

¹¹ For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. ¹² It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, ¹³ while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, ¹⁴ who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.

Heavenly Host Sing Alleluia!

Have you ever received a backstage pass? A backstage pass allows you to see things and hear things the regular show-goers can't see or hear. On Christmas night the Bethlehem shepherds received a backstage pass of sorts. On Christmas night the shepherds heard the angels. On Christmas night the shepherds saw Jesus. On Christmas night the shepherds even had the opportunity to smell the stable.

Time travel is not an option for us tonight, but one thing we can do that not even the Bethlehem shepherds were able to do on Christmas night is consider the Christmas account through the lens and lesson of the Apostle Paul. In his shepherding or pastoral letter to Titus, the Apostle Paul takes us behind the scenes of the Christmas account and shows us teachings we don't want to miss.

The first scene is Jesus. On Christmas night, Mary and Joseph, and the Bethlehem shepherds saw Jesus wrapped in strips and lying in a manger. And yet Paul in his writing to Titus shares, *“For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people.”* The Bible gives us many names for Jesus. The popular names for Jesus at Christmastime have been given to us through the prophecy of Isaiah who says, *“And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father and Prince of Peace”* (Is 9:6). Isaiah is also credited with being the first to tell us Jesus will also be called Immanuel, which means God with us. And yet in this backstage pass letter of Paul we are told the grace of God has appeared to all people.

So how have you seen the grace of God tonight? We see the grace of God in the print of our worship folder and in the pixel of our service screens. Tomorrow we will see the grace of God in the Sacrament of the Altar. From time-to-time we see the grace of God in the water of Holy Baptism. This is how the grace of God appears to us and these visuals are paired with audio, “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” as well as, “given and poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins.” When read out loud we hear Jesus talking to repentant sinners and being quoted as saying, “Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven” (Mt 9:2) and, “Father, forgiven them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Lk 23:34), and, “Neither do I condemn you” (Jn 8:11). And the angels sing alleluia!

The second scene of Christmas takes us from the manger in the stable to the movements of the shepherds. The Christmas account has the shepherds going to Bethlehem in a hurry, finding Jesus just as they were told. Then the shepherds were on the move again. They spread the word concerning what was told them about this child. And finally, the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen. The Christmas account gave the shepherds a backstage view of Jesus, but Paul's writing gives us a backstage pass to the heart. Paul teaches us about the grace of God. Paul writes, *“It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, ... eager to do what is good.*

Some singers are one hit wonders. Many child stars peak in their childhood. There are many shows dedicated to such people with a heading like, “Where are they now?” or “What happened to them?” Some performers go on to bigger and better things. Others transition to regular lives. Still others find trouble and tragic endings. We don't know the outcome of these shepherds. It would be nice to think they lived happily ever-after. Jesus' teaching of the Parable of the Seed explains the shepherds' outcome is more likely an outcome that is similar to our one-hit wonders and childhood stars.

We don't know the outcome of the shepherds, but it would be good for us to consider the outcomes of us who have gathered here? Is tonight a one-hit wonder? Will you be back? Or will you be back again

and again, but never with the thought that the grace of God should change your life? Just say no to ungodliness and just say yes to godliness.

God in his mercy doesn't leave it up to us to define godliness and ungodliness. In his moral law God gives us a complete set of commandments for self-controlled, upright and godly lives. Just like ten fingers and ten toes make a complete set so the Ten Commandments make for a well-ordered life. In catechism class I have drawn a liking to teaching the commandments like a pyramid with the fifth commandment on top. God loves life. Life is our time to come to faith in Jesus and serve him. God supports life. Your parents and earthly authorities (the fourth commandment) as well as your friends, particularly your spouse (the sixth commandment) support life. The Word of God for your soul (the third commandment) and the things of God for your body – food, clothing, shelter, daily bread (the seventh commandment) sustain life as does your reputation (eighth commandment) and the name that blesses and saves you (the second commandment). And the basecamp for your life is what you think about God and what he has given you. You shall have no other gods. Be content with what you have.

And on Christmas night the Bethlehem shepherds were eager to do what is good and the challenge Paul's letter presents is to let this grace of God motivate us every day. And the heavenly host sings alleluia. The heavenly host rejoices over every sinner who repents.

The final scene of Christmas takes us back to Mary and to the pondering of her heart. The Bible doesn't tell us, but that doesn't keep us from thinking about what Mary knew or didn't know. Did Mary know that her baby boy would one day walk on water? Did Mary know that her baby boy would give sight to a blind man. Did Mary know she looked at the face of God? Paul in his writing to Titus directs his thoughts and ours to another time in our futures – the blessed hope – the glorious appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Christian, did you know, you will know your savior even as right now you are fully known by him? Christian did you know, your mortal body will be raised to be like his glorious body? Christian did you know in your future home there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, the old order of things has passed away? Christian, did you know Jesus this same Jesus whom the disciples saw ascend into heaven, we will see with the disciples see Jesus return in the same way the disciples saw him leave? Christian, you did know or can know all these things because the Bible tells us and reminds us. And yet as we wait for his glorious return, it's good for us and as it was for Mary to ponder these things and what they mean for our future.

So there you go. Don't ever say you have never received a backstage pass. Like the Bethlehem shepherds received a backstage pass from the heavenly host, God has graciously given us a backstage pass with his sacred scriptures. Tonight is a good night to take God's Word to heart. Tonight and every night until God sends his angel as scripture teaches to safely deliver us to Abraham's side and to all the saints and angels with him we will sing alleluia. Amen.