

Christmas Day
December 25, 2018

Titus 2:11-14
55-37-63/68/50/56-62

May the peace the angel proclaimed, the peace the Christ-child brings, fill your hearts and lives today and always. Amen.

God's Grace Has Appeared – At the Manger!

- I. God's soul-saving grace.
- II. God's life-changing grace.
- III. God's hope-giving grace.

Dear Christian friends,

For perhaps well over 1,000 years **these verses** from Titus 2 have been the HISTORIC epistle reading for Christmas – and FOR GOOD REASONS. **These verses take us to** the manger but they also keep us from getting DISTRACTED and **side-tracked**. That can so easily happen with Christmas. The devil loves Christmas AS LONG AS he can keep the focus off the baby Jesus. So he tries to distract us with the lights and **decorations** – the presents and **parties** – the cards and **cookies**. There's NOTHING WRONG with any of that UNTIL it takes our focus off the baby Jesus.

Of course that the devil can't do that here in church, right? **Think again!** We CAN FOCUS on the straw and manger – the **“swaddling clothes”** – the smelly shepherds showing up unexpectedly. That is all part of GOD'S OWN ACCOUNT of the **first** Christmas. But we can't let those LITTLE DETAILS take our focus off the MAIN detail – the baby Jesus – God's Son born our Savior.

That's why I like these verses. Paul takes us to the manger. He focuses us on Jesus and explains, **“the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all people.”** GOD'S GRACE HAS APPEARED – AT THE MANGER! There at the manger is 1)**God's soul-saving** grace, 2)**God's life-changing** grace and 3)**God's hope-giving** grace.

I. God's soul-saving grace.

We go with Paul to Bethlehem. **Mary and Joseph** are basically out in a **barn** – a place to keep animals – because **“there was no room for them in the inn.”** Mary **“swaddled”** the baby Jesus just as many people still do today. DO YOU SEE the baby Jesus there “asleep on the hay?”

Kneeling at the manger Paul quietly whispers with HUSHED AWE – **“the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all people.”** The baby Jesus IS GOD Himself – the eternal Son of God – the almighty Creator of **all** things – born our **flesh-and-blood brother**. AS PROPHESED and promised Jesus is **“Immanuel”** – God Himself WITH us – one of us.

The baby Jesus is **God's grace** PERSONIFIED – God's grace IN THE FLESH. Do you remember the classic definition of grace – UNDESERVED love – God giving us the EXACT OPPOSITE of what we **really had coming**.

Let's BE HONEST **about ourselves** because we're certainly not fooling God. The LAST THING we deserved was a **Christmas present** from God. Instead of sending us to Bethlehem God HAD EVERY RIGHT to tell each one of us, **“Go to hell** for all I care! That's what you really deserve.” That's how seriously GOD TAKES our sins and WE better take them. God doesn't let us SHRUG OFF our sins as **no big deal**. So I don't always put GOD FIRST in my life – so my language – my attitude – my priorities aren't always THE GREATEST – so I sometimes drive over the speed limit or have a little too much to drink – so **mom sometimes has to tell me** MORE THAN ONCE to do something – OH WELL, **nobody's perfect**. Those **ten commandments** are DIRECT ORDERS from God, not suggestions on how He'd LIKE us to live our lives. If I really don't think my sins ARE SO BAD that God should condemn me to hell's **eternal banishment** and punishment – then I won't really appreciate – the MIRACLE – the GRACE – that **Christmas really is**.

But facing up to our sin and the hell we **really deserved** – that God instead sends us today to Bethlehem – that THERE AT the manger **“the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all people”** – WOW! **“I bring you good news of great joy,”** the angel told those shepherds, **“A SAVIOR has been born for you.”**

Today we see Jesus a **newborn baby**. Just like every other baby Jesus DIDN'T STAY a baby. Jesus grew up into a **child – teenager – adult**. But UNLIKE **every other** human being Jesus really was the PERFECT child – teenager – adult. Jesus lived His whole life with a PERFECT LOVE for and perfect obedience to His heavenly Father. God the Father could honestly say about Jesus, **“With Him I am well pleased.”** And now behold the GRACE of God – Jesus lived that life for us – Jesus gives us all the credit for His perfect life.

But don't stop there! Jesus was born in Bethlehem to ONE DAY DIE on Calvary's cross – to **“give Himself for us, to redeem us from all lawlessness.”** There on the cross that first Good Friday Jesus was punished for the sins of the world. **There** Jesus endured the hell we had coming – He shed His **precious** blood – sacrificed His **innocent** life to PERSONALLY PAY for **all** our sins **in full**. Jesus doesn't simply give us a SECOND CHANCE with God – He brings us forgiveness full and free – He reconciles and reunites us with God – He makes peace between God and us. WOW! WHAT GRACE!

Jesus did all that **“for ALL people.”** NO MATTER the person – the **sin** – how often the sin – FOR YOU – for **me** – for **all** Jesus was born the Savior in Bethlehem. The devil doesn't want us to SEE or **believe** that. DON'T LET him deceive you with his **lies** or distract you from Jesus. Kneel at the manger – savor Paul saying, **“the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to ALL people.”**

Seeing God's grace **at the manger** – treasuring God's **forgiveness** – HOW can we not be changed by that? **How** can we kneel at the manger – stand at the cross – check out Jesus' empty grave and then walk away with a HO-HUM - THAT'S NICE attitude? **“The grace of God has appeared”** –

II. God's life-changing grace.

We can't stay at the manger – JUST AS we can't hide here at church. We need both the **manger** and **church** to KEEP US FOCUSED on Jesus. But just as those shepherds CAME AND SAW Jesus and then went back to **“keeping watch”** over their flocks – so we today come to church – we kneel at the manger – and then we must go back and live our DAY-TO-DAY lives with **all their ups** and downs, **twists** and turns. But that doesn't mean we PACK JESUS AWAY with the rest of the Christmas decorations. God's grace – God's CHRISTMAS PRESENT of a Savior – changes everything.

We live now as Paul CALLS it, **“in this present age.”** It's pretty obvious we're NOT IN heaven yet and the devil wants to **make sure** we DON'T GET to heaven either. So he tempts DAY AFTER day – coming at us from **this direction**, then that direction, then a totally new, unexpected direction. He knows our WEAK SPOTS and he keeps hammering at us. He has willing allies in the **world** and our **sinful natures**. We might be ready to THROW IN the towel and GIVE IN to the devil but we have **God's grace** and **forgiveness** in Jesus. God's grace **“trains us to reject ungodliness.”**

“Reject” is the same word for **“deny”** – AS IN Peter **“denying”** Jesus – Peter **“rejecting”** any connection with Jesus. So we are to **“reject”** NOT JESUS but **“ungodliness.”**

“Ungodliness” is a very strong, negative word in the Greek. It's a TOTAL LACK of reverence and respect for God – the attitude of “I DON'T CARE what **God says** – God can take a hike!” THAT'S the world we live in – **“this present age”** – isn't it? That **“ungodliness”** can be so tempting but God's GRACE CHANGES our lives from a giving in to ungodliness to a **“rejecting”** it – wanting NO PART with such an attitude and **way of life**.

With **“ungodliness”** goes **“worldly lusts/desires.”** That's **“desiring”** the stuff and ways of the world. **Instead** of LIVING FOR GOD it's living for what **“the world”** has to offer. Again, THAT'S the

world we live in – **“this present age”** – isn’t it? “YOU WANT it – it feels right to you – GO FOR it and forget what **God says/wants.**” But having knelt at the manger – saved by God’s grace – washed clean in Jesus’ blood we **“reject”** – we want NOTHING TO DO with such GOD-DENYING, faith-destroying **“worldly desires.”** Or as Paul explains, **“Jesus gave Himself for us, to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for Himself a people who are His very own, EAGER to do good works.**

In such an **“ungodly present age”** saturated with **“worldly lusts”** and temptations God’s GRACE **“trains us to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives.”** **“Self-controlled”** – rather than BEING CONTROLLED by our bodies we’re IN CONTROL of our **bodies** – in control of our tongues – our mouths – our hands – **eyes, mind**, etc. **“Upright”** is doing what’s right IN GOD’S EYES – right as God defines right and wrong. Forget what EVERYBODY ELSE is doing – what God wants is WHAT MATTERS. **“Godly”** is the exact opposite of **“ungodly.”** **“Godly”** is that humble AWE – reverence, respect for God - a how could I dare IGNORE and DEFY my **dear Savior** – tell my heavenly Father to BUTT OUT and not interfere in my life? NO WAY – not after kneeling at the manger and standing at the cross and seeing Jesus’ empty grave!

Here it is **Christmas** and we’ve mentioned **Good Friday** and Easter. We can’t separate the three. **Actually** make that the FOUR – Christmas – Good Friday – Easter and Judgment Day. Here at the manger **“the grace of God has appeared”** –

III. God’s hope-giving grace.

Having knelt at the manger – holding tightly the Baby Jesus with the **arms of faith** – we now have a **“blessed hope”** as Paul calls it. Hope means we **have something** to LOOK FORWARD to. Earthly/worldly hopes often disappoint people. But we can confidently look forward to this **“blessed hope”** because GOD HAS PROMISED us this.

Our **“blessed hope is the glorious appearance of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.”** That Last Day will be a **“glorious”** day – so different from the first Christmas. Jesus will return **“in all His** (divine) **glory”** for all to see – Jesus taking us Christians to live with Him forever in that **“new heaven and new earth, where there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, where God will have wiped away every tear and made everything new.”** There will be that grand and glorious CHRISTIAN FAMILY REUNION **“before the throne of God and in front of the Lamb”** never again to be parted. We have that to LOOK FORWARD to – we can be absolutely sure and confident of that BECAUSE WE HAVE **today** – Christmas – God’s Son born our Savior. Yes, **“the grace of God has appeared”** – AT THE MANGER in Bethlehem. Amen.

EXPLANATION TO 2nd ARTICLE (in bulletin)