

Christmas Eve 8pm

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Preacher: Canon David Short

[0 : 00] I want to add my welcome to Jordan's and say congratulations for making it here. I thought at one stage I was going to have to get out my GPS to find the church in the fog.

I hope you all made it. What I mean is I hope everyone who left home to come to church tonight made it. I guess we won't know, will we, until later. I wonder if you would turn back to that little reading Michelle read for us in Titus.

There's a Bible in front of you. If it's too dark to pick up, just listen. This little passage in Titus 2 on page 998 is set to be read in churches all over the world tonight on Christmas Eve.

And the book of Titus was written by the Apostle Paul to new Christians, new Christian believers on the island of Crete in the Mediterranean who'd never seen Jesus.

They had heard the good news about his birth, his death and his resurrection. And they had turned to Jesus Christ. And they now gathered in little churches all over the island to live out their new life.

[1 : 09] And to live out the new life on Crete was a very tall order. Crete was famously a pirate culture.

It was rough and violent and greedy. And in chapter 1, the Apostle Paul quotes a Cretan poet, one of their own, saying this about his own people.

Quote, And he's not being critical.

He's just telling it as it is. The truth was not a high value nor was self-control. And so this little passage, which is set to be read at Christmas Eve, comes at the Christmas story from a bit of a different angle.

It's essentially how the birth and death of Jesus Christ can bring moral and spiritual transformation even to Cretans.

[2 : 14] And at the centre of the little passage, and it's only four verses, is the most astonishing moral transformation of ordinary believers. In verse 12, he says, To live self-controlled, upright and godly lives.

And at the end of verse 14, he says, It doesn't happen. It did not happen by massive inner effort for these new believers.

The Apostle didn't give them a new set of rules. They weren't overly devout. They weren't just great raw material. But the Apostle shows here how this deep moral transformation is a direct result of the coming of Jesus at Christmas and his death on the cross.

And through those two, God has made the Cretans into new people with a completely new moral compass. And the new moral compass comes from their relationship with Jesus himself.

Now, you may say, That's very interesting, David. It's 2,000 years ago. I think it's highly relevant for us today. I mean, much of our polarisation and cultural divisions today are along the lines of ethics.

[3 : 31] And moral thinking. Think of any issue. Global warming. Quality rights. Medical termination.

Sexuality. We're divided along these lines in the West. Jonathan Haight, who is a social psychologist and an atheist, said, this is his explanation, Our moral reasoning is a skill we have evolved to justify our actions and defend the teams we belong to.

That's a very interesting observation. A little bit cynical, perhaps. But if you look below the outrage and the posturing, there is little agreement today on what is right and wrong.

There's little agreement on whether there is such a thing as right and wrong. Can we use those words? And the swarming death in Toronto this week of a man by eight teens and the shooting in the condo has led to much hand-wringing, even calls for teaching ethics again.

And the question this passage puts before us is this. Where does real change come from? Where does real, inner, moral change come from?

[4 : 43] Does it come as we try harder? Do we need better rules, better laws, better leaders, better policing? All of these can be helpful and they may restrain us, but none of these things can change us.

And we're so glad tonight to meet together to sing, To us the sun is given. Peace on earth and mercy mild. God and sin are reconciled. Right in the middle of this dark and cold season, in a year of war and instability and disease.

And the question for us is what difference does it make that Christ came at Christmas? What does the greatest news that's ever been told have to do with me?

And these little four verses are so filled with hope for all of us who are tempted to be disheartened and discouraged, feeling the darkness around us and the darkness within us.

And the passage literally shines and radiates with the grace of God and the glory of God as the source and fountain of salvation and hope.

[5 : 57] And it draws a straight line from the grace of God in highest heaven right into our hearts through Christmas and the cross. And it does it by making two points. At the beginning and the end of the passage, the Apostle Paul wants us to know about the source of real change.

And then right at the heart of the passage, and that's the second point, how it works now daily. So just two points. What is the source of real change?

Well, in verse 11, he begins with these words. And this is the Apostle's way of describing the first Christmas. And you can almost hear an echo of the angel's voice. He says, For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people.

And the fact that has appeared, it has appeared, means that the grace of God does not start at Bethlehem. It was long foretold by the prophets. It was long foretold by the prophets.

He says, And what we celebrate tonight is the shining manifestation of the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

[8 : 06] Now, this word grace is a favourite word in the scriptures. It's the key that unlocks the Christian faith. And most simply put, God's grace is God's personal way of loving us.

It's a love that has no motive outside itself. It simply delights to give to those who have nothing, who've done nothing to deserve it. And it's always completely free.

It's a gift. It's not a reward. And it's always completely rich and lavish, overflowing, unstinting, never restrained, never reserved.

It's not tolerance. It's not tolerance. It's not niceness. It's the personal, spontaneous, undeserved, unconditional goodness of God poured out to us.

And I think we tend to look at God as basically being disappointed with us. You know, how can they keep doing those things after all I've done for them?

[9 : 08] We think of his love as having a limit, an end point, an expiration date. But that's not the God of the Bible. It's not the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who came from heaven to be born for us.

And his grace and his love is higher and broader and deeper and longer than any of us could ever imagine. Jesus Christ is the only human who chose deliberately to be born.

And he chose to be born to those who would reject him and kill him, who would not recognize his extraordinary love and self-giving. That is grace. And he comes not just to identify with us in our darkness and sin.

He comes to deal with our darkness and sin. And that's why the apostle says in verse 14, he gave himself.

Literally, our great God and Savior Jesus Christ gave himself for us. To redeem us from all lawlessness. To purify for himself a people for his own preciousness.

[10 : 20] Who are zealous for good works. So he doesn't just empty himself into the form of a servant. He humbles himself to death on a cross. He doesn't just leave heaven for you and me.

He endures hell for you and me. He doesn't simply die. He was condemned. He doesn't simply die. He gave himself for us.

And I wonder if you picked up in those words as I read them just how personal this is for Jesus. He gave himself for us. To purify for himself a people for his own possession.

It's not a general heroic act. It's a conscious choice of love. He goes to the cross and he dies with us in mind. It is supremely and infinitely costly for him.

And he does it because he wants to make us his own. Now, I just want to make a comment on this word precious here. Many of us who are parents have experienced great pain this year.

[11 : 31] Seeing our children in physical and emotional and spiritual danger. Doesn't stop when they leave home. It's always close to the surface. And some of you have said you would be willing to give your life for your child because of how precious they are for you.

But such is our value to the Lord Jesus Christ that he did give his life for us. He did not wait for us to clean up our act. But in his grace, he took the initiative to rinse muddy sinners clean and then to hug them to his heart.

It's simply the best news that we can hear. That Christ Jesus came for us and gave himself freely, lavishly.

I just invented a new word, freely. There you go. So the Christmas and the cross put the love of God beyond all doubt.

And now we begin to see where true change comes from. It's not be good because it's good to be good. It's not be good because society will work better.

[12 : 46] It's not even be good because God will get you. It's not be good because God will bless you. It arises from the wonder of the completely undeserved grace and love and giving of the Son of God.

It's not transactional. Jesus does not say, I'll do this for you if you do this for me. And if you don't hold up your end of the bargain, my love is going to dry up for you.

It's personal. It's personal. It's not. That God, the Son of God, would set his love on me. He doesn't meet me halfway. He doesn't hold back. He gives himself from heaven and gives his life over to death while I was busy loving my own glory.

and he makes us his own and joyfully calls us his brothers and sisters so that we can say, I belong to him, body and soul, and nothing in my waywardness threatens his love for me because he set his heart on me before the foundation of the world.

That's no wonder we sing, come let us adore him. This is the source and foundation of any real transformation and change. It is the person of Jesus Christ and our relation to him by his love.

[14 : 07] And so I move secondly and even quickly, so how does that work in practice? It works like this. The grace and giving of Christ then has ongoing daily transforming power in our lives now.

There is a change in tense. So if you just listen to these words, the grace of God has appeared bringing salvation for all people in the past, training us now to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in the present age.

This training is an ongoing present reality. It's very encouraging because God's grace doesn't leave us to ourselves, nor do we suddenly become perfect in case you hadn't noticed.

But God's grace only shines more brightly the more we fail. And the grace and love of God don't stop when Jesus went back to heaven. But for all who put their trust in him, he himself comes into our lives.

And he himself takes up residence in our lives, bringing his life and bringing his love and bringing his grace and bringing his spirit. And he daily trains and changes us.

[15 : 31] And the training word here is not the gymnasium training word. This is a word used of parents raising children, staying up at night, giving them medication, providing and deciding and directing and picking them up when they fall.

The grace of God that appeared in Bethlehem those many years ago, and in the cross of Christ those many years ago, now enters our lives and raises us as the children of God with ongoing change.

This is completely different, as far as I know, to any other ethical or moral way of thinking in the world. This is not Greek ethics. It's not situational ethics.

It's not the ethics of love. It's not Western ethics. It's not Eastern ethics. It is a new life, if you like. It's the ethics of the kingdom of God.

It's not a list of rules outside us. It's not having to be true to my authentic feelings. It is change that comes from my relationship with God through Jesus Christ now daily.

[16 : 42] How does it work? Well, take lying. Remember, all Cretans are liars. A very desirable feature of life on Crete. Not a bad feature of life today.

As one author says, In traditional moral training, how do you teach honesty? We say, do not lie or you will get caught.

Or we say, do not lie, society won't work well. Or we say, do not lie, God will punish you. But all of those will only restrain the heart.

They don't change the heart. All those things have no power to change my inner character. They're temporary and they're superficial because they don't go to the roots of my dishonesty.

The only way to change in this area is when my heart feels absolutely loved so that lying is unnecessary and unnatural.

[17 : 41] And that's only the experience of the grace of God through Jesus Christ that changes the heart rather than just restraining the heart. Or take being upright in verse 12.

Upright is a rich relationship word for how we treat others. Again, traditional moral methods would say, don't take revenge or you'll get caught.

Don't treat others badly or society won't work. Don't be mean to people or God will punish you. But it's only in the way that God has treated us that we can learn to treat people around us better than ourselves.

It's only when we experience how God has valued us in Christ's coming and Christ's cross that we can truly value others. And I don't know what's going on for you, but you can apply this to any area of life.

It is only the grace of God in Jesus Christ that has the power to humble you if you struggle with superiority and pride. To lift you up if you struggle with self-loathing and guilt.

[18 : 51] It's only receiving his grace each day that can sweeten you if you're a bitter person. Or calm you if you're an anxious person. Or melt you if you've become a cynical person.

And all it takes is going to him day by day asking for his forgiveness. For the dear Christ to enter in and be born in us today. It's never going to come from looking inside ourselves.

Or trying harder and failing. But actively taking the radical costly grace of God into our hearts. Knowing he accepts us despite our sins.

There's nothing we can do to make ourselves more secure in his love. And I think that's why in verse 13, the apostle cannot help mentioning his second appearing.

We wait for our blessed hope, he says. The appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ. His full glory and majesty is tonight seen by the angels in heaven, but it's hidden from our sight.

[20 : 00] But when he comes, he will appear. And every eye will see him. And every knee will bow. And every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord of all. And the grace that appeared at Christmas now trains us toward this blessed hope.

Because our hope is not fixed on heaven or grand reunions. Our hope is fixed on our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ. And there is nothing that can weaken or threaten his grace.

And there is nothing that can take us from his love. This is what we celebrate tonight. The revealing of the glory of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ, in the past.

The revealing of the glory of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ, in the future. And we pray for the revealing of his grace and glory in our lives day by day.

Amen.