

The Incarnate Word: Glory and Grace

John 1:14-18

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And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. ¹⁵ (John bore witness about him, and cried out, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.’”) ¹⁶ For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷ For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.

– John 1:14-18

Introduction: How Can We Know God?

The two most important questions anyone can ever answer are these:

- Is there a God?
- If so, Has God spoken? (Or If so, how can we know Him?)

Most people in the world believe in God. In 1967, 98% of Americans indicated that they believed in God and only 1% said they did not. Since then, the numbers have shifted somewhat. Today, polling indicates that 89% of Americans believe in God, while 10% say they do not believe there is a God. Even though the vast majority of Americans believe there is a God, there's much less agreement about how we can know God. Many people wonder how we can ever know an infinite, transcendent Spirit. Many other people wonder how much God can really know about us, personally. They wonder how He can understand what our lives are like as humans.

The only way for anyone to know God is for God to reveal Himself. If God is indeed the creator, then He exists above and beyond His creation. We cannot reach up to Him and figure Him out, but He can speak to us and explain Himself to us. Now, many people have invented ways of bringing the divine down to our level. Myths about gods who take on human form so they can fight in battles or trick mortals or have children abound in many cultures, especially in the Greek culture of John's day. Even today, people imagine that God might be very much like us.

The Bible shows us that God has indeed spoken and revealed Himself to humanity, through His prophets who wrote the Scriptures. God revealed Himself to Moses on Mount Sinai and wrote the Ten Commandments Himself on tablets of stone. He gave Moses the Law for His people, revealing His holy character and His standard for His people. Yet as gracious and condescending as the Law of Moses was – and it was gracious for God to reveal Himself and His character – it became clear that what we really need – forgiveness of our sins, reconciliation with God, fellowship with our Creator forever – could never be achieved by keeping a Law. Our sin nature is too strong and our sins are too horrible.

The Gospel, at its heart, is the good news that God has fully, clearly and definitively revealed Himself in Jesus Christ and that He has brought forgiveness, reconciliation and eternal life to us in Him.

A. The Word Became Flesh

John explains the very heart of the message of the Gospel with a statement that is as simple and straightforward as it is profound, impossible and wonderful beyond comprehension: “*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us*”

I. God Became a Man – How?

The opening of verse 14 draws our attention back to The Word of verses 1-5. Thus, John’s prologue is wrapping up the way it began, by telling us about the Word. While John has already told us that the Word is eternal, that the Word was with God and was God, that the Word was the agent for the creation of everything that has been made, that the word has life in Himself and that this life of the Word is the light of men which enlightens everyone, he now tells us something which is absolutely stunning and impossible and offensive both to Jews and to Greeks. We take it for granted because we’ve heard it so often, but imagine if this were the first time you’d ever heard this message:

The Word, who is eternal God, became flesh, became fully human, took on a human nature and body.

The Greeks had some concept of the Logos, the logical and rational organizing principle of the universe. Some of them even said that the Logos is the one and only true God, the Creator, the architect of the universe. But the idea that this Logos was a person and that this person became a human being, taking on flesh and blood would have struck them as impossible and offensive, ridiculous and repulsive, contradictory and contrary to both reason and piety.

The Jews understood that Torah was the Word of God. Some of them even understood the Word of God to be eternal, co-existing with God. After all, the Word of God is the wisdom of God, and how could there be a God without wisdom and without a Word, a message. But the idea that the Torah would become a man, that the Torah of God would take on flesh and dwell among men was as impossible and repulsive to Jews and it was to Greeks.

Yet John is really telling us not only that the Word of God became flesh, but that we cannot truly know God unless we know His word, receive His word, believe in His word, which is Jesus Christ. Verse 14 is, in part, John’s own explanation of what it means to receive Jesus and to believe in His name and thus to be given the right to become a child of God: It is to believe that, in the person of Jesus Christ, the eternal Word of God has become a man.

How did this happen? How could God become a man? Well, here’s where we need to slow down for a minute, allow John’s precise language to guide us, and make sure we say exactly what Scripture says, no more and no less. God did not become a man, in the sense that we would normally understand those

words. God did not stop being God and turn into a man. Such a thing would indeed be impossible, for how could God stop being God and what would happen to the universe if He did? No, John is careful to say that the word of God, who is with God and who is God, became flesh but did not stop being God. Verse 18 states that “the one and only” is God and remains “at the Father’s side” or, more precisely, “in the arms of the Father.”

Augustine of Hippo has a helpful analogy in his book, *On the Trinity*: “For just as our word in some way becomes a bodily sound by assuming that form in which it may be manifested to the senses of the people, so the Word of God was made flesh by assuming that in which He might also be manifested to the senses of the people. And just as our word becomes a sound and is not changed into a sound, so the Word of God indeed becomes flesh, but far be it from us that it should be changed into flesh. For by assuming it, not being consumed in it, this word of ours becomes a sound, and that Word became flesh.”

So Jesus, who is fully God, takes on human flesh, becomes flesh, so that we can see Him and hear Him, that He might dwell among us.

2. He Tabernacled Among Us

“The word became flesh and dwelt among us.” The word for “dwelt” refers to pitching a tent, a tabernacle, and so this could be translated, “tabernacle among us.” John is intentionally calling the Tabernacle to our minds. Further, as he goes on to discuss manifest glory and Moses and the Law, John is painting a picture in these verses of what happened under Moses at Mount Sinai and contrasting that revelation of God with the greater revelation of God given in Jesus, the incarnate Word.

The Tabernacle was, in fact, given to the people of God under Moses as a picture of what God would do when He sent His Son. The Tabernacle was the presence of God in the midst of His people. It was the place where the glory of God was manifest – in the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. It was the place where God met with His people through the priests and the sacrifices and where God spoke to His people through Moses. Now, in Jesus Christ, all that the Tabernacle represented and promised in all of its functions, has come to reality in a man who was fully God and who lived among His people.

He came to His own. He tabernacled among us, and we beheld His glory.

B. We Have Seen His Glory

“we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

Who does John mean by the “we” in this verse? Well, he’s obviously referring to himself and the other apostles as the eye-witnesses to the glory of God. But he’s not limiting the “we” to just the eye-

witnesses. Those who receive Jesus and who believe in His name can also see His glory with eyes of faith.

This is in keeping with how John opens his first letter, 1 John –

“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us— that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.” – 1 John 1:1-3, ESV

When we have the word of life proclaimed to us and we believe, we join in the fellowship of the apostles in seeing, by faith, the glory of God manifest in Jesus Christ. This is exactly what Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:5-6 –

“For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” (ESV)

1. What is Jesus' Glory?

But what is this glory we have seen “in the face of Jesus Christ”? Paul says it is the glory of God. John says it is the glory “as of the only Son from the Father.” The word “Son” is not explicitly in the text. Some translations will say “glory as of the only begotten from the Father,” which brings in the idea of Son. But others can translate this as “glory as of the one and only from the Father.” Jesus is the “one and only” – the unique One, who has come from the Father, who was with God and who was God. His glory that we see in Him is thus the glory of God.

But what is glory and how do we see the glory of God in Jesus? Glory means all that God is and has and has done. His attributes, possessions and accomplishments. Jesus comes and shows us that God is full of grace and truth, that He is merciful and faithful, that He is kind and just. He comes and shows us the power of God over sin, sickness, nature, the devil and death. He comes and shows us that God owns everything and claims everything for Himself, bringing salvation to Jews and gentiles, to people from every tribe, tongue, people and nation under heaven. And Jesus fulfills all of God's promises and accomplishes redemption for God's people. So Jesus is the ultimate revelation of the character of God, the power of God, the kingdom of God, the salvation of God and the purposes of God. In other words, He is the glory of God manifested in the flesh.

2. What was John's Testimony to Jesus' Glory?

John interrupts his Prologue again to emphasize again the witness of John the Baptist: (*John bore witness about him, and cried out, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.’”*)

John’s words are interesting because he was 6 months older than Jesus, humanly speaking. Yet he says, “He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.” This is a testimony to the superior, eternal nature of Jesus, and John brings it in here as evidence to support the truth claim that the Word – which was before John the Baptist – became flesh in Jesus, who ranks above John the Baptist.

C. We Have Received His Grace

Then, resuming the main message of his Prologue, John says: “*For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.*”

To understand the “For” at the beginning of verse 16 and its connection to the rest of the Prologue, it is necessary to see verse 15 as a parenthetical aside, which is how the ESV punctuates it.

The glory of God which has been seen in the incarnate Word is distinctly marked as “full of grace and truth” for/because “from his fullness” (that is, from the fullness of Jesus Himself, the incarnate Word) “we have all received, grace upon grace.”

I. Grace Upon Grace

What does John mean when he proclaims that “from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace”? Well, the fullness of Jesus is the completeness of His person and work, all of who He is as the incarnate Word, all that He is and has and all that He came to do. From his fullness, out of who Jesus is and what He has and what he has done and is doing – in other words, from His very self – we believers have all received “grace upon grace.”

What is this “grace upon grace”? Some translations say “one gracious gift after another” or “one gracious blessing after another.” But the ESV footnote says “grace in place of grace.” This matches the NIV “grace in place of grace already given” and even the HCSB “grace after grace.” But what does it mean? When you’re searching for the meaning of a phrase, look at the context – or, just keep reading, especially when the next word is “for,” which makes a strong connection.

We believers have received grace in the place of grace FOR or BECAUSE or SINCE “*the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.*” Remember that John is drawing a contrast between the Law given through Moses at Sinai, which came with visible signs of glory, and the Gospel which comes in the incarnate Word in Jesus Christ. (By the way, 2 Corinthians 3-4 are very helpful for understanding and appreciating this truth.)

John is saying that the Law given through Moses was grace. It was gracious for God to reveal Himself to His people and to give them a way to know Him and to worship Him. But ultimately the Law was just a shadow of the greater grace to come in Jesus Christ. So, while the Law was given through Moses, Jesus' manifest glory was full of grace and truth because grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

2. Grace and Truth

John uses these words “grace and truth” twice. These words “grace and truth” probably represent the same idea as reflected in the Hebrew words translated as “steadfast love and faithfulness” in the ESV. This pair is used throughout the Old Testament to refer to the character of God toward His people. Here are just a few examples from Psalms:

All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his testimonies. – Psalm 25:10

“For your steadfast love is before my eyes, and I walk in your faithfulness.” – Psalm 26:3

“Your steadfast love, O LORD, extends to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds.” – Psalm 36:5

*“I have not hidden your deliverance within my heart;
I have spoken of your faithfulness and your salvation;
I have not concealed your steadfast love and your faithfulness
from the great congregation.
As for you, O LORD, you will not restrain
your mercy from me;
your steadfast love and your faithfulness will
ever preserve me!” – Psalm 40:10-11*

“Grace” or “steadfast love” refers to God’s compassionate goodness, kindness, mercy and love toward His people. He does not treat us as our sins deserve!

“Truth” or “faithfulness” refers to God’s absolute reliability and unwavering character. He never breaks His promises!

Throughout the Scriptures, God reveals Himself in covenant relationship with His people in these ways: He has compassion on us and He never fails. He is merciful and unchanging. He does not treat us as our sins deserve and He never breaks His promises.

How do we know that God is really like this toward us? How do we see it, tangibly and unmistakably? We see it in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. Jesus is the full manifestation of God’s grace and truth, His steadfast love and faithfulness, His tender compassion and unwavering commitment, His forgiving mercy and unchanging reliability.

“Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.” – Hebrews 2:17

“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” – Hebrews 13:8

D. He Has Made God Known

Finally, in verse 18, John wraps up his Prologue with a simple and yet profound statement. Without getting into all of the issues of text and translation, I believe the best rendering of verse 18 is this: *“No one has ever seen God; the one and only, who is Himself God, in the arms of the Father, he has made him known.”*

1. No One Has Ever Seen God

God Himself, as God, remains invisible. The divine nature is transcendent spirit, and we are not yet equipped to look upon Him and live. Moses saw His backside from the cleft of the rock. Isaiah saw the train of His robe filling the Temple. Both men were forever changed by the experience. No one has ever seen God Himself in all of His glory, but . . .

2. The One and Only, Himself God, Has Revealed Him

“The one and only, who is Himself God” – This is a reference to God the Son, the eternal Word, Jesus Christ. He is God and He has become flesh so that he could make God known to us.

Conclusion: Knowing Him & Making Him Known

So how can we know God? Well, we can only know God because He had made Himself known in Jesus Christ. In Christ, the eternal creative Word has become flesh. The light of life has come to life and dwelt among us. God and man are reconciled. Emmanuel – God with us – has come. He is full of grace and truth. Our life’s calling now is simple: to know Him and to make Him known.

Sinclair Ferguson, in his sermon on this text, said that as he gets older, he sees more clearly how important it is for us to realize that grace is not something we get from God. Grace is not some “thing” that God gives us. Neither is truth. Rather Jesus Himself is “full of grace and truth” and God gives us Jesus. Or, to put it another way, in Jesus Christ, God gives us Himself, and He is grace and truth.

If we want the grace of God, we will only find it in Jesus. If we want the truth of God, we will find it only in Jesus. If we want to know God, we must know Jesus. If we want to extend the knowledge of God or the grace of God or the truth of God to others, we must give them Jesus. For in the word made flesh – and only in the word made flesh – the glory of God is fully seen, full of grace and truth!