

John 1:15-18

Introduction

Last week, we came to that great mystery and truth that is central to, and lies at the very heart of, Christianity.

- John 1:14 — And the Word [the eternal Word who was with God and who was God] became flesh and tabernacled among us, and we beheld his glory, glory as of the one and only from the Father, full of grace and truth.

He who was *all* that God is took to Himself *all* that we are. Though He was without sin (whether sinful acts or a sin nature) He still took to Himself our human nature in its frailty and weakness as it groans under the effects of sin while still remaining, all along, all that He was before. There will always be an infinite gulf between our humanity and the deity of the Word. There can be no mixing of these two natures so that His humanity was somehow deified or His deity was anything less than it was before. And yet we also remember with joy that these two natures, separated as they are by an infinite gulf, have been “unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably” united in the *one* person of our Lord Jesus Christ. Here is one who is perfectly suited to our great need. The Apostle John continues to marvel at this wonderful mystery when he writes in verse 15:

I. John 1:15 — (John [the Baptist] bears witness about him, and cries out, saying, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me is before me [or, ‘He who comes behind me is in front of me’]; Lk. 7:27; 19:4, 28], because he was first with respect to me.”)

This is what John “cried out.” This is the “witness” that he bore. So let us gladly give to him our closest attention. On the one hand, Jesus came after—or behind—John. In terms of His *humanity*, Jesus was conceived in the womb of the virgin Mary and born about six months later than John and He also began His public ministry later than John. In Jewish culture this, by itself, might argue for the supremacy of John because John comes first. And yet John himself cries out, saying that this one who comes after, or behind him, is actually before, or in front of him. John transitions from priority in time to priority in rank or importance and says that in this case the two don’t at all go together. The one coming after John in time (in terms of his real and true humanity) is actually before him in rank and importance and has the true supremacy. This isn’t something unheard of, but John the Baptist wants us to feel that there’s a much deeper mystery that lies behind this riddle. That’s why he uses the language, “He who comes after me is before me [or, ‘He who comes behind me is in front of me’].” We may be able to explain this in terms of a play on words (priority in time versus priority in rank and importance), but we can also feel that there’s more to it than this. What is the true explanation of this riddle? John the Baptist answers:

“He who comes behind me [in time] is in front of me [in rank and importance], *because He was first with respect to me.*” Here John takes up *both* priority in time *and* priority in rank and importance and sums both up in a single word—“first.” In other words, the point here is not *just* that this one who came after John *in time* with respect to His humanity was actually before John

in time with respect to His deity, but that connected with this pre-existence, he was also *before* John in every other possible way; He was in the most simple and absolute sense of the word—“first.” He was (and is) preeminent, and that preeminence was (and is) so absolute and unqualified that there could never be any thought of someone being “second.” To say that He is “first” is to say that He is *all* and therefore there is no other (not John or anyone else) who ranks with Him or next to Him or even after Him.

These are all things that we can say with respect to the deity of the Word become flesh. And yet it’s still no less true that with respect to the real and true humanity that the Word took to Himself, He does indeed “come *behind*” or “follow *after*” John. It’s with respect to this humanity that John can say later of the one who is already “first” in every way: “He must increase, but I must decrease” (Jn. 3:30).

And now here is the wonderful mystery: This one who both “comes *after*” with respect to His real and true humanity **and** “comes *before*” with respect to His deity—this one who is “*first*” with respect to His deity **and** yet may be said to “*increase*” with respect to His humanity—is one and the same *person*, our Lord Jesus Christ. Listen again to the witness of John the Baptist as He cries out, saying: “*This was He* of whom I said, ‘*He* who comes after [or, “behind”] me [this *same one* in His undivided person] is before [or “in front of”] me, because *He* [this *same one* who comes after me] was first with respect to me.’” John isn’t playing mind games with us. He’s simply giving expression to that wonderful mystery of the person of our Savior, of whom the Apostle Peter can say:

- Acts 4:12 — There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.

The Apostle John himself is so moved by this testimony of John that he uses the present tense (as well as a perfect tense functioning as a present) as if he “still hears the Baptist speaking” (Lenski; cf. Morris). He writes: “John *is bearing witness* about him, and he *is crying out*, saying...” Why is John so moved by the Baptist’s testimony to the person of Jesus? Because it’s only this miracle and mystery of the person of Jesus—of the Word become flesh—who can meet the need of guilty sinners like us. So we go on now to read in verse 16:

II. John 1:16a — For from his fullness we have all received...

If He was not God, John could not speak of His *fullness*; if He was not man, John could not speak of us *receiving from* His fullness. It’s *because* of *this* wonderful mystery of the person of Jesus—of the eternal Word become flesh—that now John can write these words: “For from *His fullness* we have all *received*.” This is why the mystery of His person matters so very much to us.

The fullness of Jesus is all the fullness of God, but the emphasis here is not on the fullness of His essence because that isn’t something we can “receive”; the emphasis here is on all the fullness of God expressed and manifested to us in His attributes of grace and truth. Remember what John says in verse fourteen: “And we beheld his glory, glory as of the one and only from the Father, *full of grace and truth*.” And now John can say: “And from His *fullness* we have all received.”

Grace is God's undeserved favor and kindness that He bestows freely and lavishly upon us as a gift. "Grace," as one commentator writes, "is the chief characteristic of the entire gospel of Christ, of the entire Christian religion, the center of the mystery, unknown to the world, revealed in Jesus Christ." (Lenski) The "fullness" that is in Jesus is first of all the fullness of grace – divine grace now incarnate—enfleshed—in Jesus. And coupled together with this "grace" is "truth." We remember from last week that "truth" in God is simply the reality that He is true; He is first of all true to *Himself* and therefore He is also perfectly and unfailingly true to us in His word and promise (cf. 2 Tim. 2:13). And so the "fullness" that is in Jesus is all the fullness of this truth – the faithfulness of God now incarnate—enfleshed—in Jesus Christ. It's from this fullness of grace and this fullness of truth that we have all received; which is just to say that it's from *His* fullness—the fullness of His own person as grace and truth incarnate—that we have all received. How "full," then, must we be?

In verse fourteen the "we" in "we beheld His glory" refers first of all to the eyewitnesses who walked with Jesus in the flesh when He was tabernacling among us. Here in verse sixteen the "we" refers not just to the first eyewitnesses but to all believers throughout all the world down through all the centuries of the church—"For from His fullness *we* have *all* received." Think about what this means. The picture is of a vast and inexhaustible reservoir that, though it springs forth in a multitude of fountains can never, ever be less full than it was before. This fullness that is His is flowing perpetually and unceasingly to all of us who have believed in Him and yet is never diminished or lessened in the slightest. There is a limit and an expiration to everything else; but there is no limit or expiration to the fullness that is in Him – to the fullness of divine grace and truth (cf. Eph. 1:7; 3:8, 19; 4:13; Col. 1:19-20; 2:9). If, then, it's from this fullness that we have all received, I have to ask again: How "*full*" must we be? How *much* grace is there for us who have believed in the Word become flesh? How *much* truth and faithfulness is there for us who have believed in Jesus? There is enough to fill us with all the fullness of God. There is enough to conquer and overcome all the guilt of our sin and all the power of death. There is enough to fill us with us with a life of love and joy and peace that is eternal and everlasting. It is this "enoughness"—it is this inexhaustible all-sufficiency—that is the theme not only of the word, "fullness," but also of the phrase that follows:

III. John 1:16b — For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace [grace in place of grace].

On the one hand, John speaks of grace and truth as something that all of us have already received in a finished, accomplished sort of way ("from His fullness we have all received"; aorist tense). On the other hand, John seems to be picturing this grace and truth as something that's still "ever-accessible" (Ridderbos) and something from which we can still be drawing freely, without limit or restriction. "Grace in place of grace."

"As the days come and go a new supply takes the place of the grace already bestowed, as wave follows wave upon the shore. Grace answers to grace" (Robertson, quoted in Lenski).

“It is like a stream flowing constantly; every day, every hour its banks are full, ever fresh volumes coming down from above, so that no longing for grace in our hearts is left without immediate and complete supply” (Lenski).

Now remember, this fullness of grace and truth isn’t just a sentimental, inspirational idea. First of all, it’s rooted in the person of the Word become flesh – our Lord, Jesus Christ. Second of all, in this person of our Lord Jesus Christ it’s suited perfectly not only to our condition as guilty and vile sinners but also to our condition as forgiven saints who still “groan inwardly as we eagerly long for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies” (Rom. 8:23).

By faith, are you drawing freely from the “ever-accessible and inexhaustible fountain” of His fullness? (Ridderbos) The assumption all along is that we, apart from His fullness, are utterly empty. There is nothing in us and nothing in this world to meet the true “want” and need of our souls. Apart from His fullness we have exactly nothing; and it’s only when we’ve come to see this that we can understand the meaning of John’s words: “From *His* fullness *we* have all *received*.” Every day, we should be able to ask ourselves with the Apostle Paul:

➤ 1 Corinthians 4:7 — What do you *have* that you did not *receive*?

In commenting on these words of the Apostle, Calvin writes:

“First, he shows that we are all utterly destitute and empty of spiritual blessings; for the abundance which exists in Christ is intended to supply our deficiency, and to relieve our poverty, to satisfy our hunger and thirst. Secondly, he warns us that, as soon as we have departed from Christ, it is in vain for us to seek a single drop of happiness, because God hath determined that whatever is good shall reside in him alone. Accordingly, we shall find angels and men to be dry, heaven to be empty, the earth to be unproductive, and, in short, all things to be of no value, if we wish to be partakers of the gifts of God in any other way than through Christ. Thirdly, he assures us that we shall have no reason to fear the want of any thing, provided that we draw from the *fulness* of Christ, which is in every respect so complete, that we shall experience it to be a truly inexhaustible fountain.”

But now, in order to set forth the true riches of this “fullness” all the more vividly, John goes on to draw a comparison. He writes:

IV. John 1:17 — For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

We have to be careful in this context that we don’t set up “law” and “grace and truth” as opposites to one another. We can’t say that there’s nothing gracious about the law or that there’s nothing of God’s truth and faithfulness in the law. John says that the law (the law as a covenant) was *given* through Moses, the point being that the law was *given* by God, and therefore we’re meant to remember that the law was itself a gracious gift. We see this reality in Nehemiah chapter nine:

- Nehemiah 9:9–15 — **You** saw the affliction of our fathers in Egypt and heard their cry at the Red Sea, and performed signs and wonders against Pharaoh and all his servants... **you** divided the sea before them, so that they went through the midst of the sea on dry land... By a pillar of cloud **you** led them in the day, and by a pillar of fire in the night to light for them the way in which they should go. **You** came down on Mount Sinai and spoke with them from heaven and gave them right rules and true laws, good statutes and commandments... by Moses your servant. **You** gave them bread from heaven for their hunger and brought water for them out of the rock for their thirst, and **you** told them to go in to possess the land that you had sworn to give them.

See how the gift of the law which God gave through Moses is embedded right in the middle of so many other expressions of God’s mercy and kindness. And yet while the law was an inexpressibly beautiful and gracious gift that God gave freely to His people (cf. Ps. 119), it never claimed to be that which actually conveyed grace and truth *in itself*. Because the law was an expression of God’s grace and truth the Psalmist could describe it as “more to be desired... than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb” (Ps. 19:7-11). And yet for all this, it still could never be said of the law that it was *itself* grace and truth. Much less could this be said of the mediator through whom the law was given. Even though the law was given through Moses, it still existed independently of Moses and had no real connection to his person; the law could have been given through any other choice of a mediator besides Moses. So now, in our minds and hearts, let’s compare that inexpressibly gracious gift of the law *given through Moses* with the reality of *grace and truth itself* that *came* through *Jesus Christ*. For all of us who are “taught by the Spirit,” we begin to see how the difference here is so great as to almost make the comparison fall apart entirely. We can say, borrowing the words of Paul:

- 2 Corinthians 3:10 — What once had glory has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it.

The law, John says, was *given* through Moses, but he doesn’t say that grace and truth were *given* through Jesus Christ. Instead, grace and truth “*came*” through Jesus Christ. Contrary to *Moses* as the mediator of the *law*, grace and truth have no existence independent of Jesus Christ. Contrary to *Moses* as the mediator of the *law*, grace and truth are wholly bound up with the person of Jesus Christ – the Word become flesh (cf. Lenski; Ridderbos). Contrary to *Moses* as the mediator of the *law*, Grace and truth *came* in and through Jesus Christ, and could not possibly have come through any other. And so with joy in our hearts we confess again with Peter:

- Acts 4:12 — There is salvation in *no one else*, for there is *no other name* under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.

But John isn’t finished yet. There’s still one more way that he would help us see the riches of this fullness from which we have all received.

V. John 1:18 — No one has ever seen God; the one and only—[himself] God [cf. Carson; TLNT]—who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known.

When John says that no one has ever seen God, his main point is not to teach us that God is an invisible Spirit (cf. Jn. 4:24; Col. 1:15; 1 Tim. 1:17) or that God dwells in unapproachable majesty and glory (cf. Exod. 33:18-23; 1 Tim. 6:16). These things are assumed, but his main point is to confront us with an ultimate problem. If no one has ever seen God, then who can tell us about Him – so that we can really, truly know Him? One ancient Jewish writer asks:

Sirach 43:31 — Who has *seen* [the Lord] and can *describe* him [who can *tell about* him]?

This writer is exalting God’s greatness, but underlying these words there is a problem so apparently hopeless that it leads in itself to true despair. Who can make known to us what has never been seen? If *no one* has ever seen God (because He is an invisible Spirit and dwells in unapproachable light), then who can ever tell us about Him? I’m reminded of a passage in Revelation when John “saw a mighty angel proclaiming with a loud voice, ‘Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?’ And *no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth* was able to open the scroll or to look into it” (Rev. 5:2-3). When John saw this, he says:

➤ Revelation 5:4 — I began to weep loudly because *no one was found* worthy to open the scroll or to look into it.

In the same way, when we hear the words, “No one has ever seen God,” we might also “weep loudly.” We might feel the hopeless despair of those words. But just as one of the elders said to John, “Weep no more” (Rev. 5:5), so John also shows us why we need not weep.

Already in verse one John has said that the Word who *was God* and who *became flesh*—**HE** was *with God*. And now John returns to this same theme and unfolds it even further. It is true that “no one has ever seen God” – “no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth.” But even as we begin to feel the weight of hopelessness in those words, John writes: “The *one and only*— [himself] God, *who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known.*” The “one and only” is here a one and only *Son*. In other words, there is no other of His kind. He is the *only one*. The *only Son*. And as the one and only Son, not “only” is He *God*— as the one and only *Son* He is even, John says, “in the bosom of the *Father.*” Never could John have used such an expression unless he truly was speaking “from God” (2 Pet. 1:21). We read in John 13:

➤ John 13:23 (cf. Lk. 16:22-23) — One of [Jesus] disciples, whom Jesus loved, was reclining at table *in Jesus’ bosom.*

Whatever this looked like physically, the meaning is clear, isn’t it? “To recline at table in Jesus’ bosom” is a picture of intimacy and affection. While it’s one thing to use this expression of two human beings, it’s quite another thing to use it of the one and only *Son* who is eternally and unceasingly (the present tense in v. 18) “in the bosom of the *Father.*” Here is a kind of intimacy and mutual knowing that’s beyond our ability to conceive. And yet here in this mystery is the ground of all true knowledge of God that you and I can ever have. The “one and only [Son]” has “*more than [just] seen God...* [the one and only Son and God the Father] are [even, as it were,]

in each other's embrace" (Lenski). "No one has ever seen God [‘no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth’]. But we don't despair. The one and only—[himself] God, who is in the bosom of the Father, *he has made him known.*" He has told us (cf. Judg. 7:13; 2 Kgs 8:4-5; Lk. 24:35; Acts 10:7-8; 15:12-14; 21:19) what only He has seen (cf. 1:18b; 3:11; 6:46; 12:45; 14:9). He has fully shown to us that one in whose bosom He lies.

Conclusion

“From *His fullness* we have all *received*, grace upon grace. For the law was *given through* Moses; grace and truth *came* through ***Jesus Christ.***”