

What Grace Teaches

Titus 2:11-15 | Sept. 29, 2018 | Bryce Beale

The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.¹

But what does *save* mean?

R. C. Sproul said that once, in the sixties, when he was teaching theology at a university, he was returning from his lunch break and a man approached him to ask, “Are you saved?”

Surprised by the man’s sudden appearance and by the question, Sproul responded, “Saved from what?”

The evangelist did not know.²

Salvation is a term we have laid our heads upon so often that we have forgotten what the pillow actually looks like.

“Not me!” says one zealous Christian. “I know what we are saved from—we are saved from hell.” This is true. But this is somewhat like saying, “I know what romance is—it is a biological impulse to reproduce.” Well, yes, that is a part of it. But is it nothing more? Have we really produced a thousand forests worth of pages on the subject of love in vain? Romance is biology, but it is much more.

And we are saved from hell, but salvation is much more than this. Sproul points out that we are saved from God—from his righteous judgment of our sins against his holiness. Now we have stepped backward to take in more of the scene of salvation. Yet we can step back again and see more than we have seen so far.

For Jesus came to save sinners from the penalty of their wrongdoing—he came to rescue them from the wrathful hand of God, to pluck them from over the flames of hell. But he came also to save them from the enslaving power of sin.

The Christian cringes at the sight of the corruption which remains in him, and he cries out, “Who will save me from this body of death?” And we hear the heavenly reply, “Christ! He has come to save you from your sin!”

¹ 1 Tim. 1:15 (ESV).

² Justin Taylor, “Saved from What?”, *The Gospel Coalition Website*, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/saved-from-what/> (June 4, 2010; accessed Sept. 29, 2018).

Christ appeared, as the apostle John reports, “in order to take away sins.” And so he can continue, “No one who abides in him keeps on sinning.”³ The true Christian sins less and less because he is being saved more and more from sin. Jesus is taking that sin away, and if it is taken away, it is no longer there. That is what the Savior came to do.

Brothers and sisters, this is one of the greatest graces heaven has ever birthed. Formerly we hated and were hated by one another; now we may be pleasant. The passions which ruled us as tyrants, which tormented us with scorpions and an iron scepter, with the whips of Egypt, are now put under our feet. That old philosopher Socrates saw through his squinted knowledge enough to know that it was good to be good; but he was powerless to make the men of his beloved Athens good, and they condemned him to death by hemlock. He could not save them from themselves.

But Jesus can. And by his free grace, he has chosen to do so.

This is what we read in this best-known passage in Titus.

TITUS 2:11-15

Paul appends to this great oracle of salvation an appeal that Titus speak these things in all ways and with all authority, and that he refuse to be despised—probably because he was very young, and the Cretans were very bad.⁴ What I offer you today is not a vain word, or an unimportant point of highfalutin theory. These are the words of God meant for your ears. I have no choice but to demand your attention; you have no legitimate option but to give it.

It is said that once when some poor fellow fell asleep at George Whitefield’s preaching, the preacher slammed his heavy foot upon his platform to the shock of all, waking up the slumberer with the declaration, “I have come to you in the name of the Lord of Hosts!...and I must and will be heard!”⁵

³ 1 Jn. 3:5-6.

⁴ Although Paul clearly says, in his similar exhortation to Timothy, that he (Timothy) must not be looked down on *for his youth* (1 Tim. 4:12), and does not say so here to Titus, the same is probably implied. The fact that Titus is included immediately after what he must teach young men in verse 6 suggests that Titus himself was young, and therefore the temptation for the Ephesians in regard to Timothy would likely have held for the Cretans in regard to Titus.

⁵ Fred Sanders, “Happy Birthday, George Whitefield,” *The Scriptorium Daily*, <http://scriptoriumdaily.com/happy-birthday-george-whitefield/> (Dec. 16, 2009; accessed Sept. 29, 2018).

I do not mean to do the same, but you see what command is given Titus and, therefore, is given to me in verse 15: “Declare these things; exhort and rebuke with all authority. Let no one disregard you.”

In this confidence I proceed to consider the text, for if I interpret this text correctly I speak no less than the oracles of the Almighty.

Hear then what the Lord says to his church.

Saving Grace

“For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us...”

In ten verses the apostle has shown, so far in chapter 2, how Christians should behave when they are old, when they are young, if they are servants. And last week we noted that the motivation to behave this way, to obey, is that in so doing we demonstrate the beauty of our gospel.

But what if we were to press the question further and say, “Well, why should we as Christians care if we beautify the gospel or not? What if I have come to church this morning and, although I know I ought to be living a very different sort of life, I am not. I feel bad about it, but not bad enough to change. I am glad to be saved by Jesus; but I am not ‘all in,’ my life still looks like it did before I was saved. I don’t want to make the gospel look bad, but I am not motivated enough by this fear to change my way of life.”

Take that question in hand and then turn your eye to the first English word of our text: “For.” Meaning, “We have offered you a basis for Christian obedience, which is that if you don’t obey you’ll make the gospel look bad. But, that is not the only fact that drives our obedience as Christians. After all, that is not enough of a motivation to fuel an entire lifestyle.” This “For” is set in place to show that what we will consider now is the motivation under the motivation we have already seen. This is the cornerstone of Christian obedience.

Why do Christians obey? Because “the grace of God has appeared.” Well, what has that got to do with it? Very much, if you consider the kind of grace that has appeared—see, it is a grace that “brings salvation for all people” and that “trains us.” And because God’s grace is this two-fold kind of grace, Christians will obey.

Imagine if God’s grace, as it appeared in the coming of Jesus Christ, only saved us from the wrath of God and did not train us too. Imagine if it were a grace bringing salvation to all kinds of men, or setting the offer of salvation before all the nations of the world, but after clearing the

guilt of all who believed, left them wallowing in their sins, still shackled to their oppressive lusts.

Why, this would be like Moses making his way to the court of Pharaoh to say, "The LORD has heard his people's cry under the taskmasters of Egypt, and he has come to deliver them. In four hundred more years, he will visit them and bring them up to a land flowing with milk and honey." Moses walks away from a rather confused Pharaoh, who does not much mind the words he has heard since they are only words, and since, for all intents and purposes, they have accomplished nothing. He, the king of Egypt, still exercises full control over the Israelites.

Do you think, when Moses meets the elders of Israel on his way out of that court and says, "God has saved you! In four hundred years, you'll out of here." Do you think the elders and the people would have declared, "We're saved!" Grace has visited them from on high; but where is its teeth? This grace would save, in time, but none of its force would have been felt at present. The people would return from hearing the good news and submit their backs again to the same whips that had flayed them the day before.

Here is a grace that saves from future judgment, but does not free us in the present. We are glad God's grace is not this kind of grace.

See our text again: "For the grace of God has appeared [that is, in the coming of Christ to earth, and his agonies upon the cross, and his following resurrection], bringing salvation for all people, *training us...*"⁶ When Israel was saved from Egypt, though they were not yet in the land of salvation, the land of promise, they were not in the land of slavery either. It was a real salvation that swept them up as in a motherly arm. They awaited a future hope, but life was different in the present also.

The same is meant when Paul says that God's grace has brought salvation for all people, but that it is also "training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age."

The grace that saves, sanctifies. The grace that takes us to heaven also takes away our sins.

"But wait," one says, "we are speaking of grace. No legalism is allowed here. See, God's grace has appeared, and grace is only grace if we do not in any way earn it. Therefore, we must not expect that every Christian will live an obedient life. Some may live in sin from the time they are saved until the time they die; still they are saved, for that is grace, an unmerited gift."

⁶ Emphasis mine.

Ah, but you misunderstand what it means to be saved! Yes, it involves deliverance from wrath, but it also means deliverance from sinning.

Think if there were twenty patients in a remote country who all had cataracts, could hardly see, and needed surgery to fix it. But they could not afford the procedure. So a wealthy man, hearing of their plight, donated enough money for half these twenty patients to have their eyes corrected.

If you and I were in the clinic afterward, and you asked me, “Which of these men and women had the surgery?” I would immediately look around and find the ten who now can see. This man is reading a book, and this woman is walking easily over an uneven surface, and so forth.

Now, would it be fair of you to reply, “No, no, no, you are all wrong. See, the ten who had the surgery were given the surgery as a gift. They did not earn it. But you are deciding which have had the surgery based on which ones are seeing. That is a work, seeing. If only those who see had the surgery, then you are saying they have earned their eye surgery by seeing. The real ten who have had the surgery we will never know. Some who are still blind may have gone under the blade.”

Here is a strawman logic we are all happy to hit with our rakes, but it is the same logic of those who proclaim a free grace that may or may not change the recipient. Someone says, “Yes, I believe in Jesus, I went forward at an altar call in camp once when I was young; since that time, my life has hardly changed from what it was. I am still participating in those same sins I enjoyed before I believed—but, God’s grace is free and I do not have to earn salvation. Therefore, I am saved, though I do not obey.”

That is, “I may not have undergone eye surgery to remove my cataracts, but I can see.” Or in the case of our text, “Yes, I may not have been trained to deny ungodliness or worldly desires, and I may never have been taught to live a self-controlled, upright, godly life, but I have been saved. My life shows no consciousness of God, is ungodly rather than godly; I am less than honest in my dealings with others, and I do whatever feels right to me—but I’m also a Christian. I have received the grace that trains every person who possesses it, but I have not been trained. I have taken hold of that grace that regenerates every individual who takes hold of it, but I have not been regenerated.”

This is a simple contradiction. The grace that saves also sanctifies, and God in his generosity never offers anyone only half this grace.

Paul has already said so in chapter one, when he remarked concerning some of the Cretan troublemakers, “They profess to know God, but they

deny him by their works.”⁷ Those who know God obey; those who do not obey, do not know God. Those who fly are birds, those who swim are fish, and those who obey are Christians. The flying and the swimming and the obedience earn nothing, but they do show what you already are.

You will remember Paul claimed the same in Romans 6. He had announced a free salvation by grace, apart from works, and his opponents may have retorted, “Well then, should we all sin, since our works don’t seem to matter in regard to salvation?” And Paul replied, “May it never be!” What does he mean? He means, as he goes on to say, “How can we who died to sin still live in it?”⁸ God’s grace that saves the soul trains the soul. The slave saved out of Egypt will be saved from the taskmaster’s whip, and the Christian saved from sin will be saved from sin’s whip. The saved cannot continue unchanged in unsaved deeds.

Our text goes even further. Look again and see that Jesus’ purpose in coming to this earth was quite specific, in verse 14: “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.”

Jesus, Prince of light, took upon himself the flesh of mankind with a mission in his mind—and his purposes cannot be thwarted. Notice that our text does not read, “who gave himself for us to keep us out of hell.” That would be salvation, but only in a limited sense. Jesus meant to save us and to save us abundantly. He intended to keep us from the fires of condemnation—and praise him for it! But he meant to do even more than that: he meant “to redeem us from all lawlessness,” to buy us by his own blood out of the lawless lives we lived, “and to purify,” that is to wipe away the guilt of what we have done, but also to remove those impurities from us altogether, “to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.”

We are prone to think of salvation as, “What can God do for me?” This is not entirely a bad question, for he does much for us. But it is the wrong question. Salvation is not mainly for man; it is mainly for God. Jesus did not come to earth only to forgive us—he came to purify us *for himself*. This is why grace cannot save without sanctifying, because Jesus does not want for himself a wicked and corrupt people who happen to be spared God’s justice. He wants a holy people for himself, zealous to do good works, eager to serve him.

Jesus is that great groom of Ephesians 5 who grooms his bride, who “loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify

⁷ V. 16.

⁸ V. 2.

her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.”

It will be good for our spiritual health to set aside for a moment that common question of, “What can Jesus do for me? Which of my felt needs can he meet?” and to ask instead, “What does Jesus want of me? Which of his desires can I meet?” When we see salvation from the standpoint of our Master, then holiness seems inevitable. If Jesus wants a people for his own possession, then he will want a holy people. And if he wants a holy people, then I want to be holy for him.

Brothers and sisters, I hope you do not find in this text a burden for your shoulders; this is a light yoke. Yes, if anyone does not live a holy life, he or she cannot be a recipient of God’s saving grace; but on the other side of this coin we may with equal force assert, if anyone has received of his grace, he or she cannot help but grow.

Consider all the words Paul could have chosen as the Christian’s trainer: “For the law of God has appeared, training us...” Then we would have before us a checklist we could never check. When we came inquiring, desperate to be rid of whatever remains of our sin, we would only hear, “Try harder.” If the law were our trainer, we would hear as from the lips of Pharaoh, “You are lazy, very lazy; now, go make your bricks but I will not give you straw as before. Work harder, find it for yourself, stop failing.”

Or consider what our lives would be if we read, “For the wrath of God has appeared, training us...” Then we would be justified to cringe in a corner, to watch every step we take with shuddering and fear, lest we should misstep and feel the full weight of God’s displeasure. We would have a hard and exacting master, and it would be all that we could do to simply hunker down, to put our talent in a handkerchief and bury it, to tiptoe past an angry dad across a sea of eggshells and hope we do not set him off.

What if the text read, “For the science of man has appeared, training us...” What if we were dependent on the ever-shifting sands of culture to point the way to God’s will? We would scour books on psychology and philosophy, only to find them all in disagreement with each other and without a mediator for their feuds. We would never know if all our efforts were for naught, if we were basing all our labors at growth on some faulty theory that would be disproven in another decade or century.

Ah, but see, the text really reads, “For the grace of God has appeared, training us...”

Our growth in Christ, what we call progressive sanctification, which happens “in this present age” according to our text, is a synergistic task. That is, we work and God works. *But*, God’s work is the greater of the two and envelopes our own. From his mighty arm and tender heart there flows a never-ending stream of grace, new every morning, to propel us on to holiness. And as in any training, such as training for a new job, we will repeatedly fail before we succeed. This the law could never tolerate; but grace can.

Grace is a kind trainer. She drives us on with promises of reward, and woos us forward with glimpses of God’s love. Then when we fall upon our faces, she reaches down a soft hand to lift us up again, smiling upon our shame a reassuring smile. We cannot stand how little we have grown in so long a time; but grace is patient with us. We think we cannot go forward; but grace is hopeful for us. We begin to stray to this side or that, but grace pursues us and leads us back to the path.

Believer, this is the grace that trains you. When the blood of Jesus Christ our Savior fell into the sod of Golgotha, it fell with the intention of watering our hearts, that from them every variety of holiness might bloom. The love that led our Lord to Calvary did not die with the last beat of Jesus’ human heart. That heart beats for us still, beats for our good and for our holiness. So do not lose heart; Jesus has not lost his. Grace will train you, and you will certainly grow.

The blessed hope

If this is not enough to move your heart toward holy strivings, grace offers even more incentive. For grace is training us to live a certain way, while we deny some vices and perform some virtues. But see how grace is training us not only with a view to our present salvation, our present growth and good, but with a view to the happy ending for which we are headed.

Grace trains us to live holy lives, verse 13, “waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.”

Why add this to a discussion of Christian holiness? We have been talking about the present, and about our behavior in the world right now. Why turn now to talk of the future, of things that seem far off? And the answer is, because grace is our trainer. And grace motivates us in part by holding out before us the reward of our strivings.

What grace! It were enough to say, “Christ wants a holy people for himself, so let us be holy.” He is, just as this passage so shockingly asserts, “our great God and Savior.” Some are so surprised to see Paul state Christ’s divinity, that he is God, in such plain terms, that though

the grammar practically demands it, they look for another explanation.⁹ They see it saying instead, “our great God, the Father, and also our Savior, Jesus Christ.” But the grammar demands we see “our great God” as none other than “Jesus Christ.” So, if this, the great God of all that is, wished us to be holy, how could we refuse him?

But in his kindness he goes beyond his simple right of our obedience, and sets before us a reward, the very greatest of all rewards. We will progress much more quickly in our training if we wait eagerly, with a fixed consciousness, for Christ’s return to earth.

Here Paul means by “hope” the fulfillment of our hope; by “blessed” he means happy. We long for what the saints have long called the beatific vision—the “happy making” vision of God that will be granted the pure in heart at the time of Christ’s return. We yearn to see the glory of Christ, which even when concealed in his first visit here was brilliant. If when that glory was concealed it drew the attention of the masses and turned the world upside down, what will it do when it is revealed, when it appears?

What will occur when Jesus comes, as he has said he will, in the glory of his Father with all his angels? I will tell you: he will fly upon the clouds of the sky, like lightning cracking across the firmament, and every eye will see him. He will send out his angels to gather his elect to himself, to meet him in the air; and he will send out his angels to gather all the nations before him. He will be seated on a throne of judgment and will separate his people, those trained in righteousness by grace, from those who are not his people and who live in iniquity. These who have never known the grace of God will be cast away into eternal torment for their deeds, as the only just repayment for them. But those who have been saved in the fullest sense, reborn and remade into a special people for the Lord, these will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. When Christ is revealed, these will be revealed with him in glory.¹⁰

Beyond these facts I can say nothing at all. What does it mean to live one day without a single temptation to sin? What does any relationship look like without the slightest influence of envy or pride? How does

⁹ This is one of two passages about Christ’s deity in the New Testament (the other being 2 Peter 1:1) where Granville Sharp’s Rule legitimately applies. According to the grammar in the Greek, Paul is referring to the same person by the terms “God” and “Savior,” and that person is given as “Jesus Christ.” So “our great God” is “Jesus Christ.” See the subheading “The Article with Multiple Substantives Connected by Καί (Granville Sharp Rule and Related Constructions)” in Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 270-90.

¹⁰ See Matt. 13:36-43, 47-50; 16:27; 25:31-46; Mark 8:38; Luke 17:24; 1 Thes. 4:13-18; Rev. 1:7.

anyone feel when they reach the blessed hope and stand before the Creator of heaven and earth, the essence of purity and virtue? How heavy is the eternal weight of glory that we have been eagerly anticipating in our current sufferings? None can say.

My friends, if this glorious appearance awaits us, what sort of people should we be in lives of holiness and godliness? If the Master may knock at the door any moment, how alert should we be that we may open the door for him and welcome him, whatever the time may be?

Grace is urging us forward, is appealing to us even on the basis of our greatest possible happiness. Lift your heads, for salvation is nearer now than when we first believed! And more, salvation is happening this moment, as we all proceed from glory to glory, from grace to grace, from holiness to holiness. We who have been saved from our futile way of life, are being saved from the remnants of the same, and will be saved from what our sins deserve when Christ appears to judge the world in righteousness. This, and all of this, is salvation.

And by God's grace, the fact and promise of this all has appeared, and is ours.