

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, December 13, 1989, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

TITUS 2:11-13

“For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self—controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope - the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.”

THE MEANING OF CHRISTMAS – PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

One way to murder Christmas is to sentimentalize it. We can so glamorize the “Child in the manger” as to reduce the religion of Calvary and the empty tomb to an easygoing, amiable emotionalism which is the very antithesis of authentic Christianity.

At Christmastime, we focus upon the shepherds in the fields, the heavenly host singing “Glory to God in the highest,” the star in the East, the Wise Men three, and the Baby wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

Now it is entirely proper to remember these things if they create in us wonder and awe. But let us also recognize that the New Testament, which tells of God’s saving action in coming to us in the Person of Jesus Christ, actually has very little to say about the star, the wise men, the shepherds, the sheep, the angels and the Baby.

Do you realize that St. Mark does not mention a single one of these things? Nor does St. John, nor St. Paul. Why? Probably because they were eager to get on to the more basic truths about the meaning of His coming.

Mind you, I am not for a moment seeking to demean the beauty of the story by Matthew and Luke, of our Lord’s birth, but I am suggesting that perhaps, like Mark and John and Paul, we too should get on beyond our emphasis and preoccupation at Christmas with some of the peripheral details surrounding His birth, and wrestle much more with the meaning of His coming as it relates to us and to our world. I’m afraid that sometimes we succumb to a naive emotionalism, and fail to grow, with our Lord, “in wisdom and in stature” (Luke 2:52).

Paul, in writing to Titus, gives us a message that grapples with the larger meaning of Christmas, past, present and future.

1. The Past Meaning of Christmas. Paul says, “The grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men.” The unusual expression, “the grace of God has appeared,” occurs only this once in the New Testament. While “grace” invariably refers to God’s amazing love which is always completely undeserved by us, the description of it here anchors it firmly to a specific historical event -- the coming of our blessed Lord from heaven to earth 2,000 years ago.

“The grace of God has appeared”! Years ago, when we used to have our Tuesday morning men’s prayer meeting, I would leave the house at 6 a.m., and looking up into the clear but black sky, I would see the “Morning Star” shining brightly. But an hour and a half later, when I returned home, the sun had arisen, and had magnificently dispelled the darkness!

Now, when Paul says, “The grace of God has appeared,” the Greek verb is the word used to speak of the brilliance of the sun as it appears above the horizon to herald the coming of a new day and to bathe the world in the beauty of light. And that is precisely what took place when the God-Man, our Lord Jesus Christ, visited our little planet 2,000 years ago. He came to a world drenched in the darkness of sin and hopeless despair. Oh, the Morning Star had been shining to herald His coming. It had been shining in the message of prophet and psalmist, and supremely in the message of John the Baptist when he thundered forth, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near!” (Matthew 3:2). But with the birth of the Redeemer the dawn came, the darkness was forever dispelled, for our blessed Lord is “The Sun of righteousness” (Malachi 4:2); He is “the Light of the world” (John 8:12).

Here is the very heart and soul of the Christian Gospel -- the good news of an historical event that took place 2,000 years ago, an event that changed the face of the world and ushered in God’s new and glorious day of salvation! So often we hear modern Christians cry out in faithless despair, “Look what the world has come to!”, while the early Christians shouted for joy, “Look what has come to the world!” In Jesus Christ God Almighty has visited us in saving grace!

What is “the grace of God”? Webster’s Dictionary tells us —

- generosity shown by God to man
- divine favor unmerited by man
- a free gift of God to man for his regeneration and sanctification
- the display of kindly treatment usually on the part of a superior mercy.

You know, there is sounder doctrine in Webster than there is in the writings of many modern avant-garde theologians!

“Grace” is the father of the prodigal son running down the road to receive, with open arms, and welcome home, the boy who had broken his father’s heart by going off into the far country, where he had squandered all that his father had given him in reckless sinful living.

“Grace” is God, in infinite love, stooping to a manger and suffering upon a cross. “Grace” is the child of love and the parent of mercy. It is God’s love not only looking down but coming down to earth to save us whose sins have merited His wrath and condemnation.

“The grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men.” Grace always aims at salvation. When I peep at the Baby in the manger, and then gaze upon the young Man hanging

on a cross on a windswept hill, I can only exclaim, "God loves me like that!" He came, in infinite grace, from heaven's glory, to do that, because He wanted to save me from death and hell.

It is only six miles from Bethlehem to Jerusalem. A 50-cent bus ride will take you from where Jesus was born to where He died. And you can never separate Bethlehem and Calvary in Christian experience. He was born to die, and the birth is only explained by the death. By His death Jesus atoned for your sins and mine; He took our place; He bore the punishment I should have borne; and He did it so that God, in sovereign grace, could justly forgive me, and blot out my sins forever!

And what must I do to receive this salvation? Simply come as I am and gratefully receive the forgiveness which God offers through the death of Jesus. If you don't know, this morning, the joy of God's salvation; if you have not experienced the forgiveness of your sins through the blood of the Cross, then kneel before that Cross right now, just as you are, and receive what God offers you in Christ.

A famous English artist was painting a picture of life in the city of London. He wanted to portray on the canvas various types of people who lived in the great sprawling metropolis. He was looking for a good specimen of a little London street arab, a boy very much alive, dirty, in rags, but with a sharp demeanor. And one day he found just the boy he wanted, sitting on the sidewalk with his feet in the gutter. "My boy," he said, "would you like to earn six-pence?" "I certainly would, Sir!" came the eager reply. "Well, here is my card. Come to this address just as you are at nine o'clock tomorrow morning, and you shall have your sixpence." The boy reckoned this was the cheapest six-pence he would ever earn, so promptly at 9 a.m. next morning he rang the doorbell. The maid who answered came and said, "There's a little boy, Sir, who wants to see you." "Please bring him in," said the painter. And in a moment the little boy of the day before stood before him. But his face was clean, his hair was brushed, and his mother, who had thought there were good prospects for the boy, had sewn together his rags! And this comical little fellow looked up at the artist and said, "I've come for my sixpence, Sir!" "Do you remember what I told you?" asked the painter. "Yes, Sir." "Are you sure?" "Yes, Sir, you told me to be here at nine sharp, and here I am, right on time!" "But, son, you've forgotten - I told you to come just as you are. I could have painted you if you had come as you were yesterday. I can't paint you as you are today!"

You get the point, don't you? Come to God just as you are. Don't try to make yourself morally presentable to Him. That would defeat His purpose in calling you to Himself. He wants to show you what the precious blood of Jesus can do in washing your sins away forever! He wants to show you what His grace can do to restore you. He can wash you white as snow if you come just as you are!

Just as I am, without one plea
But that Thy blood was shed for me,
And that Thou bidd'st me come to Thee,
Oh Lamb of God, I come.

"The grace of God that brings salvation has appeared..."-- 2,000 years ago. That is the past

meaning of Christmas. Look now at --

2. The Present Meaning of Christmas. “For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age.” Have you accepted the saving grace of God that He offers in Christ Jesus? If you have, then remember that that grace not only saves you, but it teaches you to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live a self-controlled, upright and godly life now - “in this present age.”

Are you doing that? Are you living out the present meaning of Christmas? Are you saying “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions? How far have you advanced in God’s divine program of training? How far have you come in turning away from the things of this world? What of sin and self have you renounced since you accepted the grace of God in Christ?

What does it mean to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions? For one it may mean having done with alcohol or tobacco; for another an adulterous affair; for another an attitude of self pity; for another a spirit of envy; for another a quick and bad temper; for another the self-centeredness that enjoys every luxury but has no concern for the poor, the underprivileged and the oppressed; and for yet another no burden for the salvation of relatives and friends who do not know Christ.

Are you living a self-controlled life, or do you hate yourself for doing things you know you ought not to do?

Are you living an upright and godly life that will bear scrutiny from any quarter? What is the first thing people think of when your name is mentioned? Have those in your home known and felt and been touched by the power of God working in your life during the year that is fast drawing to a close? And have those people with whom you work seen in you deeds done in kindness and goodness? Has the honesty, the integrity and the compassion of God been reflected in you, so that others have seen His character in your actions, and felt His winsomeness and warmth in your concern? Is the power of God unleashed and at work in you so that others can see Him in you? These are questions that you and I as Christians should ask ourselves, especially during this Advent season as we reflect upon the words of Malachi the prophet when he speaks of Messiah’s coming -- “But who can endure the day of His coming, and who shall stand when He appears?” (Malachi 3:2).

If you take seriously the call of Christ to live a godly life in this present age, then you will at all times strive to be friendly, sensible, reverent, compassionate, joyful, sound in faith, in love and in steadfastness. I know of no greater challenge or gift this Christmas than to seek, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to say “No” to all those things that are interfering with the victorious life in Christ. This present and glorious possibility of victory is based on what Jesus accomplished for us at Calvary; but it also looks forward to the future -- and that brings us to consider finally --

3. The Future Meaning of Christmas. We are to “have done with ungodliness and worldly passions... in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope, the glorious appearing of our

great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.” The Christian Gospel centers in and resolves around the two “appearings” of our Lord and Savior -- the first, 2,000 years ago in Palestine; and the second on the day of judgment. And the future meaning of Christmas will be this tremendous appearing when He “comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, when He shall sit upon the throne of His glory... Then shall the King say to those on His right hand, ‘Come, you who are blessed by My Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world’... Then shall He say also to those on His left hand, ‘Depart from Me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels’” (Matthew 25:31,34,41).

What feelings are predominant in your mind and heart when you think about the second coming of our Lord -- an event which could take place at any time? Are they feelings of apprehension or anticipation, of dread or of delight?

If you have accepted by faith the gift of salvation and eternal life which He purchased for you at His first coming; and if you are determined, by the power of His indwelling Spirit, to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live a self-controlled, upright and godly life in this present age; then you may anticipate with great joy the event of the ages -- the consummation of history, the ending of time and the ushering in of eternity, at the second coming of our great God and Savior.

The real dynamic of the new life in Christ is the expectation of His second coming. When a royal visit is expected, everything is cleansed and decorated, and made fit for the royal eye to see. The Christian is the person who is always prepared for the coming of the King of Kings.

St. John, in his first letter, puts it very beautifully — “Dear friends, now we are the children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when He appears, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. Everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as Christ is pure” (1 John 3:2,3).

“Even so come, Lord Jesus” (Revelation 22:20)

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“Oh come, let us adore Him, Christ the Lord!”

AMEN.