

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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Jesus: Who is He?

John bare witness of him, and cried, saying, This was he of whom I spake, He that cometh after me is preferred before me: for he was before me. And of his fulness have all we received, and grace for grace. For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ. (John 1:15-17)

John, the inspired apostle who wrote this gospel account, introduces John the Baptist's words regarding Jesus. By birth order John was about six months older than Jesus; yet he stated that Jesus existed before he existed. How can this be? From a purely chronological perspective, John is born six months before Jesus. John specifically affirmed Jesus' deity and eternity in this sentence. The conservative Jamieson-Fausset commentary emphasizes the significance of this verse.

- **after me**—in *official manifestation*.
- **before me**—in *rank and dignity*.
- **for he was before me**—in *existence*;
"His goings forth being from of old, from everlasting" (Mic 5:2). (Anything lower than this His words cannot mean); that is, "My Successor is my Superior, for He was my Predecessor." This enigmatic play upon the different senses of the words "before" and "after" was doubtless employed by the Baptist to arrest attention, and rivet the thought; and the Evangelist introduces it just to clinch his own statements.¹

By this comment John (the Baptist) is affirming the point that John (the apostle and writer of this gospel) has been making from the first verse of his letter. Jesus the man is not a mere man; He is also God Incarnate. For the first time in his prologue John the apostle introduces another witness to the God-Incarnate truth that he has affirmed throughout these verses. The "immerser" also believed that Jesus was God Incarnate, God manifest in human flesh.

¹Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, A. R. Fausset et al., *A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments*, On Spine: Critical and Explanatory Commentary. (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), Jn 1:15.

In seamless flow of thought John moves from this affirmation of Jesus eternity, His deity, to the implications of that fact. What does it mean to believe that Jesus is God Incarnate? From the first verse John has referred to Jesus as the "Word." He further chose a specific Greek word in this reference, *logos*, to refer to Jesus as not merely a superficial expression or verbalization of God, but a thoroughgoing commentary on the very idea of the true being of God. We sometimes sing a hymn that expresses this truth admirably, "Do you want proof of this my love? Calvary survey, then heaven above...." Writing fifty to sixty years after Jesus' ascension, John had sufficient time to reflect on the greater implications of the Incarnation. He also faced one of the first onslaughts against the truth of the Incarnation in docetic Gnosticism, a heresy that specifically denied that Jesus was either God Incarnate or that He literally came in the flesh. This philosophy rejected that God approved of anything material, so much so that they could not believe that God could become man and live in human flesh for any length of time. I believe that John's gospel deals with both of these issues.

Tom Constable, a contemporary Christian writer/scholar, adds his voice to the historical Jamieson-Fausset point.

Even though John the Baptist was older and began his ministry before Jesus, He acknowledged Jesus' superiority to himself.

"In a society where age and precedence bestowed peculiar honour, that might have been taken by superficial observers to mean John the Baptist was greater than Jesus."

Jesus' superiority rested in His preexistence with the Father and therefore His deity. John the Baptist's witness to Jesus' identity was important to

the writer of this Gospel (cf. vv. 6–8, 19–36).²

Jesus as the “Word” of God was/is a living expression of the heart of the invisible God who created the universe and who ordained the salvation of His people (Matthew 1:21). The revelation of God as holy, righteous, and unbending in His moral character and His punishment of sinners that we see in the Old Testament is necessary for us to clearly understand the true nature of the Incarnation and to see the high value that God placed on the salvation of His people, a divine objective that could only be accomplished so as to preserve divine justice by Calvary.

Human nature seems at times drawn magnet-like to extreme views of things. Humans who are legalistic and love to “have things right” may tend to focus on the Old Testament dimension of divine justice. Others who are less structured and who may live so carelessly as to fail to control their “besetting sins” in their lives may be inclined to focus on the merciful and loving image of Jesus in the New Testament. Each view in isolation from the other presents us with an errant and deficient view of God. He in fact is both the righteous and just Judge of the Old Testament who will not bend His moral code for anyone, and He is the merciful and loving Jesus of the New Testament who came to “...save sinners...” (1 Timothy 1:15) Only as we bring both of these true dimensions of God’s essential character together can we begin to grasp the true character of God that Scripture sets before us. Only as we see both elements of the divine character can we make any sense out of Calvary itself!

So if Jesus is the living embodiment, the very “Word” of God, what are the implications of this truth? John answers the question, “*And of his fullness have all we received, and grace for grace.*” First John affirms the concrete reality that Jesus’ Incarnation and work achieved something specific and real, not merely the potential for something. “...have we all received” states a fact. Someone, identified in the passage as “we,” has in fact received of His fullness. These words do not speak of potential, or of propositional possibilities, or of contingencies yet to be met by humans. They speak of fullness bestowed, fullness that enriches and alters the state and life of its recipient. The words open the door and hint at a

²Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003; 2003), Jn 1:15.

truth that John will affirm clearly later in his gospel, that God has a chosen people, that Jesus came to redeem and to save those particular people, not merely make salvation possible for all humanity, but certain for none.

D. A. Carson enlarges on this thought of fullness and blessings in Christ. “The *fulness* does not come to us all at once but in a progression of gracious experiences.”³ In other words the fullness that God bestows on us in Christ does not come to us in a single outpouring at one point or time in our life, but is a continuous flow, as it were an artesian well of divine favors that flow endlessly from God to us, culminating only with our entrance into eternity in our resurrected wholeness at the final Day.

John has not finished with this idea yet. “...and grace for grace.” A. T. Robertson emphasizes the incredible blessing of this simple phrase.

Grace for grace (χαριν ἄντι χαριτος [*charin anti charitos*]). The point is in ἄντι [*anti*], a preposition disappearing in the *Koiné* and here only in John. It is in the locative case of ἄντα [*anta*] (end), “at the end,” and was used of exchange in sale. See Luke 11:11, ἄντι ἰχθυος ὄφιν [*anti ichthuos ophin*], “a serpent for a fish,” Heb. 12:2 where “joy” and “cross” are balanced against each other. Here the picture is “grace” taking the place of “grace” like the manna fresh each morning, new grace for the new day and the new service.⁴

“...exchange in sale,” could we imply from Robertson’s thought here the idea of grace buying more grace for us? No doubt the continuous flow of grace and fullness are John’s dominant theme, but perhaps it is not his only theme. As naturally as God gave the law through the agency of Moses, He gives grace and truth through the agency of our Lord Jesus Christ. In contemplating the flow of fullness, grace, and truth from God to man, we should

³D. A. Carson, *New Bible Commentary : 21st Century Edition*, Rev. Ed. of: *The New Bible Commentary*. 3rd Ed. / Edited by D. Guthrie, J.A. Motyer. 1970., 4th ed. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill., USA: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), Jn 1:14.

⁴A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, Vol.V c1932, Vol.VI c1933 by Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), Jn 1:16.

consider no other agency than the person of God Incarnate, the Lord Jesus Christ! A distinguishing trait of Primitive Baptists is our belief that in the essential work of saving sinners, the work that transforms a fallen, sinful human from a child of Adam to a child of God, God works directly and immediately without any other agency or means. John affirms that truth in his careful choice of words in this passage. Without question God has ordained the gospel, the active functions and activities of a New Testament church, and other spiritual forces for good to enrich and to instruct His children in their pursuit of godliness, of true discipleship, here in time. However, in the crucial matter of ensuring that those whom He has chosen will live with Him throughout eternity, He has met all the conditions Himself. He has provided all the means within Himself, not dependent upon others outside of Himself.

We can thus truly conclude the following:

1. We believe that God in fact saves sinners through the synergistic interaction of God and man, but *the synergy occurred in God Incarnate, not in God and fallen man.*
2. We believe that our eternal salvation from sin and our eternal dwelling with God in heaven was altogether conditional, *but our Lord Jesus Christ, God Incarnate, met all the conditions. There are no essential conditions for our eternal salvation left to be met by us.*

To Him be the glory!

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Worship service each Sunday 10:30 A. M.
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