

A Christmas Series: The Doctrines of Grace in the Coming of Christ

A TERRORIST IS SAVED

1 Timothy 1:12-17

Intro: Each year, during the Christmas season, I have brought a short series of messages having to do with the first coming of the Lord Jesus Christ into the world. Sometimes I have spoken from the OT, sometimes from the NT, but usually from a combination of both OT and NT passages which deal with the birth of Jesus Christ.

It used to be that people, especially church-going people, were familiar with the facts surrounding the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. And when I speak of the facts surrounding His birth, I am thinking about Who He was and that He was conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of a virgin mother. He did not have a human father; God was His Father. He existed eternally before He became a Man. And He became a Man without in any way ceasing to be God. He was truly man, but did not have a sinful nature like all of us have. And it is important to understand this because the Bible makes it very clear that He came to save sinners from the judgment of God. If He had a sin nature, or if He ever sinned during His earthly life, then He would have been disqualified from being the Savior of sinners because He would have needed a Savior Himself.

In the Gospel of Matthew, the first book of the NT, we are told that when Joseph, the man who was engaged to be married to Mary, discovered that she was having a baby, he could only come to one conclusion: she had been unfaithful to him. And so, even though he found this extremely hard to believe, he began making plans to break the engagement. But he wanted to do it privately because he did not want to make her a public example. But just at that time, in a dream, an angel of the Lord appeared to him, telling him that the Child Mary was carrying had been conceived by the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, the angel told Joseph that Mary would give birth to a Son, that He was to be named JESUS because He would “save His people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21). And, according to what Matthew wrote in the book which carries his name, Joseph knew that this very event had been predicted approximately 700 years before by the prophet Isaiah, and recorded in the book of Isaiah, chapter 7, and verse 14. So Joseph did not break his engagement with Mary, but he did not become her husband until after the baby Jesus was born.

Luke, who also wrote a record of the life and ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ, tells us about an angel who appeared to several shepherds who were taking care of their sheep at night. The shepherds were frightened by the appearance of the angel, but the angel told them not to be afraid. He had come to tell the shepherds about the birth that very day “in the city of David, a Savior, which was Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:11). It was not an event that would make them afraid, but it would bring to them “great joy.” The angel was announcing to the shepherds the good news, the Gospel. That which believing Jews had looked forward to for hundreds of years, had finally taken place. A Savior had been born, a Savior Who would save them from their sins, from the penalty of their sins, and save them from the power of their sins.

Many of us have known these stories since we were children. We did not need a lot of arguments to convince us that these stories were true. We believed them. But then the time came in our lives when we understood that that message was for us, and by the grace of God we trusted in Christ as our Savior. We believed that Jesus Christ came to save us. We know that through the coming of Christ into the world, and His death of the Cross, and by faith in Him, our sins have been forgiven, and we have the gift of eternal life.

Your relationship to Christ may have come about under completely different circumstances, and possibly later in life. But you know the meaning of Christmas, and you are rejoicing not only that He came to save sinners from their sins, but you are rejoicing that He came to save you from your sins.

However, all of us who know the Lord Jesus as our Savior, have learned more about salvation since we have been saved than we understood when we were saved. The world has moved farther and farther away from the Bible. People don't like to be told that they are sinners. They are usually willing to admit that they don't do as well as they can, but, if they believe in life after death, they still prefer their own ideas about man and think that eventually everything is going to turn out OK with everybody.

But what does the Bible have to say about man, and about sin, and about salvation? Are these truths in Scripture which we ought to be paying attention to? There are many people in the world today who would like to do away with the Bible. They want to get rid of the old hymns of the church which relate to us the message of the Bible. We don't hear the old

Christmas carols like we used to hear them during the Christmas season.

This year I have been seeking to focus attention on the meaning of Christmas, and the message of Christmas. There is much more, much, much more in the Christmas message than most people realize, even more than many people who go to church every Sunday, realize. And so I have been seeking to deal with the message of Christmas under five headings. Some time in the past, someone (and we don't know who), arranged these five headings as an acrostic on the word, tulip. I gave you these headings in my first message in this series, but I want to repeat them to you again today.

Most children can tell me how to spell tulip: T - U - L - I - P. Now let me give you a heading for each of these letters:

- 1) T - Total Depravity.
- 2) U - Unconditional Election.
- 3) L - Limited Atonement.
- 4) I - Irresistible Grace.
- 5) P - Perseverance of the Saints.

Now you won't find the word *tulip* in the Bible. But you will find these five truths in the Bible. Someone has just arranged them according to the five letters in the word *tulip* to help us remember these great doctrines.

The "T" is to help us remember Total Depravity. A depraved person is a sinner, an evil person. And to speak of total depravity is to say, not that we are all as bad as we can possibly be, but that sin has affected every part of our being. It affects the way we think. It affects what we do. It affects our emotions, our wills. It means that by nature, by birth, we are not interested in God. We don't feel that we have any need for God. We are not concerned about pleasing God. We don't seek God. By nature we are not interested in the Bible, and when we read it, it doesn't really make sense to us. And yet, if you want to know the truth about yourself, you need to read the Bible. It was because man is what he is that God sent His Son into the world. We have problems that we don't know about, and they are problems for which there is no human solution. If there had been any possible way that man could meet his own need, then Jesus Christ would never have come. The birth of Jesus Christ meant that man was so hopeless and helpless in His relationship with God, that there was no other way for man's need to be met.

So the Bible tells us that God is the One Who took the initiative in meeting man's need because of his sin.

The "U" needs to remind us of Unconditional Election. God would have been perfectly righteous if He decided not to do anything for man in his sin. Or He could have decided to save everyone. He is a sovereign God. There is no one greater than He is. He could have saved everyone if that had been His will. But everyone is not being saved. Instead, God made a choice of the people He was going to save. And He made these choices before there was any creation at all. We learn from the NT that God made His choice of those whom He elected to save, and He gave them to His Son.

The "L" in tulip is to remind us that God did not send His Son to die for everyone. He sent His Son to die for the sheep. And it was not that He simply provided salvation for His sheep, but He died to secure the salvation of all whom the Father had chosen, and given to His Son. That is why the Lord said, "All that the Father giveth Me shall come to Me; and him that cometh to Me I will in no wise cast out" (John 6:37).

Jesus Christ was born to die, to die for those whom the Father had given to Him. He died in their place, taking their punishment upon Himself. And these are the people in every generation who are coming to Christ.

The "I" in tulip is for the irresistible grace of God. But man by nature doesn't want to be saved. He doesn't even believe that he needs to be saved. When we speak of the grace of God in salvation, we mean that there is nothing in any of us which would obligate God to save us. We are saved by grace. We deserve hell not heaven. Salvation is not a reward for any good that we have done.

But how can we be willing to receive God's grace when we don't want it? If we can speak of God having a problem, that is the problem that He had with me, and it is the problem that He had with you. God has chosen us. Christ died to secure our salvation. But we don't want it! What can God do?

Let me ask you a question. Of all of the people that we read about in the Bible who were saved, who would you consider to be the most difficult case, the most unlikely of all people to be saved?

I am thinking of a man, and there is no evidence that I know of in the Bible that anyone was praying that he would be saved. And yet this particular person not only was saved, but he became one of God's mightiest instruments, perhaps the mightiest servant of the Lord down to the present day.

Who am I thinking about? His name originally was Saul of Tarsus.

The first time that we read about him in the Bible is at the end of Acts 7 in connection with the stoning of Stephen. Cf. Acts 7:54-60. But there is no indication here that the heart of Saul was softened at all by what he heard and saw as Stephen died.

In Acts 8, verses 1 and 3, we learn more about Saul's active participation in the persecution of those early Christians.

I have called Saul a terrorist, a term with which we are all too familiar in our day. By definition a terrorist is one who is opposed to an established government, and who will take any measures to intimidate and destroy that government and replace it with the terrorist's form of government. What made Saul's work especially insidious, or treacherous, was that he was opposing the spread of the kingdom of God.

By the time we get to Acts 9 Saul had become one of the most aggressive of all of the enemies of the church, and there seemed to be no way to stop him. Read Acts 9:1-2. We know from what Paul wrote about himself in Philippians 3 that he was a young Pharisee whose primary purpose was the elimination of the church.

But suddenly before Saul got to Damascus to carry out his vicious plan against the Christians there, a bright light shined upon him from heaven. He fell to the earth, and a voice spoke to him from heaven. See the record in Acts 9:3-9.

Then we have the interesting account of the Lord's appearance to a Christian by the name of Ananias, and the amazing message that the Lord Jesus gave to him. No one could possibly have anticipated this turn of events. See especially Acts 9:15 and 16. But in a moment of time Saul of Tarsus, who had become the leading enemy of Christ and the Gospel, was transformed by the grace of God, so that he went on into Damascus, not to bind Christians and take them back to Jerusalem where the Lord only

knows what would have happened to them, but to join them, and to proclaim with them that Jesus was truly the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of God.

Note how Paul referred to this later in his writings:

- 1) Gal. 1:11-16, 23.
- 2) 1 Cor. 15:8-10.

To me, one of the most amazing details in the salvation of Saul of Tarsus is, that he did not try to spread the Gospel using the same methods that he had used against the Gospel. He preached. He proclaimed. He explained the message of salvation, trusting the Holy Spirit to use the Word to accomplish the eternal purposes of God.

I close by reading 1 Timothy 1:12 through 17.

If the Lord could save Saul of Tarsus, there is no one beyond the reach of His marvelous grace and power.
But all of a sudden things did change