

DUDLEY'S MONTHLY MESSAGE

JAN 2024 | TITUS 2:11-14

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age...

TITUS 2:11 & 12

THE BLESSED HOPE IS NOT AN ESCAPE

Growing up in an evangelical church, I heard many sermons and Bible lessons on the “blessed hope” mentioned by the apostle Paul in his letter to Titus. Most of the lessons got around to positing that our hope was in the Rapture. This was a familiar term for us. It included the belief that the next big event in biblical prophecy is the instantaneous disappearance of all Christians from the earth leaving the world to carry on without us. Of course, there are a lot more details included in the scheme relating to God’s return to Israel as His primary focus (since the Church will be gone.) Accordingly, such events as the Great Tribulation, the Millennium, Armageddon, and White Throne Judgment all come into play after the Rapture. It was all very intriguing, but difficult to keep the sequence straight. But, since we were members of the Church that is to be raptured, we didn’t have to worry about

all that happened afterward, except the judgment. I can remember some of the saints in the rural church I attended remarking in the midst of some special turmoil: “I wish the rapture would come now.” For them, the “blessed hope” Paul wrote about was the desire to escape life now. Of course, the imminent rapture was also a motivation to get right or stay right with God because after the rapture, there would be no more chances to study for finals. Is that what Paul meant when he referred to the blessed hope? Let’s dig into this text and seek to understand what God is saying to us through it.

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for 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 lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.

Titus 2:11-14, ESV

In this letter, Paul is writing to Titus, a spiritual son, and instructing him to appoint elders in the churches in Crete. The cultural atmosphere there was much akin to the one currently developing in the United States and throughout the western world. "Truth" was a commodity to be used for personal gain and persuasion. There was no absolute truth. Everyone had their own version, and whoever declared their position most effectively, most often, and loudest, usually won the day. The cultural heroes were the skilled orators of spin. There was the belief that politics was underlying everything, including religious beliefs. Therefore whatever leaders could make the public believe was the "truth" that ruled society.

It is not difficult for us to see the parallels in our own society. We listen to politicians make statements that we know are wrong, but they smile and proclaim with confidence, so we wince and go along and pick our favorite. It is folly to expect a modern political debate to enlighten us on the character of the participants or the real views on policy. We can only judge as to who was most skilled in their shameless self-promotion and spin. Sadly, some leaders of the church have inhaled the cultural smoke and cough up ideas and doctrines that appeal to consumers but denigrate the gospel.

Paul, the elder-apostle, instructs Titus to appoint elders who are mature enough to care more for the health of the sheep than their

own reputations, and who are committed to the mission of Christ more than the personal vision of their church or ministry. Elders don't allow the culture to change the dictionary or choose its lexicon. They know the standard is the word of God as described and fulfilled in the gospel that Paul and the other apostles proclaimed. They exhibit a depth of love that confronts error and those who promote it while tirelessly working to see hungry or wounded sheep cared for well. Without true elders the churches simply blow in the wind of the prevailing culture's fantasies.

The solution is the truth about what God has done in history. "The grace of God has appeared" (Titus 2:11). The very nature of the truth is announcement! It is the announcement of God's love taking the initiative toward His creation. It is the announcement that the unexpected appearance of Jesus is the event that fulfills all previous hope and addresses the problem that causes all other problems. Grace appeared bringing salvation for all people without distinction. It was not a Jewish religion, nor a pagan cult. God appeared on earth doing through His Son whatever was necessary to restore what sin had ruined. Since the big problem is alienation from God, the big solution is reconciliation:

For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised. From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer.

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

2 Corinthians 5:14-21, ESV

God has not left His creation in the throes of destruction. He has acted to restore what has been infected by sin and death. He has, through the sacrificial life and death of Jesus, restored us as humans, sons, and partners. He is in the process of training us to live on the basis of this new reality. Because of the appearance of grace, WE LIVE IN LOVE, AND WE WAIT IN HOPE.

LIVING IN LOVE

God is not primarily trying to make us models of morality. Rather He is working in us to make us trophies of grace. But this salvation that grace supplies is not a one time transaction. Grace trains. We have lived with the mentality of being judged and measured by our merits. The truth is that Jesus lived in our stead and was judged as us. It was not just a judicial act either. He came as a person to have an intimate relationship with us as demonstrated between Jesus the Son and God the Father.

You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me. Yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life.

John 5:39-40

The Bible is not about the heroes of history that were perfect or even morally superior. It is about people who need mercy and depend on grace. All the writers of scripture are imperfect and some strangely so. Grace-induced salvation doesn't just give us a fresh slate and instruct us to behave from now on. Grace imparts the Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead to us. We are captured by His love so that we now live out of that love rather than out of fear of being judged and condemned by a failing grade. When Jesus forgave/healed the sinful woman and told her to "go and sin no more," He was not just warning her not to get back into her previous situation. He was telling her that she was no longer a slave to sin, she could live in the love she had just experienced, and it would make her flourish. One of the evidences that the Bible is a uniquely inspired book is its insistence on exposing the folly and weaknesses of its heroes. No self-respecting religion would do such.

WAITING IN HOPE

The blessed hope Paul exalted did not offer escape from trouble, but a promise of victory for the people God created out of His resurrection. The result of the appearance of grace in the person of Jesus is a people captured by His love and compelled to fulfill His mission on earth. The good works that they are eagerly doing are all expressions of the gospel. They are not the dead works of man's religion seeking a way to appease God or find greater approval. They are not just about work

done at church or in ministries. They are not suppression of desires and conformity to religious standards. They are the fruits of the gospel, including courage, conviction, perseverance, gentleness. Grace makes us gracious!

But 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. These things are excellent and profitable for people.

Titus 3:4-8, ESV

Grace-trained people are grateful for the restoration of their vocation of managing the earth as for the restoration of their humanity and sonship. They are assured by the grace-gospel that they are forever with the Lord. That was the question that caused Paul to address the nature of the coming Rapture in 1 Thessalonians 4. Some in the community of faith were concerned that their Christian family or friends might be left out when Jesus comes back. Paul writes to assure them that those who are in Christ because of their faith in Him are always with Him. He doesn't go anywhere without them. So, when He returns to consummate the kingdom that He inaugurated, they will be with Him. In fact, they will receive their resurrection bodies first before those in Christ who are still alive. But there is no mention of all the

other stuff that has been added by a cut and paste method of biblical interpretation. Paul concludes by encouraging the readers to comfort one another with this truth. Grace-trained people are aware that there is a completed redemption in the future. What He started at His resurrection will be consummated in His final act of adoption - the redemption of our bodies.

For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Romans 8:22-25, ESV

We are privileged as his people on earth to implement the victory that was won for us and creation as we wait for the consummation. We have the Spirit working in and through us. We have the love from God to affirm us and empower us to confront the powers of hate and insolence. We are as sure of our future completion as our past forgiveness. Neither is based on our merit or faithfulness. He alone is faithful. We can live in joy while the world is filled with depression. We know that the God of justice will one day make all wrongs right and all sadness untrue. He guaranteed that through the blood of Jesus the Son. All that sin ruined, the blood reclaimed. That is the blessed hope.

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