

CHRISTMAS EVE, 2019
SCRIPTURES – Isaiah 9:2-7; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-20

The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for 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 lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works. Titus 2

In my favorite Christmas program, first shown over 50 years ago now, Charlie Brown wondered what Christmas was all about. Well, a man who lived long before Linus told Charlie Brown the answer... before any of the excitement that is part of this season... indeed, long before Christmas was even celebrated at all tells us. 60 or so years after Jesus was born, the apostle Paul wrote: ***“The grace of God has appeared...”*** All of the traditions and celebrations and joyous carols... the exchanging of cards and gifts... the decorating of trees... the gatherings with family and friends... all of these things are wonderful, of course. We may complain about our hectic schedules and the expense, but they are still a joyous and eagerly anticipated intrusion into our everyday lives. But, take them all away –

- And they will be taken away. Children grow up, move away, and start families and traditions of their own... age slows you down... all things change over time.

Take them away and there's still what Paul says: ***“The grace of God has appeared...”*** Jesus is God's grace; His unsought, un-asked for, undeserved and yet gladly given gift from God of mercy and love and blessing!

What does this mean for you? Just imagine traveling to a much anticipated Christmas gathering and, when you arrive, being greeted at the door with, *“I don't know you,”* and having the door shut in your face! Well, you will take a great trip one day. Death will take you from this life, from all the people and places that you know so well. It will take you to... well, to heaven you hope, right? Yes, God's heaven: where He who is great and holy, the eternal enemy of all evil and all sin and wrongdoing, dwells. If you appear at His door in your sins and unlike Him, He will not know you or welcome you... ***“Depart from Me, into the outer darkness,”*** is what you will hear. May this never be!

God has worked to make sure that it never be. ***“The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people.”*** Salvation is what God brought to you on Christmas. It is what He speaks to you in His Son Jesus Christ. Salvation. How should we think of it? Another holiday movie, *Miracle on 34th Street*, which is about an unusual Santa who is at Macy's Dept. store in NYC in 1946, right after WW II, gives us a good picture of salvation in one particular scene. A mother brings her daughter to see Santa, but as he greets the little girl mom tells him, *“I'm sorry, but she doesn't speak English. She's Dutch. She's been living in an orphanage in Rotterdam. We just adopted her.”* So: for most of her life that little girl had known fear and terror, for her country had been overrun by the Nazi's in 1940. Rotterdam was bombed and burned; bullets and bombs, maimed bodies and destruction and death were everywhere. She grew up under Nazi

rule, until the Allies invaded in the fall of 1944 and vicious battles again swirled around her. She lost her parents and family and ended up alone, an orphan in a devastated country. But then, a loving couple took her away from all of that. They brought her into their own family and home, in peaceful and prosperous NYC. Salvation! And when she met Santa, he even spoke Dutch. Her life was new and good and blessed!!

In Jesus God has brought to you a salvation that is far greater. ***“The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation!”*** The holy and eternal God is not in the heavens, unreachable and unknown, a mysterious and fearful Judge. He has come down in our flesh and speaks our language. But, has He really come to you, to me? We are lowly and poor in our sinful wrongdoing, and aren't Jewish or related to Joseph and Mary. Well, when a baby is born, to whom is the joyous news given? It's given to family! Listen to God's angel: ***“I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all people. To you is born a Savior, who is Christ the Lord!”*** He was born for you. You, then, are His family, as were the shepherds who first heard the news. Jesus, our great God and Savior, was born for you and is your brother. In Him God lifts you out of the devastation caused by sins, including your own... out of this broken and often angry and hate-filled world... and brings you into His family. The almighty and eternal God, His Father, is your Father. Life with Him in His heaven is yours! ***“The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people...”*** In Jesus your life is new!

Now: live it! Living a new life with God *now*, and not just one day in heaven, is also what Christmas is all about. St. Paul says: ***“Our great God and Savior Jesus Christ 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.”***

In just a few days all of the trappings of Christmas will be put away, and except for some new clothes and toys and gadgets no sign of it will remain. Well, the most important gift you have received is God's incredibly great gift of His Son. This gift cost you nothing; but it cost Jesus His life. He came to redeem you; to purchase you for God by bearing your sins and paying the price for them by dying on a cross! Now: honor Him, and your Father in heaven who gave you His Son. Honor Him by how you live.

How? In Jesus God trains us ***“to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions,”*** says Paul. If you believe that the Son of God has come down to you in your flesh and given His life for you, then you can't be ungodly. You can't think and live as if God is distant and doesn't care about you and what you do. He has reached down into your world and into your life! He has bound Himself to you and, by faith, bound you to Him! Such a Savior is surely worthy of being honored by an obedient and faithful life, as well as with your worship and praise, and on more than just this night. To not faithfully worship Him and live for Him is to be ungodly. The ungodly are not family.

There's a simple way, a simple image, to keep in mind that will help you to understand what living for God is all about; a simple image that is contained in Paul's words. ***“The grace of God has appeared,”*** he says, ***“bringing salvation [and] training us to live godly lives [while] waiting for our blessed hope...”*** Training us:

think of being on a train and heading toward a wonderful destination. Well, in Jesus God has put you on a train that is heading toward His glorious heaven. Stay on it! Don't jump off it to follow what seems good to you but stay on it by listening to His words and taking them to heart, as the shepherds did. Let your Lord Jesus guide your life. He will carry you through this life, with all of its temptations and sins and failures and trials, and will bring you to His heaven. There you will see the glory of God, hear His glorious angels, and join in their glorious praise. This is the blessed hope that awaits us in Jesus! It is the fulfillment of Christmas.

“The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation [and] training us to live godly lives [while] waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.” This is what Christmas is all about, Charlie Brown. Hark! The herald angels sing, “Glory to the newborn King!” Amen.