

Lost Verses of Famous Carols
His Sacred Face
Luke 2: 7, 2 Timothy 1: 9-10

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There is something about a new baby that draws us like a magnet. We want to see that perfect skin. To delight if he has a head full of hair or none at all. We want to see the color of her eyes and speculate about which parent she looks like most. After our visit, we're sure to say to someone, "You gotta see the baby!"



Of course that reminds me of a now classic scene from the sit com Seinfeld.

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UqO0-fwTsEc>)

Cynical Jerry figured every baby looks the same anyway.

Why should he interrupt his selfish life to make the visit?

But eventually he relents to the drumbeat of social pressure:

"You gotta see the baby!"

He's funny, but of course Jerry doesn't get what most of us feel. If the baby matters to me, I want to see him. I have to see him. The beauty and hope of new life just draws us close. Having had two granddaughters born this year, I find I'm particularly attracted to this forgotten verse of the ancient song, "Of the Father's Love Begotten."

O that birth forever blessed, when the Virgin, full of grace,
By the Holy Ghost conceiving, bore the Savior of our race,
And the babe, the world's Redeemer, first revealed his sacred face.

Isn't that a lovely picture? The moment when the Savior of the world suddenly showed his sacred face. He burst through the waters of birth, got towed off, wrapped in blankets and placed against Mary's heart. For the first time, people got to see the face of their Redeemer. Today I'd like to show you some artistic renderings from around the world of the infant Jesus. They'll play in the background as we consider the man who composed "Of the Father's Love" and some Biblical passages that explain its meaning.



Aurelius Prudentius was born in 348 in Saragossa, Spain. He was trained in law and the art of rhetoric. Looking back, Prudentius recalled that his skilled tongue could help him get ahead. Sometimes it meant artful deceit he later regretted. With all his talent, Prudentius rose in position, and his bright, restless mind found an outlet in the political debates of the time. For a long while, Prudentius lived for the game. He says “the keen lust for victory/Drove me to many a bitterness and fall.” He must have had more victories than defeats, though, for he rose to be ruler of not one, but two different cities. He served also as a judge, and finally received an appointment from the Roman Emperor himself to a military position something like that of a governor. Prudentius was a smart, competent, skillful dude.

But Prudentius writes that he had something of a crisis when his hair turned white and he entered old age, which he defines as—yikes—fifty! He says he began to wonder what good were “the prizes or the blows/Of fortune, when the body’s spark is quenched” and death would wipe out whatever power he held. He started to imagine what would happen when he appeared before his God. He realized that after he left this world, a declaration would be made concerning him: “Whatever you are, your mind has lost the world you loved.” The things you sought were not God’s but now you belong to God, and what do you have to say for yourself? It’s not that serving as a lawyer, a judge and a governor were wrong things. Prudentius doesn’t say that. It’s that he held those positions to serve himself. He wielded power for the earthly thrill of it. He was living for now, for this world, rather than living for God through the means of this world. He suddenly felt empty, as if he had done nothing with his life.

Well, as old as he was at fifty, Prudentius was granted another 15 years, and he spent those years expressing the praises of his savior. It turned out that Prudentius was a man of great literary talent. He did something that had never been done for Christianity. He wrote with an excellence of skill to match the sophisticated pagan authors, but he did it in praise of Christ, not the gods of Rome. Prudentius was our first poet that could write as well as nonbelievers. He raised our credibility with the educated elite. He matched the best with his writing skill and did it all in service to Christ. Prudentius’ most famous work is a 12 poem collection called, “Hymns for the Christian’s Day,” in which he offers us songs of praise for each hour of the day. His words have lasted 16 centuries and still have the ability to lead us deeper into Christ as we prepare for Christmas.

I'd like us to consider just two neglected stanzas from his 9th hymn,

He is found in human fashion, death and sorrow here to know,
That the race of Adam's children, doomed by law to endless woe,
May not henceforth die and perish in the dreadful gulf below.

The Son of God came to us as one of Adam's doomed race, in order to encounter our sorrow and all this dying and remake everything. That verse led to the one we are singing today:

O that birth forever blessed, when the Virgin, full of grace,
By the Holy Ghost conceiving, bore the Savior of our race,
And the babe, the world's Redeemer, first revealed his sacred face.

I love how he brings us right to that sweet, small scene of a young woman holding her baby. He is wrapped in cloths, cradled in her arms, and his little face peeks out from the blankets. This, Prudentius tells us, is the moment the world's Redeemer first revealed his face. This dear baby surrounded by animals in a little town of Bethlehem is the source of all things that are or ever have been. This little guy, his tiny face just showing through the birth clothes, is the goal, the destiny of all things. The baby is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, the start and the finish of the universe itself. The story of Christmas has its origin in eternity. Before the worlds were made, God knew he would show his face to us through the baby in Bethlehem.

In his letter to his young protégé Timothy, Paul writes about a crown of righteousness that awaits him after his life of faithful service to Christ. Then he adds this intriguing line, "and not only to me, but to all who have loved his appearing." Who gets the crown of life in eternity? Those who have *loved his appearing*. The Son of God showed his face in the infant Jesus who grew up to become our savior. Jesus happened in the real world of dust and swiftly passing time, in the world of politics and farming, the world of history with all its births and deaths. The eternal God showed his face as this one particular person. So Paul wants to know, "Do you love that fact? Do you love that God appeared to us as the baby Jesus? That he revealed himself as the man Jesus Christ?" The crown, the treasure of eternal life is for those who have loved his appearing. Those who know, "*I gotta see this baby!* When I look at his little face and I am seeing God. I behold the God who loved me enough to become what I am. To enter the world and redeem it. I love this appearing, this arrival, this advent. The babe, the world's redeemer, has shown his sacred face."

The mystery of Christ's birth stretches back into eternity. In another passage from 2 Timothy, we read: "God saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works, but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began" (2 Tim. 1:9). Did you catch that? God gave you and me grace before we were even made! Because his coming to us as Jesus Christ was always the plan. Long before the worlds were made, the Triune God took counsel. The Father purposed to send the Son in the power of the Holy Spirit to redeem the world he knew would rebel against him. Before God made us, he anticipated that people who would use the free will he would give them in order to pursue their own destructive ends. God knew we would fall, and he knew he would bring us back from that fall by the Son of God coming himself into the world. He would restore us with new hearts that freely love to love him and obey him. He would gather as his own all those who love his appearing.

Doesn't that just explode your mind? The grace of Christ Jesus we know was given to us *before we were made*. It was planned and guaranteed. Then, in the fullness of time, that grace got worked out in the world where we live. Paul goes on to write that this grace "now has been manifested through the *appearing* of our Savior Christ Jesus who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel" (2 Tim. 1: 10). The appearing of Jesus in Mary's arms became the full appearing of the glory of the cross and resurrection, the mighty acts by which the Triune God would fulfill the salvation planned before all time.

Take it one step further. The Son of God who appeared in our midst as the baby will appear again as the Lord in glory. He will return to set all things right. This is the heart of our advent preparations for Christmas. We consider his first arrival, his advent in the manger at Bethlehem. We also remember our hope. There will be a second advent of Jesus. Another arrival. He will appear in glory "to judge the living and the dead" (2 Tim. 1: 1, 1 Tim. 6: 14). Jesus will bring all justice and all mercy fully into the world. He will set all things to rights. He will make the world, and our hearts, completely new. The dross and the straw will be burned up. The gold will be refined. Paul wrote to Titus, that now "we are waiting for our blessed hope, the *appearing* of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ" (Ti. 2: 12).

We have a hope grounded in eternity when God purposed our salvation. We have a hope anchored in history when the babe, the world's redeemer first revealed his sacred face. We have a hope based on the unbroken witness of Christ's people that the Jesus who was crucified got up from the dead on the third day, and appeared to us. We saw his sacred face alive again. We have a hope energized by the promised future, that this Jesus will return. The past and the future enliven us

for the present moments. To live from Christ. To live for Christ. To be his set apart, particular, praising, serving, loving people. We have a purpose far beyond present comfort or success. A purpose that lights up every present moment with meaning. We live for the Savior who saved us before we were made. Who saved us in time. And who will save us fully in future.

For there is one more *appearing* of Jesus that we love. This appearing is why we love his whole story. It is the shining of light *into our hearts* so that we could look upon Jesus and know him to be our loving, saving Lord.

That's what happened to Prudentius 1600 years ago. Christian experience stays constant across time and across all cultures. Prudentius had lived for himself. But it dawned on him that all he strove and struggled to grasp would slip from his grip when he died. None of it was enough to satisfy him. None of it was enough to stave off death. Prudentius needed more. And when the Spirit shone light in his heart, Prudentius could see in the face of Jesus, the face of the God who loves us from eternity past to eternity future. Prudentius found immense fulfillment and hope as he gave his life to Jesus. He turned all his skill and art towards praising Christ Jesus the rest of his days. And we're still singing his songs!

Oh that birth forever blessed, when the Virgin full of grace,
By the Holy Ghost conceiving, bore the Savior of our race,
And the babe, the world's Redeemer, first revealed his sacred face.

Do you love his appearing? By all means tell him. Tell others. Create praise. Follow your heart. It's true. *You gotta see this baby!*