

Declare These Things!

Exodus 19:1-6, Titus 2:1-15 (ESV)

March 5, 2006

“The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people.” This is the gospel of Jesus Christ. “The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people.” This is the good news for which we have yearned in need of which we all stand, and in which alone we now place our good hope. “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.” Thanks be to God!

Let us begin at the beginning. “The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people.” What Paul is talking about, of course, is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He is not talking about Adam. He is not talking about Abraham. He is not talking about Moses. He is not talking about Joshua. He is not talking about Isaiah. He is not talking about himself. He is certainly not talking about Mohammed who did not even show up until 600 years later. What Paul is talking about is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, crucified, dead, and buried, and raised on the third day. That is where “the grace of God has appeared.” Indeed, Jesus Christ is the appearance of, that is to say the very presence of, the saving grace of God, with us and for us.

What this means, for starters, is that God is a God of grace. God is a God of redemption. God is a God of salvation. God is a God who is committed to the reflection of his own glory in the restoration of his good universe. For God’s grace to have appeared means that God is a God of grace. And grace does not mean simply forgiveness. Redemption involves far more than that. Grace means forgiveness and renewal. Grace means justification and sanctification. Grace means a turning away from our godless past and a turning toward God in the present and future. Grace is not a legal fiction, a matter of saying something is alright when it is not. Grace is a powerful, creative, re-creative, redeeming force, leaving nothing in its path unaffected. God is a God of grace.

Moreover, the grace of God is not an internal or hidden characteristic of God. The grace of God wells up within him and pours out upon us, grace upon grace

(John 1:16), making us live, setting us free, turning us around, and giving us good hope. This is the grace of God that has appeared. This is the grace of God that has appeared to us. This is the grace of God that has appeared to us in Jesus Christ. Once for all, in the center of all time, born in a barn, laid in a feed trough, nailed to a cross, buried in someone else's tomb, raised on Easter, the very grace of God himself appeared to us in Jesus Christ. This is who Jesus is. He is not just a carpenter. He is not just a rabbi. He is not just a faith healer. He is not just a moral exemplar. He is the very grace of God Almighty, in the flesh, with us and for us. We neglect him to our own detriment.

“The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people.” This does not have to mean every individual, but it does mean all the various people of the world. The grace of God is not only for the people of Israel. The grace of God is not only for the people of Rome. The grace of God reaches even to the people of the island of Crete, where Paul was writing to Titus. The grace of God reaches even to the Goths of northern Europe, who first built Gothic sanctuaries. The grace of God reaches even to the highlands of Scotland, where Presbyterianism was first formulated. The grace of God reaches even to the depths of Africa, even to the ancient people of China, even to the peninsula of Korea, even to the Solomon Islands, even to Central and South America, even, even, even to us, broken people though we are. The very grace of God Almighty has appeared once and for all in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and this is our salvation, this is our greatest good, this is our highest joy, this is our very life and breath, indeed, our food and drink, our nourishment and sustenance.

Now, this grace of God which has appeared to us and for us has implications for us, also. We have read what the LORD expected of the people of Israel after he rescued them from the land of Egypt in the Exodus: “You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” The intent and the expectations are even higher with the coming of Jesus Christ: “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.” Notice how this training, this reforming, this redeeming has two components, both necessary, neither sufficient by itself. The first is “to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions.” By the very grace of God, and by the grace of God alone, we are set free from all that opposes God, from all that lures us away from God-centeredness, from all that draws us toward self-centeredness and self-servingness. This is the first step.

The second is to “live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age.” Now. Today. In the present age, not just in some far away heaven. We are to “live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age.” Now we have arrived at the burden of this chapter. This is what Paul was writing about. Based on the foundation of the gospel, these are the instructions which Paul gave to Titus in order for him to give them to the people of Crete. Based on the foundation of the gospel, these are the instructions which have been preserved in the scriptures through the centuries even for us today.

So we are to “live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age.” In case that is not precise enough information, Paul specifies that our godly lives are to be centered upon Jesus Christ. It is not a matter of being good, as such. It is not a matter of being spiritual. It is a matter of being centered upon Jesus Christ, “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.” This is not unlike what we have read from Exodus. We are to live not only in memory of the earthly life of Jesus Christ and the sacrifice by which he both saves and purifies us but also and especially in the lively expectation of his glorious and victorious return. That is our great hope. That is what keeps us going. We look back to what he has already given us, even as set before us on the communion table today, and also we look ahead to what he is yet to give us, the great and heavenly banquet in the kingdom yet to come.

It is for these in between times that Paul gives Titus and the Cretans instruction in the Christian life. These continue to be instructive for us in that we continue to live in these in between times. These instructions are not exhaustive lists of everything it means to be Christian. Instead, they are suggestive lists, starting points, probably not telling Titus anything he did not know but giving him some authority with which to promote such teachings among those members of the church who apparently did not know them. “Older men are to be sober-minded, dignified, self-controlled, sound in faith, in love, and in steadfastness. Older women likewise are to be reverent in behavior, not slanderers or slaves to much wine.” Who could object to that? The mature members of the Christian community are to be the leaders in Christian life and behavior and to set the example for everyone else. This is as it should be. Some of this is just general good behavior, such as being dignified and not drunk. And some of it has to do with specifically Christian characteristics: sound in faith, sound in love, sound in steadfastness, and reverent in behavior. And all of it has to do with what builds up the community. Similarly, the young women are “to love their husbands and children,” and the young men are “to be self-controlled.” Who could object to that? What a different world we would live in

today if women loved their babies instead of aborting them and if young men were self-controlled instead of murdering each other and destroying our inner cities! Can there be any serious objection to what Paul is teaching here? Perhaps even submissiveness would not appear so foreign to us if men were sober, dignified, and self-controlled.

The lion's share of the exhortations are aimed directly at Titus. Of course, they are not for his individual good but for the good of the church he served. "As for you [Titus], teach what accords with sound doctrine.... Show yourself in all respects to be a model of good works, and in your teaching show integrity, dignity, and sound speech that cannot be condemned, so that an opponent may be put to shame, having nothing evil to say about us." Again, the purpose of it all is the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ and thereby the building up of the church of Jesus Christ. The two go together. You cannot have either one without the other. Even today, the reason we as the church have seminaries, the reason we have candidacy for the ministry, the reason we have ordination examinations, and on and on, is to continue to try to obey and fulfill these ancient exhortations and so yet today build up the church. We can do no other.

Finally, Paul writes to Titus, "Declare these things; exhort and rebuke with all authority. Let no one disregard you." Declare the gospel that the grace of God has appeared in Jesus Christ for the salvation of all people. Preach the good news. Exhort and rebuke people to gospel living, to lives appropriate to, and consonant with, the gospel, in all the authority not only of the Apostle Paul but also of the very gospel itself. These are among the duties of the ministers of the gospel of Jesus Christ. And they are to be performed for the sake of the Christian church. Therefore, "Let no one disregard you." Therefore, make your voice heard. Therefore, proclaim the gospel boldly. Not because Titus was anyone special. Not even because of Paul. But because, and only because, as we said at the very beginning, "The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people.... 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."

To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.

© Dr. James C. Goodloe IV, Pastor
Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
1627 Monument Avenue
Richmond, Virginia 23220
www.grace-covenant.org