

The Appearance of Grace and Glory

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In October of 2012 there was a disturbance in the force. The Walt Disney Company purchased Lucasfilm and announced that there would be new episodes in the Star Wars series. At that time, it was confirmed that Star Wars Episode VII would be released late in 2015; the release date is December 18, 2015 (just a few weeks away) to the great excitement of Star Wars fans everywhere. Sales for tickets already have been through the roof even though the movie isn't even released yet. Ever since that day in October of 2012 Star Wars fans have been living in limbo. There was this promise, this event that guaranteed, if you will, more to the Star Wars story; yet, they've had to wait. When you're standing in October 2012 filled with excitement, late 2015 feels so far away. How does a fan behave; what does a fan do while she waits? And how does she put this excitement and anticipation to good use?

Followers of Jesus should be used to living in limbo like this. We live in between news and a promise that's infinitely greater than the production of a new Star Wars movie. Jesus first appeared and he will appear again. And we, too, have to ask ourselves questions like, "How should we live while we wait? What should we be doing? How do we channel this excitement?"

The Advent season is upon us. Christmas decorations are up; presents are being purchased and wrapped. We are making our annual plans during this Christmas season. Advent means "to arrive" or "the arrival of someone special." That's what we celebrate; the arrival of Jesus. The next two Sundays we will be celebrating the birth, the advent, of Jesus 2000 years ago by peering into the Word of God; but we will also be learning what we should be doing in the meantime as we wait for his second appearance. Titus 2 is going to be our principle text; so, if you want to be caught up in a drama that the new Star Wars movie can't hold a candle to, turn and read with me vs. 11-14 from Titus 2 (READ vs. 11-14).

That paragraph by the Apostle Paul is filled with theological significance. But his presentation of this theological truth to Titus is meant to impact day to day living. This is so important for us to see and recognize about true theology; God's truth and our understanding of it is meant to change our lives; it's meant to impact our behavior; it's supposed to transform us from the inside out so that we relate to God and to each other differently. Truth about God changes how we wake up in the morning, go to school, go about our work and interact with our neighbors and family members. That's what sound doctrine does. And central to Paul's presentation of the truth is the appearing of Jesus Christ. Did you notice that? He makes reference to Jesus' appearing two times. The first time is in vs. 11, "For the grace of God has appeared." Then the appearing of Christ is mentioned again in vs. 13, "waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ."

I know you are astute, my brothers and sisters. And being astute you probably noticed a slight difference in those references to Jesus' appearing. The first reference of an appearance in

vs. 11 has already happened, right? For the grace of God *has appeared*. That's happened. God's grace has shown up, praise God! But the appearing in vs. 13 is one we are waiting for; Paul even says that. We are waiting for our blessed hope (what's that?), *the appearing* of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ. Let's talk about these two appearings because they are so important to our understanding of God's work and so instructive in how we should be living in our world today.

The first appearance of grace and God's Christ who brought it is what we celebrate at Christmas time - this appearing is the focus of our celebration at Christmas time. What's so utterly amazing about the appearing of Christ in Bethlehem isn't merely the interesting and providential events surrounding the birth of Jesus of Nazareth (the angels, the stars, the miracles, the prophecies); what's so confounding is that God packaged up all of his grace, all of his glory, all of his mercy, all of his power and wonder and truth in this baby's life, death and resurrection. It's that God decided in his supreme and unmatched wisdom to remain faithful to every single promise he has ever made from the beginning of time in this one person... Jesus. What's most unbelievable, but fabulously true is that God chose to reach out to us and meet us by coming to earth Himself in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ. And so, wrapped up in this baby, this person, Jesus, the firstborn of Mary, is the hope of the cosmos. And the reason why this is such good news is because before his appearing humanity could never have found God ourselves. We could never meet his standards, we could never attain his righteousness. We would never discover the glory of God ourselves. Try as we might humanity would always fall short and remain separated from God and his love. But rather than God getting angry and impatient that we couldn't reach up and meet God, he kindly, mercifully, reached down and met us. That's really good news, right, FBC?

Judah, my youngest, has always loved PB&Js. All my boys have had their seasons of liking PB&Js, some more than others; but Judah has had the longest and most consistent love affair with America's favorite sandwich. But here's the deal. Most of his life (even now, to some degree) the jelly alludes him. What do I mean by that? You know how a jelly jar gets all gunky on the inside and slippery on the outside? It makes opening the jelly jar pretty difficult for Kindergartener. So, try as he may, most of the time he's not able to get to the delicious jelly on his own. But that doesn't stop him; here's what he does. He just hands the jar to me and says, "Dad, could you help?" Unable to help himself, he finds help from his dad. I'm happy to extend some grace and open the jar for him.

That's the focus of the first appearing of Jesus. Grace. Up until the coming of Jesus we have century upon century of people failing, sinning and committing wickedness. God's people turned away from him. The Canaanites iniquity bubbled over in unrighteousness that brought the sword of God's judgment. Jews and Gentiles, Greeks and barbarians, no one sought God, all turned aside, together they became worthless. Not one did good; not even one. Not you and not me. But rather than bringing a bolt of lightning to torch the earth, God sent his son to bring grace; to bring forgiveness and mercy and peace. He kindly sent his son to turn us from our

wickedness. The grace of God appeared bringing salvation to all people everywhere regardless of gender, ethnicity, social status or wealth. The first appearing is the arrival of grace.

Can you see why Christmas is such a special time for followers of Jesus? It's a celebration of an appearing of the grace of God - grace that saves, grace that rescues, grace that forgives. And yes, the world can't see that (that was once you and don't blame them or snicker at them when they don't get why we cherish Christmas time for more than presents and Santa and ornaments). Instead of getting upset about petty Christmas culture wars, my brothers and sisters, celebrate the grace of God and then extend God's grace to others. What better way to celebrate Christ by being extravagant in giving kindness and mercy and goodwill to others in his name?

There is a second appearing that is still to come. Let's remind ourselves of that wording again; Paul says that followers of Jesus are (vs. 13) "waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ." He doesn't say we are waiting for the "appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ," he says we are "waiting for the appearing *of the glory* of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ." Why does he say it that way? Aren't we waiting for Jesus? Isn't he our greatest treasure? Why wait for the glory of our great God and Savior? Well, he doesn't mean that there's something more glorious than Jesus. And, yes, we are ultimately waiting for his appearing. But by saying we are waiting for the appearing of the glory of Jesus he's trying to describe the nature of this second appearing of Jesus. When Jesus came the first time, he came highlighting his grace; the greatness of his grace. Look how gracious God is! You'd think that when God looked upon a world filled with wickedness he'd visit us with anger and wrath. But he doesn't. He visits us with mercy and grace. Be amazed at his grace. But when Jesus appears the second time his grace isn't going to be the focal point, it's going to be his glory, his might, his excellence and power. When Jesus first appeared the world hardly took notice except for a few magi and shepherds. But when Jesus appears for the second time his glory will not be missed; every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, is King, is Ruler, is Sovereign to the glory of God the Father.

Do you know why this is so important? Do you know why the second time Jesus appears he's coming in glory? Because today, in this present age, it doesn't look like Jesus is glorious; it doesn't look like he's a glorious and strong king, ruler or sovereign. When an ISIS fighter murders a child in the name of Allah, when little boy or girls are heaping up cries to Jesus to save them and a militant Muslim fighter laughs and scoffs as he shouts Allahu Akbar, at that moment to many people Allah looks great and Jesus doesn't. When following Jesus' wisdom gets you nowhere in corporate America or in politics, when following Jesus' way keeps you in the company of refugees, orphans and sinners, when loving Jesus means you give your money away rather than storing it up for yourself, to the natural mind, Jesus doesn't look great. When Jesus doesn't heal a man from cancer, but let's him die in a hospital bed, Jesus doesn't look glorious. To many he looks weak, he looks feeble and absent. Oh, but he is glorious. He's so great and glorious a child refuses to renounce her faith and dies a martyr's death. Jesus is so glorious that he's desired more than money; he's desire more than health. To those who have

eyes to see, Jesus is more glorious than the status of corporate America and the power of the Halls of Congress.

Today, in this present age, it takes the mind of Christ, it takes the eyes given in the New Birth to see the surpassing glory of Christ. Without a new mind, without new eyes, Jesus doesn't look glorious even though he is. But at his second appearing, it will be quite clear to everyone that he is great. Greater than Allah; greater than Buddha; greater than money; greater than fame; greater than comfort; greater than hunting or shopping or fishing or cars. How will we know? Because he's coming in a full display of his glory for everyone to see. And when he does, everything you and I have ever thought was glorious will be forgotten instantly as it's dwarfed by the glory the King of kings and the Lord of lords.

1 John 3:2-3 says, "Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we will be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure." There's a lot in that passage that we can't unpack, but the reason I shared it is this: followers of Jesus (like you and me) live in this present age with hope, with faith. We know and believe in the greatness and glory of Jesus by faith; we haven't seen it with these eyes yet. We will; everyone will. And when we see him we will be made as he is, pure and sanctified. But until that day, we look with faith.

I know how unsatisfying that is to those who don't know Jesus. We even know it's reason to mock Christ and faith. I read a great article on the horrible shooting in San Bernardino this past week that highlighted the mockery of prayer during tragedies like this. "Stop praying and do something," pundits and journalist said. "God isn't fixing this," read the headline on the cover of the *Daily News*. The true message was: prayer doesn't work and God doesn't care. And if your only standard of measurement is the pints of blood that got spilt, then it seems you might be right. But God keeps saying in his word, "Don't look to the things you can see. Look with the eyes of faith."

And what gives us hope and confidence that what we see with the eyes of faith is true? The first appearing of Jesus in grace. His real, historical life, death and resurrection. Next week we are going to see what God's grace does for us and how it works to make a real, impactful difference in our lives today. But before we do that, let's finish our time today celebrating, rejoicing in the grace of our Lord Jesus around the table. This table commemorates the grace we've been talking about today. We can see the grace of God in his miraculous birth 2000 years ago and we taste his grace now with the bread and the cup. My hope for you would be that as we close our service today around the table, your heart would be filled with joy and worship of God.

Key Verse: Titus 2:11 ~ For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people.

Questions for the week

- Is it difficult to remember and celebrate the coming of grace during Christmas time? How come, if so?
- What's challenging about believing what we do not see instead of what we do see?
- How does Jesus coming in glory give you hope? If it doesn't, why do you think that's the case?