

Get Ready For His Return

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Date: 25 December 2023

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[0 : 00] What a happy, happy day it is. It's great to be here with you. But I wonder if you are familiar with the story of A Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens. It's a classic Christmas novella about a miserly and cold-hearted old businessman named Ebenezer Scrooge who despises Christmas and everything associated with it.

Not a happy day for him. But on Christmas Eve, Scrooge is visited by the ghost of his late business partner. And this ghost warns him of the consequences of his selfish and greedy ways.

The ghost is wrapped up in chains of his own making. Chains like greed and money and so on because he refused to show love or kindness to his fellow man.

And he warns Scrooge that he is building his own set of chains as well. Then throughout the night, Scrooge is visited by three spirits.

The ghost of Christmas past, the ghost of Christmas present, and the ghost of Christmas yet to be. Or often just referred to as the ghost of Christmas future.

[1 : 14] Now these three spirits take Scrooge on a journey through time. Showing him scenes from his past, the present, how people are celebrating Christmas and how they're talking about him.

And then the possible future if he doesn't change his ways. But as Scrooge witnesses the impact of his actions on others, he undergoes a transformation.

He becomes increasingly repentant and compassionate, realizing the importance of love and generosity and kindness. And by the end of the story, Scrooge is a changed man who embraces the Christmas spirit.

And wants to live with a big heart and an open hand and with joy and thankfulness. Well, friends, the passage I want to look at with you this morning may not feel like a very Christmassy one. It's not because I'm a Scrooge. But I know it's not the story about Mary and Joseph and a baby in a manger. And I hope that isn't too much of a disappointment to you.

[2 : 17] I know that at Christmastime we love to get into the nostalgia and the sentimentality of it all. And this might not be a very sentimental passage. And I don't for a moment want to knock that, really.

I think there's something probably very lovely and healthy about an annual reminder of the old, old story that we all know. And the comfort it brings. But I do want to look at Titus chapter 2 with you this morning.

Because I think in these verses, the Apostle Paul takes us on a sort of Dickensian journey of his own. See, first of all, Paul wants us to look back at Christmas past.

To show us what God did for us back then. Then he brings us into the present. To think about how we're living now. You see the last words of verse 12? He talks about the present age.

And then finally, of course, he takes us forward into the future to think about the sure and certain hope of Jesus' second coming. And the point of all this, again a bit like Dickens, is to call us to change our ways.

[3 : 20] Not to be more moral or something in our own strength, which perhaps is a bit Dickensian. But to turn back to God and find that he can set us free from our chains of sin and gloom.

Before it's too late. So will we learn the lessons of Christmas past, present and future that Paul has for us this morning? First of all, take a look with me at Christmas past in verse 11.

Paul says, For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people. Paul is talking about Jesus' first coming.

That was when God's grace appeared. When it was manifested. Manifested. God's grace is an attitude that he has towards us. It's his attitude of undeserved love and kindness and generosity.

But you can't see an attitude until it's made manifest. Until it's put into action. How do we know what God's attitude is towards us? Well, once upon a time, it appeared.

[4 : 24] In the first coming of the Lord Jesus. When Jesus came, it made God's grace visible. It made it appear. Remember, if you were here yesterday, you'll remember. That's how the angel Gabriel announced the news to Mary.

He said to her, Greetings, O favoured one. The Lord is with you. Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. Favour in the original Greek.

That's the word grace hidden in there. This was a day of grace. Or again in John's gospel. John tells us, In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God, and so on. And then, the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us.

And we have seen His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. For from His fullness we have all received grace upon grace.

For the law was given through Moses. Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, but the only God, who was at the Father's side, He has made Him known.

[5 : 30] See that last line there? No one's ever seen God, but Jesus, God the Son, has revealed the Father. No one's ever seen God, but now Jesus has revealed Him.

And in revealing the Father, what has Jesus revealed about the Father? He has revealed His grace. God's attitude of love towards us. By rights, we all deserve a revelation of God's wrath, don't we? For our sins, we might expect God to come down and smite us. We've all thought to ourselves in our heart that I'd rather do things my way than God's way. We've all turned a blind eye to our neighbors in need.

But in response to our rebellion, Jesus didn't come down as a judge, but as a Savior. His name speaks of salvation from sins rather than condemnation for them.

Jesus came to bring in a day of favor, not of fear, of grace, not of punishment. He wants to set us free from our sins, from our chains, so that we don't have to be weighed down anymore by our selfishness and our pride and our bitterness and our anger.

[6 : 40] It gets in the way of all our relationships and ruins our lives, doesn't it? Notice what Paul says. For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people.

For all people. So no matter who you are, Jesus is for every boy and girl. No matter their color or race or education or wealth. He is for the blind, the crippled, the intellectually disabled.

He is for the criminals and even for the very worst ones. You know, the pedophiles and the murderers who are rightly rejected by society, punished by our justice system.

And yet Jesus, in his system of grace and mercy, he will take them in and transform them. He'll take in anyone. He will save them from their sinful ways and from the eternal judgment of God.

He will rehabilitate them and restore them as he has done for countless thousands, even millions. And he will even do the same for a sinner like you. Jesus died on the cross with wide open arms.

[7 : 44] And he still has the same posture towards all of us, towards the world. So come to him. Come to him in your heart and mind.

You can do it even now. You can do it this afternoon. Approach him on the throne of grace. Even if you've never come before, come now. Take hold of that grace which is being offered to you.

When you bathe in the love of Jesus, you find rest for your soul. Say to Jesus, Lord Jesus, forgive me for my sins and set me free from them.

Save me from the wrath to come and grant me entrance into the kingdom of heaven. I want to be a citizen of heaven. I know I don't deserve it. But I need your grace and mercy.

My friends, this Christmas time, if you do anything, do that. I know there's lots to do. Lots of food, great times with family and friends to have.

[8 : 48] But don't forget the message of Christmas past. That the grace of God has appeared. Bringing salvation for all people. You don't have to live in chains anymore.

If you've never called yourself a Christian, you can come to Jesus today. You can be set free today. If as a Christian you are still struggling and stuck in sin, come to Jesus again.

Say, Lord Jesus, set me free. Rescue me today. Salvation doesn't come automatically. But for all those who take hold of that grace offered in the Lord Jesus.

He gives it freely. If we'll come to him. But now on to Christmas present in verse 12. Paul says that the grace of God has appeared. Bringing salvation for all people.

Verse 12. Training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions. And to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in the present age.

[9 : 47] So now the order here is very important, isn't it? Notice that our good lives. Our self-controlled, upright and godly lives. Don't earn us God's grace.

Or salvation. It's the other way around. The grace comes first. Salvation comes first. And then Paul describes grace kind of like a schoolmaster or a parent.

The word training there has to do with educating children. So I don't know what your schooling was like. Or how your parents disciplined you. But in the Christian life, our schoolmaster is grace.

God's relentless generosity. His indefatigable love. His irrepressible smile. His unstoppable kindness. That's what trains us.

What educates us. It's not that God is a sort of neglectful, indulgent sort of father. You know how that goes. That's not really love.

[10 : 46] That's just weakness. God is not like that. He disciplines his children, sometimes with tough love. But he always disciplines them in love. He loves them with great patience.

Through good times and bad. He loves them at great cost to himself. He sent his one and only son to save us. And you see how God's love turns us around.

Grace trains us to say no to certain things and yes to other things. So no to our old ways and yes to new lives. And so the challenge of Christmas present is again, which of these two lives do you want to live?

Do you want to live a life dominated by ungodliness and worldly passions? Or self-control, uprightness and godliness? And just in case the wise choice is unclear, let me just flesh out for you these three things that Paul says characterizes our new life, the Christian life.

Think about those three words. They're so helpful. Self-controlled, upright and godly. The point is that God's love, God's grace, trains us to live differently in sort of three directions if I can put it like that.

[11 : 59] The first one is self-focused. Right? You see it's about self-control. God's grace trains us to value ourselves rightly again. You are not worthless.

You are not nothing. You are not merely a blob of atoms. Your body matters. It matters to God. So use it wisely.

Your time matters. So don't waste it. Your words matter because God loves you. You see how God's love for us teaches us how to love ourselves.

At one level I think it's a bit like an old married couple. My wife and I celebrated our 10th wedding anniversary this year. And even though I know that's not really a long time, I already feel very old. And like a typical old man, which I perhaps have always been, but anyway, why do I go to see the doctor? Why do I try to exercise and eat well?

[12 : 59] Well, to tell you the truth, it's not for myself. But because my wife loves me so much. See, when someone loves you, you find a new reason to care for yourself, don't you?

Because your beloved cares for you. And because you care for them, you want to care for the things that they care for. Well, it's the same with us and God, I take it. My friends, the reason to live well is because God loves you.

God cares for you. He cares about who you are. He cares about how you go and where you end up. He wants you to live well. He wants you to live nobly.

You know, to be the fullness of the creature that he made you to be. He doesn't want you to live in slavery to worldly passions anymore. Now, that's the opposite of self-control.

One of my favorite authors, Henry Scugel, I think he's one of my favorites because I really like his name. But anyway, one of my favorite authors puts it like this. Isn't that true?

[14 : 22] And God wants us to live gloriously. Not in victory over others, but in victory over our own lusts. Not enslaved anymore.

The funny thing about this kind of slavery is that it so often masquerades as freedom, doesn't it? But don't be fooled. It is not freedom when all you can do is follow your anger.

People call it venting. You're really just a slave. When all you can do is follow your own greed. As far as your money will take you.

When all you can do is follow your own sexual urges. As far as your good looks will take you. I don't know. That is slavery. You're enslaved to yourself.

Your sinful self. Whereas God wants to give us back our true selves. So we can live under wisdom. He doesn't want ourselves to get away on us. He wants us to have self-control.

[15:24] He wants to empower us to live self-controlled lives. And it's his grace that enables us to do that. But secondly, God's grace trains us to live upright lives.

And this word has to do with how we relate to others. So we're not just looking in on ourselves. But we're also being trained to look out towards others. It's about living justly, righteously, fairly in society.

Not cheating people or manipulating people. Do you want to live a life that's all about yourself? Satisfying your lusts? Using other people to get what you want?

Surely not. We all know, don't we? How twisted and perverse love becomes when it's turned in on ourselves. Or confined to only a few. I think of those couples who seem to be in a world of their own.

Coupled them. Have you heard that term? Coupled them. When people are just so besotted with their partner or spouse, it seems to be to the exclusion of all others. Interestingly, of course, so many couples don't want to have children these days.

[16:36] Because it would inconvenience their lifestyle. It would require too much self-sacrifice. Too much service. Too much other person-centeredness. It would get in the way of our holidays.

What they really mean is too much love. I'd have to be too loving. I wouldn't get enough me time. Or again, you see it in that sort of tribalism or nationalism that is so ugly.

It's good to love one's country. But not to the exclusion of all the others. At that point, it's not true love anymore, is it?

It's sort of some twisted caricature. True love always has space for more. It grows and grows. We have a kid's book at home about all sorts of things you can run out of.

You can run out of biscuits or run out of bread. You can run out of energy flopped on your bed. But you can never, no never, not ever, you can never run out of love.

[17:38] And I know it's just a kid's book. But I think that is profoundly really true. Love has an infinite capacity. It needs to kind of stretch its legs.

And so God's love, God's pure grace, His grace, trains us to love ourselves and then love all mankind. Love the whole world. It immediately turns us away from ourselves, as it were, to loving others.

And then finally, God's love or God's grace, I'm just going to use those terms interchangeably, turn us back to love Him. Godliness is about being God-centered.

It's not just about moral behavior, remember. Godliness, not goodliness. So it's about loving God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. And what is it that makes us love God?

Well, again, it's that God first loved us. And I suspect what Paul has in mind here is something like, just the fact that there is something irresistible, isn't there, about someone who relentlessly loves you.

[18:49] No matter how grumpy or cantankerous you might be, just like old Mr. Scrooge. If someone relentlessly loves you, it has a way of winning your heart, doesn't it? Of turning you to them.

And that is how God's love, I take it, God's grace, trains us to love Him. Because that is what God has done for us. He loved us first and gave His own Son for us.

And by so doing, His love trains us. It turns our hearts back to Him. So, what kind of life do you want to live in this present age?

One of ungodliness and worldly passions? Or one of self-control, uprightness and godliness?

Because the key to changing, the key to transformation, if you want to be set free today, the key is to take hold of God's grace.

Look again at when God's grace appeared in the Lord Jesus. As a little baby who grew up to die a horrible death. To rise again to be the King forever.

[19:59] To set us free from our sins. To give us new birth and new life. That is the wellspring of it all. You don't need to save yourself.

Try harder to be self-controlled this Christmas. You couldn't possibly turn your own life around. That is not the Christian message. But Jesus came to save us.

To lavish upon us the grace of God. And this is the new life He is offering to all those who will come to Him. Self-control, uprightness and godliness. A life transformed and shaped and driven and

controlled by love.

Grace. Alright, but last but not least, onwards to Christmas future. In verse 13, Paul talks about waiting. Waiting for our blessed hope.

The appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior. Jesus Christ. Today, of course, is a day many of us have been waiting for. The shops have been ready for a couple of months now.

[21 : 03] Waiting for our money, I suppose. The kids in my house have been waiting eagerly to open their presents. We opened ours this morning. Well, half of them this morning. I don't know if any of you are still waiting.

Is anyone still waiting for this afternoon? Very patient. Very godly people. Well done. We could not wait any longer. But that's something to look forward to. But Paul says we should all be waiting for something much more wonderful than a Christmas present.

There is something coming any day now. And it's worth getting excited about. Paul calls it our blessed hope. Or as some translations have it, our happy hope. Our happy hope.

That is the idea. There is something exciting. Something thrilling. Something wonderful coming.

That will make all of those who have been waiting for it happy. Exceedingly happy.

Well, what is it? You'll remember how the grace of God appeared in the past. And in the first coming of the Lord Jesus in verse 11. But now Paul talks about the glory of God appearing in the future.

[22 : 06] So we live between these two appearings. The grace of God appearing in the past. And the glory of God appearing in the future. Specifically, the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.

And as I mentioned just yesterday, this is one of those places in the Bible where Jesus is unambiguously called God. Who are we waiting for? Our God. Our God.

Jesus. In his first coming, there was a sense in which his glory was veiled. Glory means splendor. Magnificence. It's like the sun.

The sun of righteousness. It means brightness. There were snapshots of Jesus' glory in his first coming during his earthly ministry. For instance, in John chapter 2, when Jesus turned water into wine.

John tells us that in so doing, he manifested his glory. Just like there was a little snapshot of it. A moment of magnificence. Or again, on the mountain in Matthew chapter 17, Matthew tells us, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John his brother and led them up a high mountain by themselves.

[23 : 13] And he was transfigured before them. And his face shone like the sun. And his clothes became white as light. And behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them.

And a voice from the cloud said, This is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him. When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were terrified. But Jesus came and touched them saying, Rise and have no fear.

There again, you see, they received another glimpse of his glory. But by and large, Jesus walked around looking like any other man. His face did not shine like the sun 24-7.

He came not to be served or to be worshipped, but to serve. To give his life as a ransom for many. He came not to be honoured, but to be humiliated.

To be mocked, spit upon, and crucified. He came to die on the cross to pay for our sins. Because he came to reveal, to manifest, to show God's grace.

[24 : 18] But one day, Paul tells us, he will come in glory. In other words, he will come to be worshipped. He will come to be honoured. To be glorified. For many, that will be a day of terror and regret.

As they finally set their eyes on the one they've been ignoring their whole lives. Their God and Creator. The one who came to save them.

But they ignored his offer of grace. But for those who have been waiting. It will be a day of happiness. When they finally set their eyes on their beloved.

After so many years of longing. We love him, of course, because he first loved us. Again, verse 14. Paul takes us back to the past.

You remember, Jesus, he gave himself for us. To redeem us from all lawlessness. And to purify for himself a people for his own possession. Who are zealous for good works.

[25 : 22] We will set our eyes on him. The one who loved us. He came to get us once. To give his life as a ransom. To redeem us.

To make us his. To make us new. To transform us. To make a new kind of people. Zealous for good works. And one day, he will come back.

Our beloved. Our king. In glory. Riding on the clouds. He will appear for all the world to see. And it will feel like all our Christmases have come at once.

Waiting. Waiting is hard while you're doing it, isn't it? Especially if you know how wonderful the thing is that you're waiting for.

But don't forget, good things come to those who wait. When Jesus returns in glory, it will be worth the wait. So, there you have it.

[26 : 23] Paul's Dickensian journey. Right? From Christmas past. Through Christmas present to Christmas future. But will we learn the lessons of God's grace and love this Christmas?

It's not up to us to change our ways, really. But rather, throwing ourselves on God's mercy and grace. We must ask him to set us free.

And to change us. And be assured, he wants to set us free from our chains of sin and gloom. That's why the Lord Jesus appeared that very first Christmas.

To bring us salvation. To redeem us from all lawlessness. That's why in this present age, God is training his people. God's grace trains us.

To live self-controlled, upright and godly lives. Just a taste of the glorious lives we will live for all eternity. And he is coming back to get us. Because one day when he returns, we will behold his glory.

[27 : 27] We will see him face to face. We will be transformed. So that we are like him. Finally free. And truly happy. Let's pray.

Gracious Heavenly Father. We stand in awe of your grace towards us. Thank you so much that you don't judge us as our sins deserve. That you sent your son.

To show pity. Compassion. Kindness. Mercy. Love. Grace. Please now, Father, turn our hearts back to you.

For those who might still be living in rebellion. We pray that you might grant them new birth. For those whose love for you has grown cold. We pray that you would continue to train us in new ways.

Give us faith and patience to keep waiting for our blessed hope. For we ask all these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.

[28 : 34] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen.