifies. This “grace” does not merely secure our forgiveness but also trains or instructs us, as would a professor in a classroom. The grace of God in Jesus is not content with removing our guilt; it also removes our guile.

You've heard me many times in the past explain that “grace” is not merely a *principle* in the character of God on the basis of which we are saved. It is surely that, but it is much more. It is also an active, energetic, transforming *power*

in the hearts of God's people. Notice in vv. 11-12 how grace is personified, as if it were a teacher in the classroom instructing its students. It is portrayed as a pedagogue who leads children step by step in their assigned lessons.

The grace that has made its epiphany at the first coming of Christ teaches, chastens, counsels, comforts, convicts, and empowers us to renounce or deny "ungodliness" (or "impiety"), "worldly passions" (including, but not limited to, illicit sexual desires), and to live "self-controlled" (the same word already seen in 1:8; 2:2, 5, 6) lives of righteousness and godliness. To "renounce" or "deny" in this context does not refer to mere verbal repudiation but a moral renunciation that expresses itself in taking concrete steps to distance ourselves from sin experientially. In the light of this magnificent text, all forms of antinomianism and licentiousness are ruled out of order. God's saving grace gives us no excuse for remaining in sin.

Clearly, then, there is a sense in which Paul personifies God's "grace" as if it were a person, Christ Jesus. In the first advent of our Lord, we see and receive the merciful kindness of God in saving us from a well-deserved death and condemnation. This is an echo of what John wrote in his gospel. The Word "became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory [there is the element of epiphany], glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). Because of the epiphany of the Son's "fullness we have all received, grace upon grace" (John 1:16).

We must also remember that this grace does not come merely to the *undeserving*, but to the *ill-deserving*. It isn't so much that we don't deserve grace as it is that we *do* deserve hell. We aren't merely helpless apart from Christ: we are hostile to him and thus hopeless.

We fail to fully understand what grace entails when, instead of comparing ourselves with the infinite and perfect righteousness of God, from which we have fallen immeasurably short, we compare ourselves with one another. Grace is not God treating you less than you deserve nor treating you better than you deserve. *Grace is when God treats you without the slightest regard for desert whatsoever.* Grace is when God treats you simply and solely according to the infinite goodness and sovereign mercy in his heart. Neither human merit nor demerit factor in at all.

The unbiblical notion that God's grace liberates us to live however we please has been a recurring and damaging heresy throughout the history of the Christian church. Paul vigorously denied this mistaken notion not only here in Titus 2 but also in his letter to the Romans. Yes, said Paul, "where sin increased, grace abounded all the more" (Rom. 5:20). Some erroneously concluded from this truth that we should then "continue in sin that grace may abound" (Rom. 6:1). No! God forbid! By no means! For "how can we who died to sin still live in it?" (Rom. 6:2). This antinomian (lit., against the law) deviation from biblical truth is what Jude had in mind when he referred to some "who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality" (Jude 4).

The apostle's energetic denial in Romans and his more positive explanation in Titus 2 are a clear and unmistakable reminder to us that God's grace does more than merely deliver us *from* something. It also delivers us *over to* something, namely, a godly and upright and Christlike life as we await the second epiphany of Jesus at the close of history.

We should daily pray, "O Father! Keep us ever aware of our need of your grace to be justified. And keep us ever aware that this very grace is what secures our progressive, experiential transformation into the image of your Son and our Savior, Jesus Christ. May we by your Spirit never appeal to your grace to justify our remaining in sin!"

What the Second Epiphany of Jesus Christ will Accomplish for Us

Note the connection between v. 12 and v. 13. Waiting or looking for Christ (v. 13) is an activity that should characterize the life of an obedient Christian (v. 12) at every moment. This is not a passive mindset but an active expectation. It is not a fitful, momentary perspective, but a daily, never-ending, constant anticipation of heart and soul. Paul is calling on us to live consecrated lives (vv. 11-12) while or as we wait for Christ's return. In other words, our "waiting for" the blessed hope of Christ's epiphany ("appearing") modifies or expands upon the sort of life that Paul has just called for in the preceding verses.

Although it is not evident from the English translation, there is only one definite article that governs both our "blessed hope" and "appearing of the glory" of God. Thus, these are two ways of referring to the same event. Christ's return is a "blessed" hope because when he comes we will see him as he is and thereby be changed into his very image (see 1 John 3:1-3; Phil. 3:20-21). It is also "blessed" because it will mark the termination of all sin and suffering and our entrance into the presence of our great Triune God, forever and ever.

There are two additional questions in v. 12 that must be answered. Is it "the appearing of the glory" of God or his "glorious appearing" for which we look with anticipation? The former is more likely, but there is little difference between the two. Also, is Paul referring to the epiphany of two persons, God (the Father) and Christ, or only one? The latter is assuredly the case, as ***Jesus is himself our great God and Savior***. Should anyone ask where in the NT Jesus is explicitly referred to as God, this text is certainly among those to which we would point (see also John 1:1; 20:28; Rom. 9:5; 1 Cor. 8:6; Phil. 2:5-6; Heb. 1:8; 2 Peter 1:1).

At his first epiphany this great God and Savior voluntarily gave himself up as a propitiatory sacrifice in our place. He was neither coerced nor compelled, but willingly yielded up his life to "redeem" us. Redemption alerts us to the fact that we were enslaved to our sin, and that only a ransom could deliver us from it (see Matt. 20:28; Eph. 1:7). This act of offering himself as a ransom was substitutionary ("for us"; see 1 Peter 3:18). In this way God, through the blood of his Son, purchased us unto himself as "a people for his own possession" (v. 14). Hence, "you are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body" (1 Cor. 6:19b-20). A "people for his own possession" (or, a "special people") was often used to describe the nation Israel during the time of the old covenant. Paul's use of it here strongly suggests that he believes the church to be the new Israel (cf. Gal. 6:16; 1 Peter 2:9-10).

We were not only redeemed but purified or cleansed from the stain of sin (1 John 1:7-9), a reference to both the notions of forgiveness and justification. The purpose was so that we would be "zealous for good works." We are therefore not only redeemed from death and condemnation but consecrated and set apart to live in such a way that Christ is glorified.

Many today are mocking the notion of what is known as penal substitutionary atonement. Some even resort to denouncing it as a form of cosmic child abuse, as if God the Father were a celestial bully compelling his helpless Son to be punished for our sins.

But Paul is quite clear, as was Jesus himself, that the Son "gave himself" (v. 14) as a joyful substitute in our stead, there to exhaust in himself the wrath that we so justly deserved. Jesus declared, "For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again" (John 10:17-18). In this way, the Son offered himself as a propitiatory sacrifice, satisfying the righteous wrath and justice of God (Rom. 3:25; 1 John 2:1-2; 4:10).

Apart from the righteous dying in the place of the unrighteous (1 Peter 3:18), placing himself in the position of one to whom our guilt was imputed (2 Cor. 5:21), there is no gospel. The good news is that because of this atoning work on the cross there is now "for those who are in Christ Jesus" absolutely "no condemnation" (Rom. 8:1).

There are two deadly threats to Christ-exalting Christian living: *legalism and licentiousness*. The former demands that we meet certain conditions of obedience in order to have eternal life. The latter ignores the demands of God's law, insisting that since Christ obeyed it for us and died to endure its penalty, we are free to live in unrepentant sin. It is licentiousness that Paul refutes in our passage.

But to what kind of life are we called? To what purpose did the Son of God suffer and die? Paul referred to us in Titus 1:1 as God's "elect." But to what end have we been chosen? In addition to our text in Titus 2, Paul declares that we have been predestined "to be conformed to the image of his Son" (Rom. 8:29). He "chose us" in Christ "that we should be holy and blameless before him" (Eph. 1:4). We are God's "workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10; cf. 2 Thess. 2:13; 2 Tim. 1:8b-9a; 1 Peter 1:1-2). Salvation cannot be severed from sanctification. The latter is the fruit of the former. The former is the root of the latter.

To be "zealous for good works" is not legalism. To be zealous for good works does not undermine the grace by which we have been saved. Rather, that is its very purpose! The grace that established our eternal union with God continues to work within us to empower our lives such that we might grow and deepen in our experiential communion with him. If you are not zealous for good works, if you do not turn away from lawless living, if you do not have a passion for purity of life, one can only wonder if you are a true member of Christ's "people" whom he redeemed for himself.

May we again pray: "Holy Spirit of God, we bring our heartfelt petition to you. Set us apart unto Christ Jesus! Work in us all that is pleasing to him! Make use of our thoughts, words, and lives to honor the one who died to purify us for himself. May we never appeal to grace to rationalize a life of sinful license!"

Consider how the truth in this paragraph was evident in the life of the 16th century Protestant reformer, Martin Luther. Luther was often accused by his enemies as being guilty of a multitude of sins. He was accused of being a drunkard because he once said that he would just as soon be baptized in German beer as in water! The Roman Catholic Pope insisted that once Luther sobered up he would think more clearly about religious matters. Let it be known that Luther denounced drunkenness as a sin.

He was also accused of being sexually obsessed because he was an advocate for priests to be married. He eventually married Katherine Von Bora. But of all the charges brought against him, the most scurrilous and outrageous to Luther's mind was the charge that he advocated moral licentiousness and lawlessness. He was actually accused of espousing a less than casual approach to personal holiness. It was, of course, a hideous lie. Listen to Luther's words in the Preface to his commentary on Romans.

"O, this faith is a living, busy, active, powerful thing! It is impossible that it should not be ceaselessly doing that which is good. It does not even ask whether good works should be done; but before the question can be asked, it has done them, and it is constantly engaged in doing them. But he who does not do such works is a man without (saving) faith."

Conclusion

So, what is the meaning and purpose and goal of Christmas? It is the two-fold epiphany of Jesus Christ. The epiphany of his first coming was to bring the light of salvation to us. The epiphany of his second coming will be to shed abroad for all to see and enjoy his great and incomparable glory. Don't ever think that Christmas is only concerned with the birth of Jesus in a manger. It is also concerned with the return of Christ in splendor and glory.

As we close, let me say one thing about v. 15 - *Declare these things; exhort and rebuke with all authority. Let no one disregard you.*

Although Paul is obviously referring to all that he has written to Titus in chapters one and two, I think his primary focus is on vv. 11-14. Don't be afraid to "declare" this incredible truth regarding the two epiphanies of Jesus. Don't let the world silence your voice. Don't be intimidated by the opposition of unbelievers. Declare to them that their only hope for life now and in eternity future is faith in the reality of the two epiphanies of Jesus Christ!

When people oppose you and mock you for your proclamation of this truth, "rebuke" them "with all authority." Don't let anyone "disregard you" or reject you or cause you to think that your voice doesn't matter. Be faithful in preaching and teaching and sharing this wonderful truth, that the Son of God who first appeared centuries ago in a manger will once again appear in the clouds of heaven in blinding glory. This is our "blessed hope"!