

“From His Fullness We Have All Received”

(The Gospel of John, Part 5)

John 1.15-18

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“And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.” (John 1.14) Those were the majestic words we explored a week ago, on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day; the climax of John’s eighteen-verse prologue. But this majestic opening to John’s gospel is not quite over. John had a few more things to say to us before beginning the narrative of the gospel itself, a few more key concepts he wants to get across.

Let’s start with this: “John testified to him and cried out, ‘This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’” We’re talking about John the Baptist; don’t get your Johns confused; there are at least three different people named “John” in the New Testament. John the Evangelist is talking about John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus. John the Evangelist already had some things to say about John the Baptist, back in verses 6-8: “There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.” John the Evangelist will have more to say about John the Baptist, which we’ll look at next week. But the critical point, for now, is that John the Evangelist wants to make it abundantly clear that if you are comparing John the Baptist and Jesus Christ – as, apparently, quite a number of people back in the first century were doing – Jesus both *predates* and *outranks* John. According to Luke, John the Baptist was born a few months before Jesus, but that’s not what John the Evangelist is referring to. Jesus is *God incarnate*, the Word-made-flesh, and the prologue to John’s gospel establishes that Jesus existed *before the very beginning of time*. Jesus doesn’t predate John the Baptist by a few months, but by *eternity itself!* As for *outranking* John – well, that may seem obvious to us today, but you have to remember that both John the Baptist and Jesus ended up dead, executed by the government: Jesus was crucified; John was beheaded. Before their deaths, both of them had large crowds of followers, and both of them were significant enough that they were mentioned in the works of the first-century Jewish historian Josephus. The picture Josephus paints of John the Baptist is consistent with what the four gospels say about him; we get the impression of an *extraordinarily* well-known individual who attracted and inspired *thousands* of people with his message of baptism for the forgiveness of sins. John the Evangelist wants to make it abundantly clear: look, folks, Jesus was *way* more important in the grand scheme of things than John the Baptist. John was merely the messenger, the herald, the harbinger of the good things coming in Jesus.

“From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.” (John 1:16) Three words are especially important in this sentence. First, *fullness*, in Greek *pleroma*, which represents the totality of all that is good, or as William Barclay puts it, “the sum total of all that is in God.” The apostle Paul uses the same word in Colossians 1:19 when he says “in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.” All of God’s magnificent attributes are embodied in Jesus; *every single one*. There is not one aspect of God’s being that is not present in Jesus; not one aspect of divinity that did not come to earth on that first Christmas morn. Barclay says: “in Jesus there dwelt the totality of the wisdom, the power and the love of God. Just because of that, Jesus is inexhaustible. We can go to Jesus with any need and find that need supplied. We can go to Jesus with any ideal and find that ideal realized. In Jesus, the person who is in love with beauty will find the supreme beauty. In Jesus, the person to whom life is the search for knowledge will find the supreme revelation. In Jesus, the person who needs courage will find the pattern and the secret of being brave. In Jesus, the person who feels unable to cope with life will find the Master of life and the power to live. In Jesus, the person who is conscious of sin will find the forgiveness for that sin and the strength to be good. In Jesus, the *pleroma*, the fullness of God, all that is in God, what the scholar B. F. Westcott called ‘the spring of divine life,’ becomes available to everyone.”

The second word that is especially important here is the word “we.” *We* have all received. Not just “I.” Not just “those of us who saw him in the flesh.” No, *we* have all received. We have *all* received. The gift is for *all* of us. You, me, your neighbor next door, your boss, your co-worker, your best friend, your most bitter enemy. The grace and the love of Jesus Christ is available to *everyone*.

Then, finally, there is that curious phrase, “grace upon grace.” A super-literal translation would be “grace *against* grace,” or “grace *instead of* grace.” What does this mean? Scholars and commentators through the centuries have pondered what John meant here. St. Augustine, in the fourth century, thought that there were *two* forms of the divine grace that we receive, first *faith*, and secondly *eternal life*. That’s a lovely thought, but most commentators today don’t think that’s quite what John meant. C. K. Barrett said that “the meaning of the phrase seems to be that Christian life is based at all points upon grace; as [the Christian life] proceeds one grace is exchanged only for another.” William Barclay fleshes this out: “The different ages and the different situations in life demand a different kind of grace. We need one grace in the days of prosperity and another in the days of adversity. We need one grace in the sunlit days of youth and another when the shadows of age begin to lengthen. The Church needs one grace in the days of persecution and another when the days of acceptance have come. We need one grace when we feel that we are on top of things and another when we are depressed and discouraged and near to despair. We need one grace to bear our own burdens and another to bear one another’s burdens. We need one grace when we are sure of things and another when there seems nothing certain left in the world. The grace of God is never a static but always a dynamic thing. It never fails to meet the situation. . . . All through life we are constantly receiving grace instead of grace, for the grace of Christ is triumphantly adequate to deal with any situation.” ... and thank God for that!

“The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” (John 1.17) This sentence is fairly straightforward and should be fairly obvious to anyone who knows anything about Moses and Jesus. Both hold special places in the divine history of our salvation; Moses was the great lawgiver of the Old Testament, epitomized in the Ten Commandments, which most of us could

probably recite by heart. But law never had the power to save. The law tried to paint a picture of what a relationship with God looks like through a long series of “do”s and “don’t”s, but you and I both know that’s not how relationships work; that’s not how *love* works. Imagine if your relationship with your spouse or the person most important to you in life were distilled to a mere list of *rules*. All the joy would be gone. All the intimacy. All the tender compassion. All the loving touch. All the warmth. It wouldn’t be a *relationship* at all, merely an empty shell, devoid of meaning or significance. We need more than *law* in our lives. We need *love*. We need *grace* and *truth*. And Jesus offered them, in abundance. The law was important; it served – and still serves – a useful purpose. But it is *never* enough. Jesus offers us what the law could never provide. Jesus gives us the capacity to *feel* – to truly *experience* – the goodness of God. We all know what it’s like, don’t we, when we’ve done something wrong, when we have to face the truth of our words or our actions. The pain, the shame, the regret. You know what that feels like, don’t you? Jesus comes along and says to us, “I know the truth about your life. And I *still* love you. That doesn’t mean I like what you did, but my love for you is *endless*. You are *still* God’s beloved child.” Do you feel the *relief*? The *grace*? The *forgiveness*? The *love*? These are gifts that the law of Moses could never offer. Jesus offers *freedom* in a way that the law never could.

Finally: “No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.” (John 1.18) Some translations say “only-begotten Son,” instead of “only Son.” The Greek does mean “only-begotten,” it literally means that Jesus was an “only child” of God – but more significantly, it means that Jesus was *unique*. That there is no one else like him. Never has been, never will be. There is only one being in the entirety of existence who is that close to God. And the good news of Christmas is that this special, unique, only child of God did not stay in the heavenly realm, but came down here, *to us*. God was too transcendent for us to be able to see him face-to-face – until he came *here*, of his own free will. *Then* we could see him. *Then* we could know him.

If you’ve ever been to London, you’ve probably been to Trafalgar Square, that large public square in the heart of London replete with statues, fountains, and pigeons (although I’m told the pigeons have mostly been evicted). At its center, guarded by four lion statues, stands Nelson’s Column, 17 stories high, with an 18-foot-tall statue of Admiral Horatio Nelson at the top, commemorating his victories during the Napoleonic Wars in the early 1800s. The statue at the top of the column is so high off the ground it’s difficult to see Admiral Nelson’s features very clearly. It was too ... *transcendent*, if you will. Frederick Dale Bruner tells us that some fifty or sixty years ago, “an exact, six-foot replica of Lord Nelson atop the pinnacle was placed at eye level beneath the pinnacle in order to give sightseers the opportunity of seeing the exalted figure close up.” I don’t think this replica is still there; apparently it was there for just a short time – but long enough for a pastor named Donald McCullough to make the connection: this “is an illustration of what God did for the human race when he gave Jesus. The high, invisible God came down low, in the eye-level Jesus, his Son, so that we could see what God looks like” (Bruner’s summary of McCullough’s sermon). The God who previously had been *way up there* decided, of his own free will, to come *all the way down here*. “No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.” In Jesus, we get to see God, *face to face*.

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