

God's Grace for His Own Special Possession

Scripture Readings: *Exodus 19:5-6; Ezekiel 37:21-23 • Titus 2:11-14 (Text)*

What is the common keyword in the following statements?

- Philippine President Mrs. Gloria Arroyo on the year 2010: “an unfolding future that we greet with hopefulness.”
- Malacanang press release: “We in the government join our people in welcoming the New Year with a sense of accomplishment and hope.”
- Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, leader of the Anglican Church: People should not give up on the “hope for change” or “shrug our shoulders and lower our expectations.”

This January 1st, just like all past New Year pronouncements, “hope” is the byword—hope for peace and economic prosperity for their countries and for the world. But it is not only leaders of nations, but most everyone is hopeful at the start of a new year. However, their hope is soon dashed to pieces because wars and rumors of wars, famines, earthquakes, and lawlessness continue unabated. In fact, the world’s problems seem to intensify with every new year, as Jesus prophesied in Matthew 24:6-8.

Where then should we as Christians put our hope? Paul says that we are to “set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth” (Col 3:2). And when we look up to things above, we think of Christ who, with his grace, gives us hope for the future.

In his letter to Titus, Paul warns against false teachers who lead people to ungodly lives (Tit 1:10-16). Then, in contrast to false teachers, he lists the criteria for choosing elders (Tit 1:5-9). He then gives instructions as to the various roles of different people in the church (Tit 2:1-10). Godly Christian living based on sound doctrine leads to sound behavior. In this way, the believer—and the church—is built up and strengthened.

What is the basis of the righteous lifestyle of a Christian? The basis is the grace of God which brought salvation to the world when Jesus was born, lived among men, crucified, and then rose again from the dead. Because of this salvation, believers are to be “zealous for good works” in this present age. While they await their “blessed hope”—the appearing of Christ a second time in the age to come—they are to live according to their calling as God’s own special people.

This afternoon, we will consider “**God’s Grace for His Own Special Possession.**”

- 1. In the Past: Gracious Salvation**
- 2. In the Present: Godly Living and Waiting**
- 3. In the Future: Complete Redemption and Purification**

In the Past: Gracious Salvation

In the Christmas story that we have considered the past four Sundays, we came back often to the angel's announcement to Joseph that his wife Mary "will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (Matt 1:21).

Two thousand years ago, Christ came down from his glorious throne in heaven to be born as a humble baby in human flesh and blood. Why did he do that? God sent him on a mission with eternal consequences. The angel said his mission was to "save his people from their sins." In Titus 2:11, Paul confirms this mission in saying that God's grace brought salvation to the world.

What is this grace? When Adam sinned, his perfect human nature was corrupted. He lost his righteous, holiness and fellowship with God. And all of mankind—his descendants—inherited this sinful nature. God warned Adam that on the day he disobeyed his command, he would surely die. He died that moment, losing his perfect communion with God. Then he died later, his body separating from his spirit.

God would have been justified if he physically destroyed Adam and Eve on that day they broke his covenant of works. But he didn't. In his grace and mercy, he set forth in his covenant of grace a plan to save Adam and his descendants. This is why Paul says in Romans 5:15:

But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many.

Adam and Eve and all mankind did not deserve God's mercy because the wages of sin is death. But God was gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in his love for them and his whole creation. His redemptive plan involved sending his own beloved Son to die for the sins of his people. But this plan was all God's grace, mercy and love, without any contribution from our works whatsoever. This is why Paul says in Ephesians 2:8-9:

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

Grace is God's gift. Even the faith in Christ and repentance that is required of us for our salvation is granted to us by God! There is nothing in our salvation that we can boast that we have contributed. Salvation is by *grace alone* through *faith alone* in *Christ alone*: it is 100 percent God's work.

Who are the recipients of this grace? Matthew says Jesus was born to "save *his people* from their sins." Then why does Paul in our text says, "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for *all people*"? This phrase "all people" is often misunderstood that Christ died for *all* the sins of *all* people. This is a false teaching, because it contradicts many other Scripture. If Christ died for every single human being who ever lived, no one will be in hell, which is unbiblical. But if there are people in hell, which is what the Bible says, then Christ died even for those who are in hell! What a travesty of God's justice and holiness!

No, contrary to false Arminian teaching, this phrase rather means that salvation is brought to all kinds of people: man or woman, slave or free, rich or poor, Jew or Gentile. In heaven, there will be all kinds of people “from every tribe and language and people and nation” (Rev 5:9).

But even more important than this question—for whom did Christ die—is this: Do you know if Christ died for you? Do you know if God’s grace has brought salvation for you from sin and death? If you do not know or if you are not sure, today is the day to know and to be sure. God calls you and all other unrepentant sinners, “*Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts*” (Heb 4:7).

But if you have received God’s grace by heeding God’s call to faith alone in Christ alone, then what are you to do afterwards? How are you to live your lives as people who have been given God’s grace and mercy?

In the Present: Godly Living and Waiting

Paul says that believers are to live godly lives—the results of our salvation--“in the present age.” This means that Christians are to live godly lives today, in the here and now.

How different this is from those who teach that the Reformed understanding of the preservation and perseverance of the saints will lead to ungodliness. On the contrary, we teach that good works are the sure evidence of our salvation. This is why Paul says in Ephesians 2:10 that because of his grace, God has “*created [us] in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.*” Even before God created the world, he already prepared for his chosen people all the good works that they will do in their lives. What, then, if a person claims to be a believer but does not show the fruits of his faith? Is he then what Arminians call a “carnal Christian”? God forbid! That is a contradiction—an impossibility—of the highest order!

Our Reformed confessions stress this sound doctrine:

Heidelberg Catechism 64: Q. But does not this doctrine make men careless and profane?
A. No, for it is impossible that those who are implanted into Christ by true faith, should not bring forth fruits of thankfulness.

The Reformers affirmed that it is impossible for a person who is saved by God’s grace not to bring forth the fruits of his salvation!

The catechism also teaches us the uses of good works in our present lives:

HC 86. Q. Since, then, we are redeemed from our misery by grace through Christ, without any merit of ours, why must we do good works? A. Because Christ, having redeemed us by His blood, also renews us by His Holy Spirit after His own image, that with our whole life we show ourselves thankful to God for His blessing, and that He be glorified through us; then also, that we ourselves may be assured by our faith by the fruits thereof; and by our godly walk win also others to Christ.

First, good works shapes us into Christ's image. Second, they show our thankfulness for God's salvation. Third, God is glorified by our good works. Fourth, good works assures us that we are truly saved people. And lastly, our godly behavior will lead unbelievers to Christ.

These statements are echoed by the Westminster Confession of Faith's article about good works:

These good works, done in obedience to God's commandments, are the fruits and evidences of a true and lively faith: and by them believers manifest their thankfulness, strengthen their assurance, edify their brethren, adorn the profession of the gospel, stop the mouths of the adversaries, and glorify God, whose workmanship they are, created in Christ Jesus thereunto, that, having their fruit unto holiness, they may have the end, eternal life (WCF 16:2).

This is why Paul says that we who are believers are a people "zealous for good works." We do not merely do good works as obligation and obedience, but we do them with joy and zeal. There is joy in salvation! The Psalmist knows this when he says, "More to be desired are they [God's commands] than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb" (Psa 19:10). Doing God's will is the most desirable thing in the world!

Positively, our salvation trains us in two things:

First, God's grace trains us "to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions." What is ungodliness? In Romans 1:29-31, he describes them as

filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice... full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness... gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.

This ungodliness is what Paul and Titus are up against in Crete. Titus was the pastor of the churches in Crete, whose people are well-known for pagan immorality and ungodliness.

Second, grace teaches us "to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives." Self-control is the discipline given by the Holy Spirit that allows Christians to resist the power of the flesh—our ungodly desires and passions. Paul applies it to women in relation to modesty, "women should adorn themselves in respectable apparel, with modesty and self-control" (1 Tim 2:9). How women today, even those in the churches, rebel against this Biblical injunction to live self-controlled lives when they dress in provocative, revealing ways!

Another example of the absence of self-control is in contemporary worship practices: wild dancing, emotional singing, screaming, and deafening rock music that we find in many evangelical churches. Do you remember the so-called "Toronto Blessing"? What made it famous were the uncontrolled "manifestations of the Spirit" during their "worship," such as "holy laughter," crying, barking, roaring, and other animal sounds and babbling. So much for Paul's injunction--"But all things should be done decently and in order" (1 Cor 14:40)—self-control.

Upright and godly lives mean righteous lives—living according to God’s righteous standard. Christ’s life is our standard of righteousness. His righteousness is counted as our righteousness as a result of our faith in him. Paul calls the opposite of these as ungodliness and unrighteousness, with terrible eternal consequences:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth (Rom 1:18).

God will harden the hearts of those who insist on living ungodly lives and then on Judgment Day, he will pour out his righteous wrath on them.

God’s grace brought salvation to us long ago when Jesus was born, died and rose from the grave. This salvation results in godly and righteous living today. And when Christ appears a second time, he will complete our redemption and purification.

In the Future: Complete Redemption and Purification

Do you remember that just a month ago, all of us were so excited about the coming Christmas and New Year celebrations? All of our thoughts were focused on the holidays. We were constantly thinking what presents to buy, what food we will cook, where we will go, and what we will wear.

This is what is called living for the future. And Paul tells Titus that we are to live righteous and godly lives while we await our Redeemer’s appearing. The Greek word for “waiting” also includes the idea of eagerness, anticipation and excitement for the future, for what’s coming. As eager as we are for Christmas and New Year, so we are to be infinitely more eager in expectation of the return of Christ to take us to our heavenly home forever.

When apocalyptic movies like 2012 or Armageddon are shown, some people wonder, “Why should I study hard to finish college? Why should I continue to work hard? Why should I live in righteousness? Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we all die!”

But Paul exhorts us in exactly the opposite way: “renounce ungodliness and worldly passions... and live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age.” Because our blessed hope, Christ, is coming! When he came into this world the first time, our Suffering Servant came “not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matt 20:28).

In giving his life as a ransom for his chosen multitude, his mission in Titus 2:14 was twofold: first, “to redeem us from all lawlessness”; second, “to purify for himself a people for his own possession.”

What is lawlessness? Lawlessness in the Old Testament is direct opposition to God’s Law. In the New Testament, it means “wickedness” or “sinfulness,” the opposite of “righteous,” “upright,” or “godly” lives that Paul exhorts believers to live. In Romans 6:19, Paul contrasts these two opposite qualities, “For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification.”

In giving his life for us, Christ redeemed us from all lawlessness and sinfulness.

What does Paul mean by “purification”? Again, he uses much Old Testament imagery here, mostly in Ezekiel 36-37, beginning with Ezekiel 37:23:

They shall not defile themselves anymore with their idols and their detestable things, or with any of their transgressions. But I will save them from all the backslidings in which they have sinned, and will cleanse them.

Ezekiel prophesied that one day, the people of Judah will be restored from their exile in Babylon. God will save and cleanse them from the defilement of their sins of idolatry and unfaithfulness. In Ezekiel 36:25, 29, 33, God says he will cleanse and deliver them from their uncleannesses, idolatries, and iniquities by sprinkling them with clean water.

It is then not difficult to see how Paul applies the context of Israel’s lawlessness and uncleanness to the Christians in Crete—people who were formerly lawless and idolatrous, and therefore defiled and unclean before a holy God.

So at the end of the verse 14, Paul brings all of his Old Testament imagery together into the reality of the New Testament church. Believers have been redeemed and purified by God through the first coming of Christ because they are “a people for his own possession.” Just as he called his chosen nation Israel at Mount Sinai, “my treasured possession among all peoples,” the church is now God’s “prized, special, treasured possession” (Exod 19:5; also Mal 3:17).

Notice the parallelism between Old Testament Israel and the New Testament church. While Psalm 130:8 talks about God’s redemption of Israel, “And he will redeem Israel from all his iniquities,” Paul says in Titus 2:14 that Christ came “to redeem us from all lawlessness.” God’s own chosen people today are “us” who believe in Christ.

Thus, Paul connects three of his major themes in his epistles: God’s grace in election, redemption and sanctification. We are his own chosen possession, redeemed and cleansed from all our sins and uncleannesses, and as elect and redeemed people, we are to live godly and righteous lives in this present age while waiting for our blessed hope in the age to come.

And when he returns, he will complete our election, redemption, and purification. When he comes, we will have perfect body and soul. There will be no more sickness, no more death. There will be no more temptation, no more sin, no more tears. Can you imagine being in this perfect state for eternity? Can you imagine being in everlasting joy?

Much more than this, we will dwell with God and Christ forever in the heavenly places. We shall forever be perfected as “a people for his own possession.” As God says in Ezekiel 37:23, “they shall be my people, and I will be their God.”

Beloved friends, by God’s grace, you have been saved through faith in Christ. Go about your business this new year as God’s special, treasured possession, whether you’re at home, work, school and marketplace!

Because your hope in this new year is not in your family, friends, work, or government, but in the sure appearing of Christ your Redeemer from heaven. AMEN.