

Christmas: The Day God's Grace Appeared

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Date: 25 December 2016

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- [0 : 0 0] And tonight we're going to take a little bit of time to look at the Titus passage, which might be odd since we're here at Christmas not looking at the gospel passage, but I think you'll see why as we work through the text.
- So again, welcome to Church of the Advent. If you're new here, I don't think there could be a better day for you to have joined us. As today, presumably, we just took some time to feast and to open presents together wherever we have come from.
- And now we gather together as God's family in the world to feast at his table in a little while. And before we do that, we're going to take a look at Titus 2 and unwrap what Paul tells us is God's gift to the whole world, the greatest gift we could ever receive.
- So we turn to Titus 2. We are greeted by a beautiful and powerful phrase. For the grace of God has appeared. For Paul, who wrote this letter, this word grace is the linchpin of the gospel.
- It's the climax. It's the story of God and humanity summed up in one word. It permeated Paul's thinking and Paul's life. All of his ministry revolved around this word grace.
- [1 : 1 3] For Paul, he could not possibly conceive of salvation apart from grace. Pause for a second.
- What is grace? What is grace? Here's a classic definition. God's grace is his unmerited favor. Grace means that God showers favor and blessing.
- His good gifts on all those who do not in any way merit or deserve it. Those who deserve judgment receive mercy through God's grace.
- So, if we do not in any way merit or deserve it, and yet we receive it, then it can only be one thing, right? God's grace that Paul talks about here in Titus 2 is a gift.
- It's a Christmas gift. It's the Christmas gift. So, in verses 11 through 14 tonight of chapter 2 of Titus, we're going to look at two questions that this passage answers.
- [2 : 1 5] What is this gift of grace that Paul talks about? And what are we to do with it? Let us pray. Heavenly Father God, we thank you for Christmas.
- We thank you that the season of Advent comes to a close this day. That our hope has been realized in you. That our needs have been met in you.
- That Christmas signals and calls us to remember the day where you broke into time and space and rescued us. As we open up this passage tonight, God, we ask that you open up our hearts and our minds and our ears.
- That we can not only hear and receive, but we can be changed by your good news. In your name we pray. Amen. So, what is the gift that Paul calls God's grace here in Titus 2?
- It's three things. This gift of God's grace is seen in the person of Jesus, coming to fulfill the plan of God, and deal with the problem of sin.
- [3 : 1 8] Now, I used three Ps so I could remember it, and maybe that will help you. If not, feel free to forget that. Now that I've said that, you probably can't, and that's okay. But first things first, the gift of God's grace is seen in the person of Jesus.

Throughout the Bible, we come across these words, the grace of God appearing. The grace of God appears. The grace of God has appeared, as we see in tonight's text.

And every single time, this is a direct reference to the person of Jesus. For Paul, his life word is grace, as we talked about a moment ago. And for him, it cannot be separated from salvation.

Therefore, when we see the grace of God appearing, it leads us to one conclusion, and one conclusion only. The grace of God that has appeared is none other than the person of Jesus.

The person of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ become man, born in the humble setting of a backyard cattle shed. To become the gift we all desperately need.

[4 : 24] But he didn't just come as a person. He didn't just come to be another guy to walk and talk on the earth. He didn't come just to be a human. Jesus Christ came as a person to fulfill the plan of God.

And deal with the problem of sin. What is this problem, and what is this plan? Well, from the beginning, God created with the desire and the intention to be in perfect relationship with his creation.

But we, humanity, starting with Adam and Eve at the very beginning, the first people, have chosen to follow our own desires, our own passions, our own way of life, instead of a relationship with God.

A choice that has left us in a hopeless, dire situation that we could not undo or get ourselves out of. From that moment on, from that first moment where we chose ourselves instead of God, God put a plan into action.

A plan to rescue us from our destruction and death. A plan to break into the world and save us when we weren't even aware that we needed saving. Without God's plan to deal with the problem of sin, we would still be hopelessly stuck in our self-made problem.

[5 : 44] This need of a miracle and of rescue is much like two stories of shipwreck that end up with two very different endings. In the spring of 1912, a ship named after a Greek myth struck an object in the Atlantic.

Of the roughly 2,200 passengers and crew, over 1,500 of them went down with the ship. Just about 70% of the lives were lost.

It was thought to be an unsinkable ship. The crew was unprepared to launch the lifeboats. And they were untrained in how many of the lifeboats could hold as they ended up loading only about 50% capacity into each lifeboat.

The people on the ship didn't immediately respond to the sirens warning them to evacuate because in their minds, there was no space for this being a reality. There was no conceivable way that this ship, named after a Greek myth, could go down.

Why? Simply this. They thought they were safe. They thought this ship, the Titanic, was indestructible. And the second story is of a ship named the SS Andrea Doria, sailing the Atlantic in 1956, just 40-some years after the Titanic.

[7 : 03] She was hardly more prepared than the Titanic. But there was one life-altering difference. After a collision off the coast of Massachusetts, a multitude of other ships, having seen on their radar this collision happen, and hearing through their radios the calls for help, came to the rescue, offering safety to the majority of the passengers and crew.

Of the 1,706 passengers and crew, all but 46 survived. The difference? Someone, some crew, a host of ships outside of themselves, broke onto the scene and rescued them, or it would have been the Titanic 2.0.

In the same way, Jesus Christ, without our asking or even knowing, the eternal problem we are facing, came on a rescue mission. A rescue mission to save us from our brokenness and death.

A rescue mission called Christmas. He came to save us and rescue us from the sinking ship that is our sin. And it's a death that I think we don't even recognize most of the time, if you're anything like me.

We have earned this death. We have chosen to follow our own desires instead of God's will, but just the same, regardless of what we've done or what we do, Jesus came as the gift of grace to rescue us from our situation.

[8 : 32] So, the answer to the first question is this, the gift of grace has appeared in the person of Jesus, come to fulfill the plan of God, and deal with the problem of sin.

However, is any gift a good gift unless it is received? That's the real question, isn't it? Or is it simply a package, a box, an unknown thing, neatly wrapped, residing under a Christmas tree?

Essentially useless. Right? Even the passengers of the SS Andrea Doria, they had to choose to actively participate in the gift that was their rescue. They had to actively receive this gift by boarding the ships that came to rescue.

They could not stay on their sinking ship and receive the gift. Something had to happen. So, the second question for us tonight is this, what are we to do with this gift of grace, this gift of Jesus, that we celebrate at Christmas?

Paul says two things. He says, receive it freely, and he says, let it change our hearts and our lives. The first thing then, receive it freely.

[9 : 46] Learn to receive it freely. Verse 11 says in our text, that it is a salvation for the whole world, unmerited and unearned. Oftentimes, receiving gifts can be the hardest part of gift giving.

I have to admit, if someone offers me lunch, I'm very quick to ask them when I might get them back or offer to get them back the next time we have lunch.

Or, and maybe you can resonate with this, I try to repay this non-existing debt to my friend even more quickly by asking, can I Venmo you?

Maybe you can resonate with this. Maybe you yourselves have offered Venmo as a way of paying a non-existent debt to someone offering you a beverage or a meal or a gift.

But for that gift to remain a gift, for any gift to remain a gift, we cannot repay it. We cannot turn it into a transaction. Because just like we saw with grace at the beginning, a gift by nature is freely received.

[10 : 57] We see this in the great musical-turned-film Les Miserables, after Jean Valjean, a convict and a thief, is caught red-handed and returned to the bishop from whom he stole a bag full of silver.

If you've seen this movie, you know where I'm going. Upon his arrest and return to the bishop, the bishop looks at the guards and says, feel free to leave. This man stole nothing from me.

This was a gift. He's not a thief, but my guest. Jean Valjean, having received this grace, is confused. He's at a loss for words.

He's utterly speechless. And the bishop offers this beautiful summary of grace. The scene goes like this. The bishop drew near to him and said in a low voice, Do not forget, never forget, that you have promised to use this money in becoming an honest man.

Jean Valjean, who had no recollection of ever having promised anything, remained speechless. The bishop, having emphasized the words when he uttered them, continued on to Jean Valjean.

[12 : 14] He says this, Jean Valjean, my brother, you no longer belong to evil, but to good. It is your soul that I buy from you.

I withdraw it from black thoughts and perdition, and I give it to God. Isn't that beautiful? This is the gift of Christmas.

This is the gift of grace that we see here in Les Miserables, which we neither deserve or can earn, and yet it changes us forever. Think about how countercultural it is to have unmerited favor and blessing.

In our schools, you work to earn a good grade so you can earn a scholarship or an award that'll earn you a degree that positions you well to get a good job in a prestigious firm or company or career path.

But it doesn't stop there, does it? No, you get the job, and then you work to do well to earn your raise or your promotion, knowing that if you do sloppy or poor work, eventually you'll be demoted or worse, fired.

[13 : 38] Relationships. Relationships are that way in our culture, I think. Most of the time they operate on the question, what are you doing for me that I should love you?

Are you loving me well enough to earn my love, my trust, and my allegiance? Relationships end up in shambles because of this idea of merit-based worth.

Work becomes life-taking instead of enjoyable and God-glorifying because of merit-based worth. But Jesus offers us an upside-down kingdom, an upside-down way of living, an upside-down love.

We do not earn it. We cannot get more of it through success or loyalty. And best of all, we cannot lose it. I imagine if all human relationships worked this way, that we would begin to see more and more of a glimpse of what this world can and will be when Christ comes again in glory to reclaim all of this world that is His.

He's broken in on Christmas Day and He's coming back to redeem this whole thing. For those of us who have been trying to carry the burden all on our own, trying to do enough, to be enough, to succeed enough, to be worth someone else's love or recognition, this gift of Jesus, this gift of Christmas, has got to be the sweetest sound our ears could ever hear.

[15 : 16] There's nothing like it. And yet there's a little bit more to this idea of receiving a gift. When you get a Christmas present, are you content to just freely receive it?

If someone buys you lunch, are you content to just have them buy it for you and have it set in front of you? Isn't there a little part of you that wants to open up the present that you've received and see what's inside, to put it to use, to play with it?

Children absolutely lead the way for us in learning how to receive God's grace and how to receive good gifts. Christmas morning just happened. Many of you probably had children around the Christmas tree with you.

Like a child, they wake up in the morning, the earliest morning of the year for most children. At least it was for me as a child. It was the one morning sleeping in, didn't matter, cartoons didn't matter, gifts mattered.

They get up, they run to the tree, they tear off the wrapping paper, they rip open the box, they hurriedly rip through all of it in a hurry to see and use this new gift.

[16 : 25] It changes them. It changes them and their priorities. With a child and his or her toy, it changes them for a while, right? For an hour, or a day, or a week, until it's broken, or until they get a next gift or present.

If they're young enough, maybe until brother and sister open their present and it seems better at the time. But for us, for us receiving the gift of Jesus, receiving the gift of God's grace, it lasts forever.

And we must let this gift of grace change our hearts and our lives forever with it. We'll return to Les Misérables for a second. This beautiful, beautiful reality of Les Misérables is seen in Jean Valjean, the character who becomes the main character throughout the film.

Having received freely this grace in the opening of the film, the rest of the film shows us what happened once he received this grace. You see, Jean Valjean doesn't go back to the life he lived before.

Jean Valjean doesn't forget this gift that he received from the bishop. No. No, he goes on and he does exactly what the gift was intended to do. He goes and he runs a business that's just and right.

[17 : 43] He later on saves an old man from an injury at work and offers him a pension that he neither earned nor deserved. He saves a woman who is a social outcast and takes care of her through her dying days.

And even once she has passed, he risks his life to go and save this woman's daughter who is living as a servant in another part of the area. He later on offers up his life and his freedom to set another man free.

Grace changed him and so too shall it define our lives once we receive it from Christ. So receiving this grace and being changed by it means two things.

First of all, it means turning away from worldly ways and our own human passions and desires. And second, it means turning towards God. It means turning towards God and living a self-controlled, upright, and godly life.

Another translation of the passage says this, turning from drunkenness and living a sober life. I like that language because it shows us the point of the text we read tonight.

[19 : 01] The two options are mutually exclusive. You can't have one and the other. It becomes clear then that the first list, the do-nots that Paul lists for us, are all inward and self-serving things, motives for us.

And the second list, the do's, the ways in which the gift of grace changes us, are all outward and selfless motives, meant to serve the world, God's kingdom, and God himself.

But how do we learn to begin to practice turning towards God? just a few suggestions. Friends, spend time opening and reading the Bible.

And as you do, remember that every story in the book, every story that this book has in it points you to Jesus and nowhere else.

is the life that we learn secondly, by worshiping on Sundays together. It shapes us, it forms us, it helps us practice turning towards God actively together.

[20 : 08] And thirdly, by praying, eating, and playing with other Christians. If you're a member here at Advent, you may recognize this as the life of our core groups, our small group ministry here at Church of the Advent.

If you're new here tonight, I would encourage you to check out and join one of our core groups as they are intended to be the place in our church that helps us practice this life of turning towards God.

So just a few habits and practices, and there's many more. But I encourage you to try some, to put them to practice. Let them turn you around, let them shape you.

What I love most about this idea that Paul has for us tonight of actively receiving by turning away and turning towards is you cannot by nature turn away from something and turn towards something at the same time.

They're opposites, right? If I'm turned towards you all, if I'm facing you as I talk tonight, I am by nature turned away from the cross and table behind me. And likewise, if I turn around and I face the cross and the table, I'm turned away from you because they can't coincide.

[21 : 22] They can't be together. And yet, if you're anything like me, I try to do this way too often. I want all of the world and I want all of Jesus.

I want both camps and I want to have it all. The gospel tells us, friends, it just isn't possible. It just isn't possible.

But for us, the offer is this. The grace of God has appeared and is freely given to us for salvation. Won't you receive it?

Won't you unwrap this gift of grace and let it change you by turning you towards God and how you live and how you think about relationships and how you think about your work, your home, your family, and your play.

As we begin to live this way, the worldly desires and passions that boil up inside of us will begin to get pushed out. We'll be pushed to the edges as our heart grows bigger and fuller with God's desires and will.

[22 : 28] for Paul, for Jean Valjean, and for us, this gift of grace, the birth of Jesus, the true joy of Christmas, it turns us towards God.

It turns us towards His kingdom work as we wait for Jesus to return. And while we wait, we join with Him in the restoration of this world.

in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. Amen. Let's pray.