

# WHEN GRACE APPEARED

by Ray C. Stedman

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In the midst of the hurry-burly and hustle and bustle of Christmas, while we were getting the tree and trimming it, and in the midst of all that accompanies this festive season, the thought suddenly occurred to me, "How did the 1st century Christians celebrate Christmas?" Or did they celebrate the birthday of our Lord Jesus Christ? I took my New Testament and made a rather startling discovery. I found there is no Christmas celebration recorded at all in the New Testament! There is, of course, the coming of the shepherds and the wise men. But in the letters of Paul and James and Peter and John there is not one reference to a Christmas celebration. I wondered why this should be.

Did they not care about the birthday of Jesus? Were they opposed to it, perhaps, like the early Pilgrim fathers here on our own shores, who felt that it was a frivolous and worldly manifestation and forbade it by law? Or was it simply because credit cards had not yet been invented and they could not afford it? As I read the New Testament, I found what I think is the reason for this rather amazing fact. I discovered that the early Christians, the apostles and their associates, did not see the life of Jesus as we do, in segments -- the birth, the hidden years, the open ministry, the cross, and the resurrection. We have the record in the Gospels and it is easier to study it when it is broken up that way. But 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."

In Paul's second letter to his son in the faith, Timothy, he writes,

**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}**

Thus he groups it all together as one great event which he calls "the appearing." In our text in Titus, Chapter 2, Verse 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 that passage. One begins the passage and one occurs in the middle of it. One is a part of history and it was so in Paul's day, "for the grace of God," he said, "has appeared." That appearing covers the entire life and ministry of Jesus Christ, approximately thirty-three years, as best we can determine, 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, yet one appearing of Jesus Christ.

The second appearing is a part of prophecy, and still is today, 2,000 years after these words were written. We are, we read, "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. It is more meaningful to us today than it was when it was written, for many students of Scripture feel this blessed hope, this "appearing of the glory," is drawing very, very near.

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 quite different things. 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. I call attention to one other interesting fact -- that the word "appearing" is, in the original, *epiphany*. It has been transliterated into English and means "a shining forth." The wonderful phrasing of the New English Bible reads, "The grace of God has dawned upon the world." What a beautiful expression that is of Christmas!

Thus the nature of Christ's first appearing, beginning at Bethlehem, and all the subsequent ministry, is quite 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 all grace -- God reaching out to man. Dr. G. Campbell Morgan says, very beautifully,

"The song of the angels to sighing humanity is the beginning of the infinite mystery of the Incarnate God. From this all light is streaming, all songs are coming, all hope is flaming."

Grace means that the first subject on God's agenda to discuss with man is not judgment, but love. It is amazing how many today fear that if they draw near to God, the first thing God wants to talk about is condemnation, that he wishes to punish them for their sins. But the Scripture says, "God sent His Son into the world not to condemn the world but that the world through Him might be saved," {cf, John 3:17}. God's first concern with man is not judgment.

I was in Oklahoma City a few weeks ago, and attended a lunch put on by Campus Crusade for Christ. Among other parts of the program they had asked a number of local men to give testimonials to the blessing of the ministry of Campus Crusade in their own lives. One man startled the group by saying, "I want you men to know that I had a long-standing resentment against Campus Crusade. I read some of their literature one day and discovered they had what they called 'The Four Spiritual Laws'. (1) God loves you and has a plan for your life; (2) man is sinful and therefore is unable to discover God's love and plan; (3) Jesus Christ is God's provision for the sin of man that he might enter into the full program of God; and 4) you must receive Him by faith, by an invitation and thus you may enter into all that God has planned." He said, "I read these four spiritual laws through and I felt very angry for I recognized that all they had done was to take the three points of our good Southern Baptist 'plan for salvation' and simply prefaced it with another and called it 'The Four Spiritual Laws'. I could not stand this crowd at first! The idea of taking the Southern Baptist plan of salvation and using it without giving any credit to them at all! But I remembered how many times I had tried witnessing with the plan of salvation which begins, 'you are a sinner and if you acknowledge your sin God will save you.' I would go to people and tell them they were sinners but I could never get any of them to admit it! But one day I decided to try these four spiritual laws and instead of starting out with the subject of sin I started out with the idea, 'God loves you and has a plan for your life,' and you know, in the last three weeks I have won four men to Christ, because I started out with God's love."

That is grace, the first subject on God's program. For almost 2,000 years, God has permitted man to have his way. He is allowing man, in his ignorance and willfulness, to abuse and misuse God's gift of life to him in order that he may have the opportunity to hear the whole wonderful tale of redemption by the Lord Jesus Christ, that 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, including those from the mouth of Jesus himself, 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, refuses utterly to do so, 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 a bit, 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 Verse 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}**

Salvation is, first of all, an altered allegiance, "renouncing irreligion (or godlessness) and worldly passions, and then, lawful life, "soberly, uprightly and godly" in this present world.

Let us look at that more closely. Salvation manifests itself first by an altered allegiance. Have you discovered that the chain with which the devil binds men too 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 -- is an implacable master. 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 all social acts at all levels of life. It is impossible to escape it. 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 coterie 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 all the machinery of 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, writing to the Romans, can say, "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" {cf, Rom 12:2}, in Jesus Christ. It is this that makes true 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 doughty champions of orthodoxy and among them was a man by the name of Athanasius from Alexandria, Egypt, a mighty man of God. 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 stoutly refused to surrender any of the faith of which he was convinced. The emperor leaned over and said to him, "Pertinacious old man! 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, there is manifest a lawful life, 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 who look as if they could eat butter out of a churn, but this word does not describe someone without humor. I confess to you, I am always afraid of 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. No, this does not indicate dourness; it means "being responsible, taking life seriously, responsibility in the areas of knowledge." Phillips renders it thus: "We are to live," he says, "responsible, honorable, God-fearing lives." If you want an enlargement of this, I refer you to the context, beginning with Verse 6:

**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 results when a heart has been changed by contact with Jesus Christ. An altered allegiance and altered living.

A Christian man was once asked if he believed in the miracle of changing water to wine. He said, "Of course I do. I have never seen Jesus change water into wine, but in our home he changed beer into furniture."

Salvation is not only described as to what it is, that is, what it looks like, but also where it is to be manifest: "In this world," Paul said, literally, "in this present age." Where are you to show this change? 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 other words, right in the center of life. That is where the change is to be manifest.

I read this week a rather quaint sermon of Charles Spurgeon's, the great London preacher, on Christ's words to the demoniac, "Go home to thy friends and tell them how great things the Lord has done for thee, and had compassion upon thee," {Mark 5:19b KJV}. Spurgeon said, among other things, "Oh, if I could do it, I would seek out the hermit in his lonely cave and say to him, 'If you are what you profess to be, a servant of God, then upset this pitcher and eat your bread and leave this dreary cave and wash your face and go home to your friends and tell them what the Lord has done for you.'" He said, "I would go to the monks and to the nuns, and say, 'No more of this absurd discipline. Go home to your friends and to your parents, and turn your houses into convents and live your lives, not in some isolated separation which is disobedience to the will and purpose of God, but right in the center of life. Go home to your friends.'" Christianity never was made to interfere with households and family ties. It makes a better husband and a better wife and a better son and a better daughter out of anyone who takes the Lord Jesus seriously.

And, if you ask why all this happens, you have more than a hint in Verse 14. We read of the Lord Jesus,

**... 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 transcendent 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 in that life. 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.

In these closing moments I wish to depart from the mere theory of what I have been saying to end on a very 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 Jesus saving men and women, boys and girls like this today?"
- "Is it real, or is it but a myth?"

Are these kind of lives being produced? Are we still in the age of grace and is the appearing of glory yet ahead? Or is it all a beautiful dream?

Last Sunday night I met with a group of fifteen or sixteen, people, right here in this building, and I listened to them one after another, tell in their own way the story of the difference Jesus Christ had made when he came into their lives. It was heartwarming. I could not possibly repeat each story, but among them was a young man who said that as he grew up his heart was filled with hate to all people everywhere. This was the characteristic of his life, he hated people. His reaction to every situation was one of hate. But he met a man who told him about Christ, and in telling there came an awakened hope and he opened his heart to this living Christ. He went on to say how the hate had been changed to compassion and to concern.

Sitting next to him was a woman who told us that as she grew up her heart was so filled with hatred of her father that on one occasion she was barely restrained from killing him. But Christ entered her life and changed that. Her father, too, was changed so that when he died a few years later he was mourned by the family that

hated him before.

I finished reading this week that amazing story, *The Cross and the Switchblade* -- the story of what is going on in the streets of New York City among the tough gang leaders and teen-age gangsters there. These are dope addicts, homosexuals, and murderers, giving themselves over to the vilest and the foulest of deeds, yet in the grace of God the gospel has penetrated even into those dark areas and is transforming and delivering them from drug addiction and the other hopeless, wearing, frightful things of their life; transforming them into new creatures in Christ, intelligent men and women, living lawful lives.

Does this work for the old as well as the young? A few years ago I met an old man who had been a member of the French Foreign Legion in Africa, a tough, hard-bitten old soldier whose every other word was blasphemy. Meeting him, I found that he was interested in reading and I started taking him books, first a rather light type and gradually more and more serious books, all of them concerning Christian faith. One day I knocked at the door to pick up a book he had finished and when he brought it to the door and laid it in my hand he said, with a tear in his eye, "I want to thank you for this book because through this book I was introduced to Jesus, my Savior." He lived for only a couple of years after that, but what a change in that man! He was completely transformed, every interest in his life different, and the joy that was in his heart was evident to all.

These last few weeks I sat down with one of the world's great ear surgeons and heard him tell how Christ had entered his heart and what a transformation it had made. I met a woman high in social circles in New York City who told me of the empty social round of her life, with its meaninglessness and drab monotony, but how it was utterly transformed as she came to know Jesus Christ, a living Savior. I sat with a Senator from Mexico not long ago who confessed he had been searching all his life for something that would satisfy and give him joy and a sense of purpose in life. He said that in simple faith he had met Jesus Christ recently, and there was on his face a light that never shone on land or sea before.

Just this week I read an account of a young minister to whom a young girl of about seventeen years of age came and said she wanted to talk with him. He took her into the study and she sat down and said, "I am so unhappy, so miserable." He said, "Tell me about it." She said, "You know how the magazines all say today that the purity that the church tries to uphold is not realistic? And parents seem to do the same things that the young people are doing these days, and you wonder what is right and what is wrong. I sometimes wonder if there is any goodness left at all. You know how your classmates will tell you that all this purity and chastity is old-fashioned and out of date. The boys come and tell you that they love you, and they make demands upon you, and tell you that if you will not do what they want they will never date you again. This has been happening to me, and I did things I did not think I would do, but I am in pretty deep now and I do not know what to do about it. I get no fun out of it, it is a misery to me. But I do not know what to do. I'm afraid that I will just go on and I will end up nothing but an old hag." The minister said, "Do not despair. Jesus Christ has come to stand against these very things, and to deal with exactly this kind of problem. The scars that are in your life will still remain, but your life need never be the same again."

And as he talked with her, he told her what it means to meet a living Lord. She knelt in prayer with him and he said he did something he had never done before. Impulsively he reached out and put his hands on her head and said, "May the healing grace of Jesus Christ cleanse you from all your sin." And he said that girl looked up at him and there was a change in her eyes, a light in her face, that made his heart leap with joy. He said, "I know she will go straight. I know there is imparted to her now a power that can keep her straight."

This is what salvation is. It is not "pie in the sky by and by." It is a transformed heart and a transformed life right now, an altered allegiance, a delivered life, the breaking of the bonds of slavery that bind us to this terrible system of pleasing men, and brings us into the full glory and liberty of a life that is well 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, to work out once a year. He came to be a Savior. He came to give salvation, to begin right where you are, in your place of need, and to accept you

as you are, and to change you. And that change is always manifest in this two-fold way:

1. An altered allegiance, and, thus,
2. The beginning of a lawful 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.

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