A Christmas Letter from Crete

In the name of our newborn Savior, Lord and King!

It's a fine tradition and phenomenon that happens this time of year. Friends, family, even distant relatives feel the urge to support the United States Postal Service as they buy rolls of seasonal stamps to stick on their Christmas Cards. Companies like Shutterfly and Costco are definitely having their impact this tradition. After all, it's so easy to upload a few photos, click "buy now" and a few days later at your door arrives 150 perfectly printed cards and matching envelopes with photos of the past year and a sentence or two of greeting. Stick on the stamp and tadah!

And there are still those who go the old-school route… taking you on a month-by-month journey… or perhaps child by child journey… and then of course, the grandchildren… and the pet goldfish… all wonderfully highlighting how the Lord has blessed their year. It's a fine tradition that fills your physical mailbox with letters you actually want to open and read.

This Christmas Eve, we're taking a look at a letter that one pastor wrote to another. Scholars tend to agree that it was written in late fall of the year 63AD. And while I'm sure it wasn't intended to be a Christmas Letter like we know, it most definitely embodies and extols the truths of Christmas.

In the upper left corner, the return address label reads: The Apostle Paul – PO Box 1, Philippi 64003. This is after Paul's has been released from imprisonment in Rome. He's back in Philippi and now he writes to his dear friend and fellow Gospel minister, Pastor Titus… PO Box 2, Island of Crete 71201. And while they aren't blood relatives or cousins, we know they have a very close bond; Paul calls Titus, "my true son in our common faith." (Titus 1:4). Paul had sent Titus to minister to the people on the island of Crete – which was anything but a Mediterranean tropical paradise. It was sketchy. Even one of their own Cretan leaders said of their own people, "Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons." (1:12).

This letter, or Epistle, while it is quite short, only 3 chapters, is loaded full of wonderful and powerful encouragement for pastors, teachers and congregation members alike. For our time tonight, we're going to go to the heart of the letter in chapter 2, starting with verse 11, ***"For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people."***

What a beautiful description of Christmas! **"The Grace of God has appeared!"** This is certainly a phrase that we want unwrap carefully. Grace… undeserved love. Grace… love that has his source in the heart of God. Grace… so freely given to us as a gift! Grace – God's perfect love – not earned, not merited, given - *to all*. God's grace was given to the world in Bethlehem.

In the next few hours, I'm guessing you may hear one of these phrases as you give on another gifts, "Oh, shouldn't have…" or perhaps, "Aww, you didn't have to…" Let's apply that to Bethlehem; let just say that we were so privileged to walk up to the manger tonight and gaze upon our infant Lord. What if the next words out of our mouths were, "Oh, you shouldn't have…" and you know what – we'd 100% correct. Because of our sinfulness, God should not have given us his son. In fact, because of our sin, he should have given us a huge lump of coal to make the fires of hell that much hotter.

Let's try that other phrase, "Aww, you didn't have to…" I'm pretty sure that if we would have uttered that phrase at the manger, Jesus himself would have jumped up right out of those swaddling cloths and said, "Yes, actually I *had to*, because there is no other way to save sinners. And then he would have followed that up immediately with, "No I didn't *have to – I wanted to!* Even though I know what it will cost me, I want to do this – because I love you, and I don't want to lose you to the fires of hell. I want you to be in heaven with me forever."

This is what it means that the Grace of God has appeared in the flesh. That means no matter how badly you and I sinned in 2025, no matter what horrible things we said, no matter what hurtful things we did, no matter the devious thought we allowed to linger in heads, Jesus took on human flesh, lived under God's law without sin, willingly laid down his life on that cross to pay for all sin. That's God's grace!

Paul's letter does a wonderful job of capturing the Christmas story in 1 word: Grace. But Grace doesn't stop there. Grace doesn't just cause us to say, "Aww." Grace teaches. God's grace causes a change in our hearts and lives! Paul continues in his letter to Titus, ***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."***

Our sinful minds have no trouble wandering away from the Lord and his Word. Our sinful hearts so quickly run after our own self-centered passions. But this is what makes God's grace-in-the-flesh so incredible, it changes the way we look at and view sin. The grace of God teaches us to say "NO" to sin… and fills us with the motivation to say "YES" to the upright and godly things of our Lord:

- No – I will not use the Lord's name to call down curses on others… Yes – I will use God's name to pray, to praise him, to give thanks, and to tell others.
- No – will not harbor hateful thoughts about my neighbor… Yes – I will befriend and help them.
- No – I will not let lustful thoughts linger in my head… Yes – I will uphold and treasure everything what God says about marriage and about men and women.
- No – I will not squander away God's gifts on meaningless things… Yes – I will be a faithful steward of what God has entrusted to me – so that others can learn of their Savior.
- No – I will not covet my neighbor's things… Yes – I will be content with what God has given me.

We could go on and on because we're all too familiar with these daily battles – but we are not alone. The Grace of God teaches you and me what it means to live for Christ. It starts with Jesus ***– 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."*** He has redeemed us. He has paid that price. He has set us free from clutches of sin and Satan. In the same way he has purified us, washed us clean, in the waters of baptism he claimed us as his own dear children. And now, as his dear children, redeemed, restored, forgiven, we are eager to live every day until he come - for him who has given us this gift of grace.

Yes, it's Christmas Eve, and in some respects the waiting is over. All the preparation, all the planning, it culminates this eve at the manger. But as Paul writes to Titus, the waiting continues; he says, ***"we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ"***

If a person is waiting for something… it changes your behavior. If you're waiting for that special delivery… you check the tracking… "oh, it's out for delivery, arriving between 5 and 10pm. Just got the notification, it arrived!" If the children are waiting for grandma and grandpa to arrive… they keep running to the front window, watching the cars drive by waiting for theirs to pull into the driveway.

Paul tells us that we have something even greater that grandparents arriving – we have a blessed hope – the appearing of the Glory of our Great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. No, we didn't have the opportunity to see him in the manger, but we will behold him face-to-face on that last day. And it's a day that we are eagerly awaiting, eagerly looking forward to, waiting in hopeful anticipation of that day – but just how do we do that? How are we to wait? We can't necessarily sign up for notifications on our phone that Jesus is arriving between 5 and 10pm… Looking out the front window won't help…

Actually, Jesus has already given us all the notification that we need – right here in his Word. Until that day of his glorious appearing, keep being in God's Word. Keep growing in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Keep teaching your children of God's love. Stay connected to Jesus in Word and Sacrament. Keep witnessing to others of the peace that you have in Jesus, that baby born in Bethlehem. Keep resisting the devil, saying No to ungodliness and worldly passions. Keep striving with God's help to live self-controlled, upright and godly live in this present age. This, dear friends, is godly waiting. As we look ahead to 2026… with calendars filling so quickly already… make sure to set aside time in God's word, continue to gather regularly in God's house, eagerly spread abroad this Good News of Great Joy!