

Insist on These Things!

Isaiah 49:1-7, Titus 3:1-15 (ESV)

March 12, 2006

“When the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared,” “When the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared,” and you know when that was, “When the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared,” in and through Jesus Christ, of course, “he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly”—When and where did he do that?—“through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.” This is the gospel of our Lord. This is the good news for which we have waited. This is the good hope by which alone we live. “When the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us.” Thanks be to God!

Now, we need to be ever so slightly more precise here. When Paul writes, “the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared,” he does not mean by that simply the physical appearing of Jesus Christ, as such. That physical appearing is, of course, the necessary foundation for everything else being said here, but it is not by itself everything that is being said here. That is to say, this is not simply a Christmas story. Instead, when Paul writes, “the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared,” what he means by that is the reappearance of Jesus Christ precisely in and as the content of the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ.¹

Do you see the difference? Paul did not become a Christian when Jesus Christ was born or at any other time during the earthly life of Christ. Paul became a Christian only when he heard the gospel of Jesus Christ. And when he heard the gospel, he fell to the ground. He was struck blind. He fasted for three days. And, most importantly, he was saved. He became a believer. His life was turned around. Instead of persecuting Christians, he became an apostle, the missionary to the Gentiles.

¹John Calvin, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, eds. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, vol. 10: *The Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians, and the Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon*, trans. T. A. Smail (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964), 10:380.

That is what happens when Jesus Christ appears in the preaching of the gospel. So what Paul is writing about here is not only something that happened 2,000 years ago for him and for all the Christians on the island of Crete to whom he was writing, through Titus. Instead, what Paul is writing about here is also something that happens again, every Sunday, even today, even for us, when Jesus Christ reappears in the very preaching of the gospel. “When the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us.” Paul is reminding his first readers of, and so telling us about, the transforming power of the gospel proclaimed. This, of course, raises several questions. What are we saved from? How are we saved? For what purpose are we saved? And, What are we saved to? Let us take these up in order.

What are we saved from? Paul is very clear about that. “We ourselves”—not only the Cretans to whom he was writing, but also even Paul himself, as well as Titus—“We ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another.” It is not a pretty picture. Unbelievers are foolish in their rejection of God our Creator and Redeemer, disobedient in their unfaithfulness, and led astray from him who is the one true Way.² The results of such unbelief include slavery to base motivations, ill will toward others, and mutual hatred. It is not only an ancient problem. It is something with which we are all too familiar in our own hearts, in our own lives, and in the world around us. Look in the newspapers. Surely we should want to be saved and delivered from this.

How are we saved? As we have already said, “When the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior.” “He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy.” We are saved, not because we deserve it—if we were good enough to deserve to be saved, we would not need to be saved—we are saved, not because we earn it—if we were good enough to earn it, we would not need to be saved—we are saved, not because we deserve it and not because we earn it but instead because of the sheer grace and goodness of God Almighty. It is nothing to brag about. It is nothing we have done. “We bring nothing to God.”³ We are instead recipients of a tremendous largess, beneficiaries of an incomprehensible

²Calvin, *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries*, 10:379.

³Calvin, *New Testament Commentaries*, 10:381.

generosity, open handed beggars upon whom the bounty of heaven has rained and poured beyond all counting. Thanks be to God!

Moreover, God did this to us “by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior.” It is not the power of the water of baptism as such but the power of the Holy Spirit working in and through us to move us from unbelief to belief, from folly to faith, from atheism or paganism to Christianity, from greater sinfulness to lesser sinfulness, from disobedience to obedience, from lostness to salvation, from mutual hatred to mutual love. And this regenerating and renewing power of the Holy Spirit is released upon us and poured out upon us precisely in and through Jesus Christ, precisely in and through the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ. That is why we are here today. That is why we are here every Sunday. That is what we come to receive.

For what purpose are we saved? “He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy... so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.” Life has a goal. Life has a purpose. Life has a direction and a meaning. And the goal, purpose, direction, and meaning of life are so large that they cannot be contained in this life. This life points beyond itself. This life cannot explain itself. This life cannot account for itself. This life cannot satisfy itself. This life points beyond itself. And so it is the case that the salvation which we have received is not simply about this life. It is about this life, and we shall get to that in just a moment. But it is not simply about this life, or not about this life only. The salvation which we have received is about the life which is to come, the life beyond this life, even life eternal, life in the very presence of God, life reconciled to our Creator, Judge, and Redeemer. Do we not all yearn for this?

What are we saved to? Or, after what we have just said, maybe I should ask, What are we saved to here? “The saying is trustworthy, and I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works. These things are excellent and profitable for people.” This is the shape, form, and content of the Christian life here and now. Not only are we to worship God, and not only are we to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ, but also, and as a result of those, we are to devote ourselves to good works. This is who we are. This is what our lives are about. This is what we are saved to here. To be sure that we get this, Paul writes it three times: once in the opening exhortation, again in this statement of purpose, and again in his closing exhortation. “Let our people learn to devote themselves to good works, so as to help cases of urgent need, and not be unfruitful.”

God has been good to us, so we are to be good to others. God has loved us freely, so we are to love others. God has poured out his grace upon us, so we are to be not only grateful, as we are here, giving thanks to God after we hear the word of God, but also and especially we are to be gracious, out there in the rest of the world, all the rest of the week. We are to devote ourselves to good works. This is who we are. This is what our lives are about. This is what we are saved to here. Do I need to spell these out? We are to feed the hungry. We are to give drink to the thirsty. We are to clothe the naked. We are to house the homeless. We are to visit the sick, the lonely, the friendless, and those in prison. This is who we are.

This is who we are. We devote ourselves to good works, “so as to help cases of urgent need, and not be unfruitful.” But this is not all of who we are. We are also ambassadors of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We do not do these deeds anonymously. We do these deeds in the name of, and for the sake of, Jesus Christ. We do these deeds not only so that people may be fed, clothed, housed, and visited, but also and especially so that they also may hear the gospel, receive the Holy Spirit, come to faith, and name the name of Jesus Christ.

It is this evangelistic purpose which seems to be the main point for Paul. That is where this chapter begins. “Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people.” This way of Christian living seems to be promoted not only as a good in and of itself but also and especially as a form of witness to everyone else. Unlike the otherwise unruly, insubordinate, disobedient, self-centered, slanderous, quarreling, rough, and discourteous populace of Crete (not, perhaps, unlike the people in the world in which we live), unlike them, the Christians were “to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people.” The Christians would stand out as ideal citizens. They were not to blend in to the world but to distinguish themselves from the world. They were not to be like everyone else but precisely to be different from everyone else.

How very strange! How very strange except that, could it not be the case again and also that precisely in such Christian living “the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior” might appear to all those about us? This is where Paul goes with his understanding of the Christian life which we are called to live.⁴ That

⁴Nicholas Thomas Wright, *Paul for Everyone: The Pastor Letters, 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 162.

is, could it not be the case that precisely in such Christian living we proclaim and share the gospel with all those about us? Could it not be the case that precisely in such Christian living God will make us as a light for the nations, that his salvation may reach to the end of the earth? Could it not be the case again and also that precisely in such Christian living “the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior” might appear to all those about us? We are not talking about etiquette. We are not talking about self-righteousness or affected piety. Instead, we are talking about the high and holy calling of being a Christian people in our own time and in our own place. The Christians would stand out not only as ideal citizens but also and especially as emissaries of the kingdom of God yet to come. God, help us!

No wonder Paul urged Titus to “insist upon these things”! These are not extras. These are not add ons. These are not options. These go to the core of the Christian faith and life. Hear the gospel where Christ our Savior appears. Believe the good news. Receive the Holy Spirit. Live the new life. Devote ourselves to good works. Be the occasion of the reappearing yet again of Christ our Savior. Yes, “insist on these things.” Indeed, let us all encourage each other to “insist on these things,” all these things.

This rigorous Christian life also requires some focus and discipline. “Avoid foolish controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless.” There is simply not enough time for all of that. We have more important things to do. Life is too short. “As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him, knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned.” Interestingly, there are limits to how far efforts should go to keep disruptive people within the church.⁵ The larger church today seems entirely unaware of this wisdom, indeed, this directive. The larger church today is hell bent upon elevating the alien values of tolerance, inclusivity, diversity, and pluralism, all of which are ways of saying that anything goes. Anything at all. Anything, that is, except historic and orthodox Christian faith, life, and discipline.

But that is not the way that Paul looked at the church. Paul writes in his letter to Titus that we are to try twice to straighten out disruptive people and then we are to let them go. The people who are always stirring up the church are simply trying to destroy the church and certainly are to have no place within the church. Those who have no intention of repenting from the evil of their ways have set themselves beyond the bounds of the church. They become a distraction from our calling to be devoted to good works. Is that not obvious? Does that not make sense? Is not good

⁵Calvin, *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries*, 10:388.

discipline a sign of institutional health and well-being? We need to learn not to be naive or foolish about persons disrupting the church. After all, we have more important things to be doing.

And with that word, let us hear again the core gospel which Paul shared with Titus and its implications which reach still to us:

When the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. The saying is trustworthy, and I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works.

To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.

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