

January 11, 2004
The Baptism of Our Lord

"Amazing Grace!"

TITUS 3:4-7

But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, ⁵ he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, ⁶ whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷ so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound!

That saved a wretch like me.

I once was lost, but now am found,

Was blind, but now I see.

"That saved a wretch like me!" The man who wrote these well known words was John Newton. His Christian mother died when he was seven years old. At the age of eleven he traveled with his dad on a merchant ship, picking up bad habits of sailors, drinking, swearing and carousing. Eventually he commanded his own ship, hauling slaves like cattle from Africa to England. Then it happened. In a terrible storm, while lashed to a helm of the ship, holding onto the ship's wheel, and staring death in the face, his thoughts turned back to the Lord God he had come to know while sitting in the lap of his dear mother. He cried out in fear and anguish, "Lord have mercy on me." He started reading the Bible and other devotional books, taught himself Hebrew and Greek, and became the pastor preaching to large crowds, even to the Queen of England. He wrote books and hymns extolling the grace of God "that saved a wretch like me."

"Amazing grace, how sweet the sound! That saved a wretch like me." That's the story of your life and mine. That's the story of "**Amazing Grace**" that we see in the words just read to you. These verses show us three things about God's amazing grace: 1) It is universal 2) It is personal 3) Eternal.

1) God's grace is universal

God's grace is universal. That does not mean all people will be saved and everyone is going to heaven regardless of what they believe. It does mean that God has provided salvation for all people. Our text says, "But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy." The kindness and love of our God is like the sun that shines, and the stars that appear at night, and the rain that falls. It is for all people. John 3:16 says, "God so loved the world he gave his only begotten Son." When Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River, the Father spoke to the world and said, "This is my Son in whom I am well pleased, listen to him." That amazing appearance of Jesus was for all people of every generation, not just those who were there at that moment in time along the banks of the Jordan River.

God's kindness has appeared to people. It comes in the rain, the sun, the smiles of friends, the birth of a child, the jobs, the food we eat, even though people don't deserve it. The Greek word is "epephane" from which we get the word "Epiphany." Have you ever been on the computer doing research on the Internet and suddenly advertising pops up or appears on your screen? That's an epiphany, a sudden appearance. God's grace and his kindness are that way. When Jesus was baptized he popped up and appeared as the one to rescue us. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit pointed to Jesus and said, "This is the one. Here is where you will find your salvation and hope of eternal life, not in the righteous things you do. Here is the ultimate evidence of God's kindness and love for you."

This kindness and love of God that appeared to people in places like the banks of the Jordan River, the manger in Bethlehem, the cross, and the open tomb is meant for all people, because all people need this kindness and help in their lives. If you were to open your Bible and read the verses before the verses just read to you, you would discover this description of humanity. "At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in male and envy, being hated and hating one another." This is not just describing some drunken sailors that led John Newton into all sorts of sin. This is a description of all humanity who has fallen short of God's glory.

The year-end issue of Time magazine gave the award of "Man of the Year" to the soldier in Iraq. The article inside told of soldiers facing death and wanting to be closer to God. That reminds me of a story from WW2 about soldiers facing death who asked the chaplain to tell them if they were ready to face death and die. The chaplain told of only two places to go, either heaven or hell. He then gave each soldier a piece of paper and asked them to grade themselves with a number from one to ten, ten being the highest on how well they did in life.

The first question was have you always put God first in your life? The second was, "Have you ever misused God's name?" and another, "Have you enjoyed worshipping God?" At the end of the ten questions, or review of the 10 commandments, the soldiers added up their scores and began to compare scores, 30, 40, 60. One soldier asked, "What's a passing score? The chaplain solemnly told them, "100."

Then he told these soldiers facing death about Jesus, the only person in history who scored a hundred percent, who was always perfect. He told them of the perfect sacrifice Jesus made for their sin, and the perfect life he lived for them. He shared how all of this happened for them in history, and it was for all people, even a thief who died on the cross next to Jesus. As we sing in the hymn, "Chief of sinners tho' I be, Jesus shed his blood for me."

2) God's grace is personal

That leads us to the second part of God's grace that we see in these words from the book of Titus. God's amazing grace is personal. Listen to how God personally brought you to believe in what he has provided for all people. "He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior." Without the blessing of the Holy Spirit in your life, you will not believe in the kindness and goodness of God. When you look at the sun shining or the

rain falling, or the grass growing or the birth of a child you will join the scoffers who laugh at the concept of God and say defiantly, "All this just came about by chance." When the Holy Spirit opens your heart, you personally believe that the sun, rain, food, and body the Lord has given you is a gift of God's kindness and life. As we confess in James 1, "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights."

Let me give an example to help us grasp how the kindness and love of God has come to us personally. When I was a child, we loved to dig holes. We usually did not get very far, especially on a hot summer day. What if we were digging a hole, and suddenly hit a metal box and then we began to dig around it, lift it out of the ground with bars and poles and with a heavy bar broke open the lock. Inside were hundreds of gold coins. Would you say it was luck or chance that brought this gift to you, or would you say it was a gift from God? As a Christian we believe that every gift that comes to us comes from the hand of God, unless it is gained in an ungodly way by stealing or cheating from others.

How did the gift of God's love come to you? How is it that you know that blood of Jesus washes you clean from all sin, and another person could care less about this? It is by God's grace this comes into our lives. "By grace you have been saved through faith, it is a gift of God..." Not only does God give you the gift of his Son, but also gives the gift of believing in that gift. Grace is amazing because it involves two gifts, the gift itself and the ability to receive that gift. It is not correct to say, "I accepted Christ into my heart." Instead I should say, "It was the Holy Spirit who gave me faith to believe. In fact God's amazing grace even involves a third gift. Do you see that gift in the words, "washing and regeneration of the Holy Spirit?" It is also the Holy Spirit that uses the blessing of Holy Baptism to create faith to believe.

Have you ever noticed that every reference to Holy Baptism in the New Testament is always without exception in the context of God doing something special for us? Here the word washing is tied to the rebirth and renewal of the Holy Spirit." In Galatians 3 it is connected to "putting on Christ." In Romans 6 it is connected to being "buried with Christ." In 1 Peter it is connected to having a clean conscience before God.

Not all people believe baptism is a blessing that comes from God. Listen to what this popular book (The Purpose Driven Life) says about Baptism. "It is a celebration of your inclusion in God's family." "Like a wedding ring, it is a visible reminder of an inward commitment made in the heart." That sounds like baptism is something we do to show our commitment to God, the way I wear this wedding ring to show my commitment to my wife Susan. Baptism is not something we do to show our commitment to God. It is God's way of actually creating faith and creating commitment and personally bringing Christ to us.

How do I know that I have been saved? I can answer that in several ways. I can say I know that the blood of Jesus cleanses me from all sin. I can sing "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so." Or I can also say without reservation, "I have been baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit." The hand of God has worked through water and the word to create faith in my heart. This past week I visited one of our members in the hospital. I told Elsie Fazzone, "Elsie you have been baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit." Why did she get a big smile on her face? Was it because she was thinking of a commitment she made to God? No, the very words remind us of what God has done in our lives.

3) God's grace is eternal

God's grace, universal, for all people, personal, just for you, is also amazing because it is eternal. It gives blessings that last forever. "Having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life." Every day you can rejoice in God's amazing grace, because he has justified you, declared you righteous, and given you the hope of eternal life. Look at the picture on the front cover of the bulletin. See the smiling faces of the little children. That's you my dear Christians, rejoicing every day in the hope of glory that is yours, the place Jesus has prepared for you, an inheritance that will not fade, a home of righteousness, the place where your God will wipe all tears from your eyes. As we sing in the hymn, "When we've been there ten thousand years, Bright shining as the sun. We've no less days, to sing God's praise. Then when we first begun." "Amazing grace. How sweet the sound. That saved a wretch like me." Amen.