

## Living between Appearings: A Sermon for the Christmas Season

Titus 2:11-12

By Bob Young

### Introduction

Titles are difficult. I thought of two alternate titles that I really liked: "When Grace Appeared" and "From Grace to Glory."

In the hustle and bustle of Christmas, when we trim the tree, in all that accompanies this festive season, the question could be raised, how did the first century Christians celebrate Christmas? Did they celebrate the birthday of their Lord Jesus Christ? Students of the NT know that to read carefully the NT is to make a rather startling discovery. There is no Christmas celebration in the NT! There are the Nativity narratives with the coming of the shepherds and later coming of the wise men. But in the writings of Paul and James and Peter and John there is no reference to a Christmas celebration. Did they not care about the birthday of Jesus? Were they opposed to it like the early Pilgrim Fathers, who felt it was a frivolous and worldly manifestation and forbade it by law? Was it because credit cards had not been invented and they could not afford it?

Today I suggest a reason for this amazing fact. The early Christians, the apostles and their associates, did not see the life of Jesus in segments as we do—the birth, hidden years, open ministry, the cross, and the resurrection. We have the Gospels and it is easier to study it when it is broken up that way. They saw the life of Jesus and his ministry as one complete whole, all the great events blended together into one, which they called "the appearing of Jesus Christ."

Paul writes to Timothy,

**Do not be ashamed then of testifying to our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but take your share of suffering for the gospel in the power of God, who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not in virtue of our works but in virtue of his own purpose and the grace which he gave us in Christ Jesus ages ago, and now has manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. {2 Tim 1:8-10 RSV}**

He groups it all together as one great event which he calls "the appearing." In Titus 2:11, we have the same nomenclature,

**For the grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all men, training us to renounce irreligion and worldly passions, and to live sober, upright, and godly lives in this world, awaiting 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 iniquity and to purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds. {Tit 2:11-14 RSV}**

Notice, there are two "appearings" in this passage. One is a part of history and was so in Paul's day, "for the grace of God has appeared." That appearing covers the entire life and ministry of Jesus Christ from the birth of Jesus through the cross and the resurrection; from Bethlehem to the Mount of Olives; from the open heavens where the shepherds heard the voices of the angels singing, to the open heavens when the disciples looked up and saw him disappearing into the clouds of heaven. Thirty-three years--one appearing of Jesus Christ.

The second appearing is a part of prophecy even 2000 years after the words were written. We are "awaiting our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us." Paul calls this "our blessed hope." This is the only way out for a war-torn, weary, troubled world.

The first appearing is called the appearing of the grace of our Lord Jesus, while the second one is the appearing of His glory--two distinct concepts. In between comes what has been called, quite properly, "the age of grace," the age in which we live, and the age in which Paul wrote. The word "appearing" is, in the original, *epiphany*. It has been transliterated into English and means "a shining forth." The New English Bible reads, "The grace of God has dawned upon the world." What a beautiful expression of Christmas!

The nature of Christ's first appearing, beginning at Bethlehem and through his ministry is plainly described for us. From Bethlehem through the darkness of Calvary to the glorious light of Easter morning you have that which introduces the age of grace. It is grace -- God reaching out to man.

Grace means that the first subject on God's agenda in Christ is not judgment but love (John 3:16-17). In Jesus, grace appeared. Many today fear that if they draw near to God, the first thing God wants to talk about is condemnation, his desire to punish sins. Grace is the first subject on God's program. Grace has appeared. For multiple millennia, God permitted man to have his own way. He allowed man, in ignorance and willfulness, to abuse and misuse God's gift of life. Now in the Lord Jesus Christ, there is a way out of man's misery and heartache and sinfulness.

Not only is the nature of this appearing plainly described for us as grace, but the purpose of it is clearly announced. Paul says, "the grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all men." Now do not read that as saying that all men will be saved automatically, regardless of how they believe or live, for there are far too many Scriptures that say quite otherwise. Salvation is never put on an automatic basis. It is not that all men *will* be saved, but all men *can* be saved. The grace of God has appeared that all men can be saved. It is available to all. Though it is true that God's first subject with man is His love and grace, nevertheless, if a man will not talk on that subject, then eventually God must move to the subject of condemnation and of judgment. But if man will talk with God about grace the result is salvation.

Here is a word that needs to be examined for we use it very loosely. *Salvation* is not merely a reserved seat in heaven, or an insurance policy against going to hell. Too frequently this is what we make it. Salvation is described for us quite accurately in v. 12, where Paul goes on to say,

**... training us to renounce irreligion and worldly passions, and to live sober, upright, and godly lives in this world. {Tit 2:12 RSV}**

### **THE WHAT OF SALVATION**

First, salvation is an altered allegiance. "renouncing irreligion (or godlessness) and worldly passions, and then, lawful life, "soberly, uprightly and godly" in this present world. Salvation manifests itself first by an altered allegiance. Have you discovered that one chain, with which the devil binds men to do his will, even though they are not aware of it, is the desire for the approval of their fellows? This is the great power by which the devil holds his slaves together. This desire to please men--our crowd, our gang, our social set. The natural man, the man without Jesus Christ, inevitably lives his life on this level. His strongest motive is a desire to please whoever around him is important to him. This desire is back of social acts at all levels of life. It is impossible to escape. We cannot break it ourselves. The most we can do is to narrow the circle. The outlaw breaks loose from society, but is still intent on finding the approval of the small gang with which he runs. The philosopher rises above what he regards as the common herd, but is still dependent upon the approval of that small group of "real thinkers" that agree with him. But when a man looks at Jesus Christ and desires Him and loves Him, he is suddenly overwhelmed with a powerful feeling that only God matters. When he realizes this great fact he has discovered the ultimate truth behind the universe. As he gives himself to that fact, it works its way through his heart and life and manifests itself in every part of his being. He becomes possessed of a mighty desire to please God. When he does, he discovers that very soon he is utterly set free from slavery to others' opinions. So Paul says, "Be not conformed to this world" (do not let the world around you squeeze you into its mold), "but be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Rom 12:2), in Jesus Christ. It is this that makes Christians invincible.

Some of you may recall a story from the 3rd or 4th century, when the church was undergoing persecution: There arose a terrible heresy within the ranks of the church -- called Arianism, the idea that Jesus Christ was not God but merely a created being. Opposed to that were certain champions of orthodoxy and among them was a man by the name of Athanasius from Alexandria in Egypt. He was brought before the Emperor Theodosius (a convert to Arianism) to answer for what was regarded as heresy in that part of the Christian world, his belief that Jesus Christ was God. Standing before the emperor, Athanasius refused to surrender any of the faith of which he was convinced. The emperor leaned over and said to him, "...Do you not know that the whole world is against you?" And Athanasius said to him, "Then, Sire, I am against the whole world."

This is what happens when a man believes in Jesus Christ. There is a breaking away from the slavery of the opinions of others, and only God matters. There is a renouncing of godlessness with its worldly attitudes and philosophies.

Second, grace implies lawful living. Paul describes it in three terms, "sober upright, and godly." Do not be misled by the word *sober*. By no means does that mean long-faced. There are, unfortunately, long-faced Christians but this word does not describe someone without humor. I fear religious people who have no humor. They are invariably

fanatical. But the greatest saints I have ever met have invariably possessed a wonderful sense of humor. This means "being responsible, taking life seriously, responsibility in the areas of knowledge." Phillips renders it thus: "We are to live responsible, honorable, God-fearing lives."

**Likewise urge the younger men to control themselves.** [That is responsible living.] **Show yourself in all respects a model of good deeds, and in your teaching show integrity, gravity, and sound speech that cannot be censured, so that an opponent may be put to shame, having nothing evil to say of us. {Tit 2:6-8 RSV}**

That is the kind of living that comes when a heart has been changed by contact with Jesus Christ: altered allegiance and altered living. A Christian man was asked if he believed in the miracle of changing water to wine. He said, "Of course. I have never seen Jesus change water into wine, but in our home he changed beer into furniture."

## **THE WHERE OF SALVATION**

Salvation is not only described as to what it is but also where it is to be manifested: "In this world," literally, "in this present age." Where can one see this reality? In church? Well, that is a nice place to start, but the place where it will really count is at home, at work, at school, in every part of life. That is where the change is to be manifest.

Christianity never was made to interfere with households and families. It makes better husbands and better wives and better sons and better daughters out of all who take Jesus seriously.

## **THE WHY OR HOW OF SALVATION**

And, if you ask why this happens,

**...who gave himself for us to redeem us from all iniquity and to purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds. {Tit 2:14 RSV}**

The key is, "a people of his own," i.e., a people for his own possession. We can never escape the mystery of the Christian message, that the God who became incarnate in Bethlehem is willing and able to become incarnate in you. The secret of a godly life is God himself—Jesus, himself, living in you, making the difference, imparting the power, preserving purity. He is the only answer. Not an empty creed that is followed but a living Lord at work.

## **Conclusion**

End on practical note. Sermons can sound so wonderful, and such a beautiful picture can be painted, but the question must come to many who hear, does it ever happen? Is it real, or is it but a myth? Are we still in the age of grace and is the appearing of glory yet ahead? Or is it all a beautiful dream?

[Examples of those for whom it has made a difference]

This is what salvation is. It is not "pie in the sky by and by." It is a transformed heart and a transformed life, an altered loyalty, an altered life, breaking of the bonds of slavery that bind us to a system of pleasing men, bringing us into the full glory and liberty of a life pleasing to God.

This is what Christmas means.

This is "the appearing," the reason behind it. Christ did not come simply to give us a beautiful manger scene to look at. He did not come to give us a lovely pageant, a religious charade or parade, to work out once a year. He came to be a Savior. He came to give salvation, to begin where you are, in your place of need, and to accept you as you are, and to change you. And that change is always manifested in two areas: altered loyalty, and altered life.

## **Prayer**

Lord Jesus, in this closing moment, thou hast promised to be in our midst. "Where two or three are gathered together (or two or three hundred) thou art there in the midst of them." We pray that any who are hungering for deliverance, any who are sick and tired of being what they are and wanting to be something different, wanting to be set free, wanting to be taken out of the morass and the wilderness of emptiness in which they live out their days, may now breathe a prayer to thee, asking thee to be their Lord, to enter their life. We pray this Christmas season may be to them a totally different time, as this amazing miracle of new birth takes place. Thou didst come, Lord Jesus, to enter human life and be incarnate in men once again. We thank you for it. May it take place, as some pray here in this very moment of quietness. In Jesus' name, Amen.