

## Believe: Why Jesus Came

### Receiving Grace Upon Grace

John 1:15-16

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*“(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.’”) For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace” (John 1:15–16).*

This is our seventh week in our journey through the first eighteen verses of the gospel of John. We are walking through this text at a very slow pace because there are wonderful truths to see and savor. By walking slowly, we are able to linger a little longer or consider some words and phrases more carefully.

Some of you have asked with rather concerned looks on your faces as to how long we'll be in John. I can assure you that we'll pick up the pace in 2019. I've timed it out, along with a few shorter sermon series, to end the book around Easter of 2020. There are some times when it is better to move more quickly. Nothing wrong with that, for sure.

But I hope that our pace will cause you to slow down a bit in your reading of the Bible. Perhaps our study will cause you to linger over words and phrases—to consider more carefully and more thoughtfully what they mean.

This is increasingly important in a culture where the pace of life, the scrolling on a phone, and the communication via text messaging is fast, short, and frantic. And this pace of processing information is now a part of our culture. Nicholas Carr, in his book, *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to our Brains*, said this:

*“What the Net seems to be doing is chipping away my capacity for concentration and contemplation. Whether I'm online or not, my mind now expects to take in information the way the Net distributes it: in a swiftly moving stream of particles. Once I was a scuba diver in the sea of words. Now I zip along the surface like a guy on a Jet Ski.”<sup>1</sup>*

I'm sure that you feel this. So, let me encourage you to linger over the text. Take time to study the Word of God. Let the Bible get into your soul. Allow every word of the Bible to nourish your soul. All of it is written so that you might come to know Jesus in a personal way. Hopefully, you'll remember that this is why John wrote his gospel:

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/7205526-the-shallows-what-the-internet-is-doing-to-our-brains>

“Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:30–31),

John wants you to savor what is written here so that you might believe.

Last week we were in John 1:14—just one verse. But it was loaded with truth. In particular, we learned that John saw the glory of Jesus in what he did, what he taught, and what he said. And John described that glory as “full of grace and truth.”

Did you have the opportunity to apply that in your life this week? Did you think about what it means for the glory of Jesus to be seen in you as you look more and more like him through how you live out grace and truth? There was a lot to consider and apply in just verse 14.

I’ve got good news for you: John isn’t done. There’s more to talk about here as it relates to Jesus.

This is one of the things I love about the Bible and learning about Jesus. Just when you think there can’t be more glory to behold or truth to learn about him, you discover another reality that makes your heart leap for joy. Or you find another application in which you see the relevance and helpfulness of your relationship with Jesus.

There’s more to learn about Jesus in John 1. Let me show you three additional things.

### **1. More Affirmation of Deity**

In order to be a Christian and in order to be saved from your sins, you must believe. But believe in what? A foundational truth, according to John 20:31, is believing that Jesus is the Son of God. In other words, you have to believe that Jesus is God. Not just that he looked like God or performed god-like acts. No, you must believe that Jesus is God-in-the-flesh.

Now, we have already read about this in the previous verses. In verse 1, we learned that Jesus (called the Word) was (a) in the beginning, (b) was with God, and (c) was God. And then last week we saw how John returned to this reality. He connected Jesus’s deity to Jesus coming in the flesh (incarnation) and people beholding the glory of God through him.

“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” (John 1:14).

This idea of Jesus being God is so important that the apostle John adds the testimony of John the Baptist into the mix. John the Apostle is adding another affirmation of the deity of Jesus. He’s giving his readers further proof that Jesus really was the Son of God.

We first heard about John the Baptist in verses 6-8, where John the Apostle made it clear that John the Baptist was a forerunner of Christ. We’ll see this again in early 2019 as we look at John 1:19-34 when John the Baptist clarifies his role testifying that “Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the

world” (v. 29). And John the Baptist’s witness reaches its crescendo in 1:34 with “I have seen borne witness that this is the Son of God.” That is where John the Apostle is going.

Back to verse 15. John the Apostle adds what appears to be a comment outside of what he was saying in verse 14. That’s why most translations put the verse inside parentheses. However, just because it is parenthetical doesn’t mean it’s not important.

John the Apostle quotes John the Baptist as saying, “This is was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me’” (v. 15). Why does John the Baptist say this, and what does it mean?

In the culture in which the Bible was written, age and precedence were equated with authority and honor.<sup>2</sup> Old Testament cities were ruled by the “elders at the gate.” Maybe as a child, you heard someone say, “Obey your elders.” There was an assumption that life experience or being present before another provided greater credibility. Since John the Baptist’s ministry was before the ministry of Jesus, and since he was older, it would be fairly normal to assume that John the Baptist was greater. But John the Baptist makes it very clear that his role is to prepare the way for Jesus. All four gospels record his preparatory role.

However, John the Baptist goes even further. He said, “He ranks before me because he was before me.” John the Baptist is clearly talking about more than ministry exposure. He is connecting Jesus’s preeminence to his pre-existence. John the Apostle is quoting John the Baptist’s own testimony as another piece of evidence that Jesus really was the Son of God. He was God-in-the-flesh.

This issue with the deity of Jesus was so important that it necessitated the first creed. Three hundred Church leaders gathered in Nicaea to determine the church’s position on the deity of Christ. They met from May-August in 321 A.D. The reason? There was a controversy devastating the church. It was called Arianism, and it suggested that Jesus was like God but not fully God. This teaching suggested that either Jesus was different or similar in substance, but that he was not of the same substance.

By the end of the council, a creed was written to clarify the orthodox teaching of the church:

I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds; God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made. Who, for us men and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, and was made man; and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; He suffered and was buried; and the third day He rose again, according to the Scriptures; and ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand

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<sup>2</sup> D. A. Carson, [\*The Gospel according to John\*](#), The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 131.

of the Father; and He shall come again, with glory, to judge the quick and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end.<sup>3</sup>

The Apostle John and the early church knew that the deity of Jesus was central to Christianity. Jesus is not another prophet as Muslims would say. He is not a holy man as Hindus would say. He is not the first creation of God as the Jehovah's Witnesses would say. Jesus is God.

Why is this important? Last week I shared with you that Jesus had to be human in order for his death to apply to us. But he had to be God (not like God or similar to God) or his atonement would have only been for his sins. He had to be perfect to make us perfect (2 Cor. 5:21); and he had to be God in order to be our mediator (1 Tim. 2:5), such that John would later say in 1 John 2:23—"No one who denies the Son has the Father. Whoever confesses the Son has the Father also."

The deity of Christ is that important. It is worth another affirmation.

## **2. More Implications of Fullness**

The second aspect of Jesus that John talks about is related to a word that we looked at last week: fullness. In verse 14, the word was related to the glory of Jesus. John saw the glory of Jesus as he performed his miracles, as he taught the people, and in his transfiguration. Hopefully, you will remember that Jesus's glory was described as "full of grace and truth."

But there's even more here.

You see, Jesus's fullness is not just about what he's like. His fullness is also about what he gives. His fullness creates a well from which we can draw. His fullness is an ocean of spiritual resources from which we are blessed.

Verse 16 says this explicitly: "from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace." Now, we are going to look at what "grace upon grace" means in our final point. But for now, I just want you to consider the connection between the fullness of Jesus and our position of receiving.

Essentially, this verse is telling us that the fullness of the glory of Jesus becomes the supply of the spiritual blessings we receive. Trace the source of everything grace given to a Christian and you'll find Jesus.

Here is how Paul said it in Colossians—"For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him . . ." (Col 1:19–22)

Here is how Charles Spurgeon said it:

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<sup>3</sup> <https://zondervanacademic.com/blog/the-nicene-creed-where-it-came-from-and-why-it-still-matters/>

There is a fulness of essential Deity, for "in Him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead." There is a fulness of perfect manhood, for in Him, bodily, that Godhead was revealed. There is a fulness of atoning efficacy in His blood, for "the blood of Jesus Christ, His Son, cleanseth us from all sin." There is a fulness of justifying righteousness in His life, for "there is therefore now no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus." There is a fulness of divine prevalence in His plea, for "He is able to save to the uttermost them that come unto God by Him; seeing He ever liveth to make intercession for them." There is a fulness of victory in His death, for through death He destroyed him that had the power of death, that is the devil. There is a fulness of efficacy in His resurrection from the dead, for by it "we are begotten again unto a lively hope." There is a fullness of triumph in His ascension, for "when He ascended up on high, He led captivity captive, and received gifts for men." There is a fulness of blessings of every sort and shape; a fulness of grace to pardon, of grace to regenerate, of grace to sanctify, of grace to preserve, and of grace to perfect. There is a fulness at all times; a fulness of comfort in affliction; a fulness of guidance in prosperity. A fulness of every divine attribute, of wisdom, of power, of love; a fulness which it were impossible to survey, much less to explore. "It pleased the Father that in Him should all fulness dwell." Oh, what a fulness must this be of which all receive! Fulness, indeed, must there be when the stream is always flowing, and yet the well springs up as free, as rich, as full as ever. Come, believer, and get all thy need supplied; ask largely, and thou shalt receive largely, for this "fulness" is inexhaustible, and is treasured up where all the needy may reach it, even in Jesus, Immanuel--God with us.<sup>4</sup>

Over and over the Bible keeps pointing us back to the person and work of Jesus. It is his fullness that creates fullness in us. It is his fullness that provides what we need. When we started this series, I asked you to consider if you love theology or if you love Jesus, if you love the Bible or if you love Jesus, if you love church or if you love Jesus, and if you love Christianity or if you love Jesus.

It is so important you realize the vital nature of a personal relationship with him. Every ounce of what it means to follow him comes from the essence of who he is.

"For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory" (2 Cor. 1:20).

And what is the role of the church in this? Just listen to Ephesians 4:

"And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ," (Eph. 4:11-15)

My role is to point you to Christ, so that you may become like him and look to him for what you need. And there is always enough for what you need in Christ. He an ocean of grace that never runs dry. His

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.antioch.com.sg/well/devotional/spurgeon/01/01-27-am.htm>

fullness is my supply. His more is my more—even when I’m struggling to believe that. Here’s how Jared Wilson said it in a blog article:

Not a bit of Christ is held back from those who trust him. He does not mete himself out according to measures of faith but according to the veracity of it. And for those with a weak faith, if it be true, he gives enough himself for all eternity. A weak faith may hinder *us*, but it does not hinder him.<sup>5</sup>

From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.

### 3. More Grace

The final aspect of the “more” of Jesus is connected to the final phrase—“grace upon grace.” It seems that John wants us to understand how much better Jesus is than anything we would trust in. He is not only better because his glory is full of grace and truth. He is better because he provides grace upon grace.

Now in full disclosure, I thought this text was heading in a particular and fairly straight-forward direction. If you have an ESV Bible, you will see that the text simply says, “from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.” But if you start comparing various translations, you will see a challenge start to emerge. Let me show you:

- ESV footnote: “from his fullness we have received grace in place of grace”
- 1984 NIV: “we have all received one blessing after another”
- 2011 NIV: “we have all received grace in place of grace already given”
- KJV: “we have all received grace for grace”

I show you this for two reasons. First, you can know this is a great way to study the Bible. If you take four to five translations and compare them, you begin to get a new sense of the potential range of meaning. You don’t even need to know the original languages.

Second, John seems to be intentionally vague here. In light of what follows in verse 17 (a passage we’ll look at next week), it seems he is saying that Christ gives a grace that is better than the grace of the law. Although it is rare to hear the law called a “grace,” it certainly is a gift, and it is a part of God’s plan of redemption. Paul calls the law holy, righteous, and good (Rom. 7:12). It was a gracious thing for God to tell people what he is like and what we are like.

The law is a gift or a “grace” in that it revealed the true nature of our need. And John wants you to understand that from Jesus we receive even more grace—“grace in place of grace already given.” Now we’ll explore this more next week. You’ll have to come back to learn how much greater Jesus is than the law.

What I want you to see here is the manner in which Jesus becomes the source of everything we need for true obedience. It is not only “glory” to be made more and more like Jesus, but the hope of that reality is

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/jared-c-wilson/all-of-christ-for-all-of-life/>

only possible because of the fullness of Jesus. He not only perfectly kept the law and paid the atonement for our sins, but he set us on a path to become like him. And how does that happen? By his own fullness. Listen to Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3:

"that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen" (Eph. 3:16–21).

It is the fullness of Jesus that is the basis of everything we receive. Are you weary? Run to him. Are you discouraged? Sit at his feet. Are you mourning? Come to the empty tomb. Are you doubting? Feel his hand and side. Are you successful? See his glory. Are you happy? Make your joy in him. Whatever your need: run to him because we receive from him.

The source of all grace, the better grace, the eternal grace, is Jesus! Here's how Jared Wilson said it:

In Christ, there is grace to sustain for every need, grace to empower every deed. There is the grace to forgive all of our sins and the grace to impute to us his perfect righteousness. There is the grace to absorb the wrath of God we were due and the grace to conquer the sin and death we could not escape. There is grace to live and grace to die. There is grace to crawl and grace to fly. There is grace below and grace up high ([Psalm 139:8](#)).

The grace keeps coming, ever-present and ever-new. We wake up to new mercies delivered to our bedside, from which we begin our days with new ideas for sin and self-sovereignty. Still, Christ does not stand over us as we wake up groggy and grumpy, shaking his head and frowning and muttering, "Ugh. *This* guy." He stands over us with a sparkle in his eye, returning our morning breath-filled yawn with a beaming welcome, "This guy!"

In Christ, there is grace to get through *the stinkin' day*. And whether we do so by the skin of our teeth or bounding and leaping with joy upon joy, our souls are united to him day by day and age to age; because his fullness does not afford a meager grace, a probationary grace, a tentative grace. For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.<sup>6</sup>

Yes! From the fullness of Jesus, we receive more grace!

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/jared-c-wilson/all-of-christ-for-all-of-life/>