

The Gospel of John (5); The Prologue (1:1-18) (part 4) (cont.)

Introduction:

We are in the fourth section of John's Prologue to his Gospel, which is set forth in verses 14 through 18 of chapter 1. We began to address this section last Lord's Day, but we were only able to consider the first of these four verses, which was verse 14. Today, Lord willing, we will complete our study of this prologue with our addressing verses 15 through 18.

The outline that we have used is as follows:

- I. The Prologue of the Gospel of John (1:1-18)**
 - A. The Introduction of the Word (1:1-5)**
 - B. The Witness of the Word (1:6-8)**
 - C. The Manifestation of the Word (1:9-13)**
 - D. The Uniqueness of the Word (1:14-18)**

These four divisions of the prologue correspond to what may be discerned as four paragraphs. Let us read this last paragraph of this prologue, which, again, is verses 14 through 18.

¹⁴And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. ¹⁵John bore witness of Him and cried out, saying, "This was He of whom I said, 'He who comes after me is preferred before me, for He was before me.'" ¹⁶And of His fullness we have all received, and grace for grace. ¹⁷For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him.

Last Lord's Day we examined verse 14 in which we read that...

1. The Word of God became incarnate. (1:14)

We showed that John was setting forth the incarnation of the Lord Jesus as a greater and more glorious disclosure of the glory of God than what Israel had experienced, when the Shekinah glory of God led His people through the wilderness to the Promised Land. God is revealed most clearly and fully through Jesus Christ than any former disclosure to mankind.

John set forth the Lord Jesus as both God and man. We gave further information regarding our Lord Jesus by stating and affirming that He is a divine person with two natures, a divine nature and a human nature.

We showed that the Lord Jesus Himself said that to believe in His *deity* is essential to salvation. John 8:24 reads, "Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins; for if you do not believe that **I am** (He), you will die in your sins." When Jesus said, "if you do not believe that **I am**", He was saying that if you do not believe that He is God Who showed Himself to Moses and Israel, Whose name is "I am," then you shall die in your sins. Denominations and "churches" and "preachers who deny the deity of Jesus Christ, as has been set before us in His holy Word, do not know God and do not and will not have salvation as long as they persist in their very serious heresy.

But not only is it essential to believe in Jesus' deity in order to be saved, it is equally necessary to believe in His *humanity*. John the Apostle wrote, "Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and *every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God*. And this is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world."

Let us now turn our attention to the second sentence of this paragraph, in which we read that...

2. John the Baptist bore witness of the preexistence of the Word which became flesh. (1:15)

¹⁵*John bore witness of Him and cried out, saying, “This was He of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me is preferred before me, for He was before me.’”*

John the Baptist was a great man. The Lord Jesus said of him, “Verily I say unto you, among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist” (Matt. 11:11). But though John was the greatest of men, John the Baptist was a humble man, who understood that Jesus far surpassed him in stature and importance. John would say, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30). John’s great desire in life was to point people to Jesus and to enable them to see and embrace Him in His greatness. Here we read of John’s own self-devaluation as he sought to exalt the Lord Jesus, to whom he gave witness.

The verb tenses of this verse are significant. First we read that “John bore witness of Him.” Actually the verb, “bore witness”, is a present tense verb. It should probably be translated, “John bears witness of Him.” Even though John and his ministry had apparently passed from the scene, John was still bearing witness of Jesus Christ. John’s ministry and proclamation of Jesus Christ had an abiding, continuing influence. John was still bearing witness of Jesus Christ when the Apostle John penned his Gospel. The witness of John the Baptist to the Lord Jesus Christ continues today.

It is said that John “bears witness” and that he was doing so for he had “cried out.” This is a perfect tense verb. It says that John had “cried out” at some time in the past but that the impact of that cry continued to have an impact on those who had heard him. John’s proclamation of Christ left an abiding impact and realization of those who heard him, that the Jesus whom he declared was of profound significance. What John had cried out was true; “the substance of what he proclaimed is permanently true.”¹

The word translated “cried out” is the clarion call of a prophet. “*Crieth* is a technical Rabbinic term for the loud voice of a prophet who intends to be heard.”² As one said of this verb,

The Baptist is said to have “cried out” (κέκραγεν), which is not used for emotional or irrational cries but with a special sense for inspired speech, as for the speech of Jesus (7:28; 12:44), the cries of the Spirit (Luke 1:41-42), or the cries of a prophet (Rom. 9:27).³

John’s proclamation was loud, widely heard, and pronounced. We read elsewhere that the multitude “counted him as a prophet” (Matt. 14:5). They did so not because he performed miracles (cf. John 10:41), for he did not. They believed him to be a prophet due to the content and the manner that he bore witness to Jesus Christ.

The Prologue then gives us the content of the message of John the Baptist that he cried out to the people. We read of John’s message, “*This was He of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me is preferred before me, for He was before me.’”* This is the first direct speech we have recorded in this Fourth Gospel. It is a word regarding the preexistence and the preeminence of Jesus Christ.

A significant shift is hinted at in the words of the Baptist, “This was He of whom I said.” Back in verse 6 we read of John’s witness, “There was a man sent from God, whose name *was* John.” It spoke of John in the third person of having been sent by God. But here in verse 15 John is described as *giving* witness through his preaching regarding Jesus Christ.

The nuance signals a shift has taken place; the only perspective to be had is on this side of the incarnation. The Old Testament has crossed over into the New. The connection to the creative acts in Genesis (vv. 1-5) has given way to the creative acts of the Word (vv. 9-14). God has become “the Father.” The voice of an

¹ F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (William B. Eerdmans, 1983), p. 42.

² Edwyn Clement Hoskyns, *The Fourth Gospel* (Faber and Faber Limited, 1947), p. 151.

³ Edward W. Klink, III, *John*. Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Zondervan, 2016), p. 112.

Old Testament prophet, therefore, has become the voice of an apostle; the Baptist no longer looks *for* the Coming One, but *at* Him.”⁴

John cried out, “***He who comes after me...***” John the Baptist had preceded Jesus by birth, having been born to Zacharias and Elizabeth 6 months before Mary gave birth to Jesus. And John had begun his public ministry six months before the onset of the ministry of Jesus. Jesus came *after* John the Baptist.

Nevertheless, John declared, “He who comes after me *is preferred before me.*” In the ancient world, respect and honor would be given to those who are older or who had gone before. Convention would have brought privilege and status to John rather than Jesus. This statement of John would have been heard as a significant but paradoxical claim. “How could one who came after John, especially considering the greatness of John, be regarded as ‘preferred’ above John?” It was because John declared that in actuality “***He was before me.***”

If we were to examine the record of the Synoptic Gospels⁵ of the ministry and message of John the Baptist, we would not read of John’s witness to the pre-incarnate Christ. In the Synoptics John’s message was primarily an announcement of the soon arrival of the promised Kingdom of God and the need to repent of sins with view to the arrival of the King. We read in Matthew’s Gospel the message of John the Baptist, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” (Matt. 3:2). In Mark 1 we read John’s words, “Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight” (Mark. 1:3). And in Luke 3:3ff we read of John’s ministry:

³And he went into all the region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins, ⁴as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, saying:

“The voice of one crying in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the LORD;

Make His paths straight.

⁵Every valley shall be filled

And every mountain and hill brought low;

The crooked places shall be made straight

And the rough ways smooth;

⁶And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” (Luke 3:3-6)

In the Synoptics we do not read of the content of John the Baptist’s preaching to be the eternal *Logos* (Word) become incarnate, but we do read it here in John’s Gospel. John gave forth a declaration of the preexistent divine nature of Jesus Christ, the divine Word that was God (v. 1). Jesus was to be “preferred” over John, for in actuality, Jesus had preceded John, and that, from eternity. One said of this:

It follows, of course, that he (Jesus) outranks John the Baptist... Between the two (Christ and the Baptist) there is a difference as between the Infinite and the finite, the eternal and the temporal, the original light of the sun and the reflected light of the moon. And this is exactly what the Baptist himself had confessed, as verse 15 indicates.⁶

And another worte,

According to the witness of John, “He who follows me has surprised me, because he was prior to me.” This statement playfully moves from the historical chronology (and implied rank) that Jesus first “follows” John to the surpassing greatness of Jesus rooted in his cosmological chronology (and implied rank) that Jesus was actually “prior” to John. That is, the Baptist is stating unequivocally that the

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ i.e. Matthew, Mark, and Luke

⁶ William Hendriksen, *John*, New Testament Commentary (Baker Academic, 1953), p. 88.

successor is greater than the forerunner. The Baptist moves the comparison beyond his own historical ministry and harkens back to the Word who was “in the beginning.”⁷

The Lord Jesus had followed John and yet was always before John. And of course when John was saying that Jesus was “before” him, it was not simply that Jesus was of a higher rank than John, but that Jesus was even “before” the creation.

3. Believers receive of His fulness. (1:16)

After having described the witness of John the Baptist, the Apostle John declared, “***And of His fullness we have all received, and grace for grace.***” This is not a statement of John the Baptist, as was verse 15; it is the statement of John the Apostle, the writer of the Gospel. It is the outworking of verse 14, which reads, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, ***full of grace and truth.***” And now here, in verse 16, John wrote, “***And of His fullness we have all received...***” Here the “we” is all true believers. Receiving Jesus Christ (v. 12) is to receive the “fulness” of “grace and truth” (v. 16) in Jesus Christ. This is what it is to be a Christian, to have received of the fullness of God’s blessing in Jesus Christ. This is true of the so-called “greatest” of Christians, but it is also true of the “least” of those who know Jesus Christ.

All true believers receive from Christ’s fulness; the best and greatest saints cannot live without him, the meanest (i.e. simplest) and weakest may live by him. This excludes proud boasting, that we have nothing but *we have received it*; and silences perplexing fears, that we want nothing (i.e. do not lack anything) but *we may receive it*. (Matthew Henry)

We are to boast in the Lord Jesus for all that we have from God and before God. Paul wrote,

²⁶For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, *are called.* ²⁷But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; ²⁸and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, ²⁹that no flesh should glory in His presence. ³⁰But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God—and righteousness and sanctification and redemption—³¹that, as it is written, “***He who glories, let him glory in the LORD.***” (1 Cor. 1:26-31)

John Calvin (1509-1564) wrote of this verse in his commentary on John’s Gospel:

True, indeed, the fountain of life, righteousness, virtue, and wisdom, is with God, but to us it is a hidden and inaccessible fountain. But an abundance of those things is exhibited to us in Christ, that we may be permitted to have recourse to him; for he is ready to flow to us, provided that we open up a channel by faith. He declares in general, that out of Christ we ought not to seek any thing good, though this sentence consists of several clauses. 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, 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 ill 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 fullness of Christ, which is in every respect; so complete, that we shall experience it to be a truly inexhaustible fountain; and John

⁷ Klink, *John*, p. 112.

classes himself with the rest, not for the sake of modesty, but to make it more evident that no man whatever is excepted.

Everything we are and have is bound up in Jesus Christ. Each of us who have truly received Christ have received the fullness which is in Jesus Christ, which will endure unto eternity. Those who have not received Christ, have nothing that will endure. They are empty, though they may think themselves “full.”

J. C. Ryle (1826-1900) also spoke of this fullness:

There is an infinite fullness in Jesus Christ. As Paul says, “It pleased the Father that in him should all fullness dwell.” “In Him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col. 1:19; 2:3). There is laid up in Him, as in a treasury, a boundless supply of all that any sinner can need, either in time or eternity. The Spirit of Life is His special gift to the Church, and conveys from Him, as from a great root, sap and vigor to all the believing branches. He is rich in mercy, grace, wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption. Out of Christ’s fullness, all believers in every age of the world, have been supplied. They did not clearly understand the fountain from which their supplies flowed, in Old Testament times. The Old Testament saints only saw Christ afar off, and not face to face. But from Abel downwards, all saved souls have received all they have had from Jesus Christ alone. Every saint in glory will at last acknowledge that he is Christ’s debtor for all he is. Jesus will prove to have been all in all.

Now verse 16 contains a phrase that is difficult to understand rightly. Again, John wrote, “And of His fullness we have all received, **and grace for grace.**” What does this mean? There are a number of proposals. We might have some of these rehearsed before us through the pen of **J. C. Ryle**:

[*Grace for grace.*] This expression is very peculiar, and has caused much difference of opinion among commentators.

(1) Some think it means “the new grace of the Gospel in place of, or instead of, the old grace of the law.” This is the view of Cyril, Chrysostom, Theophylact, Euthymius, Rupertus, Lyranus, Bucer, Beza, Scaliger, De Dieu, Calovius, Jansenius, Lampe, and Quesnel.

(2) Some think that it means “grace, on account of God’s grace or favour, and especially His favour towards His Son” This is the view of Zwingle, Melancthin, Chemnitius, Flacius, Rollock, Grotius, Camerarius, Torrnovius, Toletus, Barradius, Cartwright, and Cornelius a Lapide.

(3) Some think it means “grace on account of, or in return for, the grace of faith in us.” This is the view of Augustine, Gomarus, and Beda.

(4) Some think that it means “grace answering to, or proportioned to, the grace that is in Christ.” This is the view of Calvin, Leigh, and Bridge.

(5) Some think it means “grace for the propagation of grace.” This is the view of Lightfoot.

(6) Some think it means “accumulated grace, abundant grace, grace upon grace.” This is the view of Schleusner, Winer. Bucer, Pellican, Musculus, Gualter, Poole, Nifanius, Pearce, Burkitt, Doddridge, Bengal, A. Clarke, Tittman, Olshausen, Barnes, and Alford.⁸

I included all of these names of commentators to show that many good men have sincere differences of opinion on how to interpret some difficult texts. After citing the above, Ryle then wrote that his own view was that of #6 above. “On the whole, I am inclined to think that the sixth and the last is the correct view.” Ultimately rather than the weight of the name of a commentator being preferred, we should make determinations on the evidence of the text itself.

⁸ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on John*, vol. 1 (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987, orig. 1869), p. 40.

Which is the correct view? I am quite persuaded that it is #1 above, that “grace for grace” speaks of “*the new grace of the Gospel in place of, or instead of, the old grace of the law.*” There are good reasons for this opinion. First, the meaning largely hinges on the Greek preposition which is translated in our New King James Version as “for”, in “grace for grace.”⁹ (The English Standard Version (ESV) translates the phrase, “grace upon grace.”) The Greek word, *ἀντί* (*anti*), is used only once in John’s Gospel, in this verse. The most common meaning of this Greek word is “instead of” or “in the place of.” In fact the translation of this Greek word, *ἀντί* (*anti*), as “upon” or “in addition to” has no parallel in all of Greek literature.¹⁰ It is the Greek word, *ἐπί* (*epi*), not *ἀντί* (*anti*), that is commonly used to convey this idea of “upon” or “in addition to” or “for.” What John was conveying was that we all have received “grace instead of”, or “in the place of grace.” He was saying that in place of the grace of God that was in His law that had been given through Moses, God has given all true Christians the grace that is in Jesus Christ.

Verse 17 confirms that this is the meaning of verse 16. It is the explanation or commentary on the meaning of verse 16. Let us read these two verses in context:

¹⁶And of His fullness we have all received, and grace for grace. ¹⁷**For** the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

Now having made a choice between the options of the meaning of verse 16, we are not saying that the views of the others are not biblical, even though they are not expressed in this verse. **Matthew Henry** seemed to draw upon all of these meanings for the grace that we have received in Christ, while citing other verses to substantiate his statements. He wrote: “*Grace for grace* bespeaks,

[1.] The *freeness* of this grace. It is grace for grace’ sake; so *Grotius*. We receive grace, not for *our sakes* (be it known to us), but even so, Father, *because it seemed good in thy sight*. It is a *gift according to grace* (Rom. 12:6). It is grace *to us* for the sake of grace to Jesus Christ. God was well pleased in him, and is therefore well pleased with us in him (Eph. 1:6).

[2.] The *fulness* of this grace. *Grace for grace* is abundance of grace, grace upon grace (so *Camero*), one grace heaped upon another; as *skin for skin* is skin after skin, even all that a man has (Job 2:4). It is a blessing poured out, that there shall not be room to receive it, *plenteous redemption*: one grace a pledge of more grace. *Joseph-He will add*. It is such a fulness as is called *the fulness of God* which we are filled with. We are not straitened in the grace of Christ, if we be not straitened in our own bosoms.

[3.] The *serviceableness* of this grace. *Grace for grace* is grace for the promoting and advancing of grace. Grace to be *exercised* by ourselves; gracious habits for gracious acts. Grace to be *ministered* to others; gracious vouchsafements for gracious performances: grace is a talent to be traded with. The apostles received grace (Rom. 1:5; Eph. 3:8), that they might communicate it (1 Pet. 4:10).

[4.] The *substitution* of New-Testament grace *in the room and stead* of Old-Testament grace: so *Beza*. And this sense is confirmed by what follows (v. 17); for the Old Testament had grace in type, the New Testament has grace in truth. There was a grace under the Old Testament, the gospel was preached then (Gal. 3:8); but that grace is superseded, and we have gospel grace instead of it, a *glory which excelleth* (2 Cor. 3:10). Discoveries of grace are now more clear, distributions of grace far more plentiful; this is grace instead of grace.

[5.] It bespeaks the *augmentation* and *continuance* of grace. *Grace for grace* is one grace to improve, confirm, and perfect another grace. We are changed into the divine image, *from glory to glory*, from one degree of glorious grace to another (2 Cor. 3:18). When God gives grace he saith, Take this *in part*; for he who hath promised will perform. .3:18). Those that have *true* grace have that for *more grace* (Jam. 4:6).

⁹ Interestingly the word, “grace”, is used only four times in the Gospel of John, all four of which are in the Prologue, here in the verses of this paragraph of verses 14-18.

¹⁰ Klink, *John*, p. 113.

[6.] It bespeaks the *agreeableness* and *conformity* of grace in the saints to the grace that is in Jesus Christ; so Mr. Clark. *Grace for grace* is grace in us answering to grace in him, as the impression upon the wax answers the seal line for line. The grace we receive from Christ *changes us into the same image* (2 Cor. 3:18), the *image of the Son* (Rom. 8:9), the *image of the heavenly* (1 Cor. 15:49).”¹¹

4. Moses and Jesus Christ compared (1:17)

Here we read the declaration of the Gospel writer: **“For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.”** Although John has been writing of the Son of God from the very first verse and throughout His prologue, here in verse 17 Jesus Christ is first identified by name. John speaks of a finality and fulness of the revelation of God and the blessing of God through Jesus Christ.

As we wrote earlier, verse 17 explains the meaning of verse 16. The first word of verse 17 is “For.” This is a conjunction that conveys the idea of providing explanation; it is an explanatory “for.” Let us read again these two verses in context:

¹⁶And of His fullness we have all received, and grace for grace. ¹⁷**For** the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

And so, verse 16 tells us in Jesus Christ we (Christians) have received His fullness, that we have received the grace of God that “came” through Jesus Christ that replaced the grace that “was given” by God through Moses.

“The progression of the prologue has moved from a God who has ‘given’ to his people to a God who has ‘come’ to his people.”¹²

Now some object to this understanding of these verses. The most common objection asserts that there is nothing about the Law of Moses that could be characterized as the grace of God, therefore, how could “grace” replace “grace” if the law is not gracious? But this is to misunderstand the biblical presentation of the Law of Moses. Now it is true that the Apostle Paul contrasts law and grace quite sharply in his epistles. He makes it very clear that the “law is not of faith” (Gal. 3:12), and that “the law brings wrath” (Rom. 4:15), that the law cannot produce true righteousness in sinners (Gal. 2:21), and that “all who rely on works of the law are under a curse” (Gal. 3:10). But to argue, therefore, that God did not give His law to His people in grace, does not follow. For the Holy Scriptures set forth the grace of God in having given His law to Israel. God promised that blessing would come to those who keep His law. We read of this in many places. Here is Deuteronomy 28:1ff.:

“Now it shall come to pass, if you diligently obey the voice of the LORD your God, to observe carefully all His commandments which I command you today, that the LORD your God will set you high above all nations of the earth. ²And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, because you obey the voice of the LORD your God:

³“Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the country.

⁴“Blessed shall be the fruit of your body, the produce of your ground and the increase of your herds, the increase of your cattle and the offspring of your flocks.

⁵“Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl.

⁶“Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out.

⁷“The LORD will cause your enemies who rise against you to be defeated before your face; they shall come out against you one way and flee before you seven ways.

¹¹ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible*, vol. 5 (Fleming H. Revell Company, n. d., originally 1721), p. 856.

¹² Klink, p. 116.

⁸“The LORD will command the blessing on you in your storehouses and in all to which you set your hand, and He will bless you in the land which the LORD your God is giving you.

⁹“The LORD will establish you as a holy people to Himself, just as He has sworn to you, if you keep the commandments of the LORD your God and walk in His ways. ¹⁰Then all peoples of the earth shall see that you are called by the name of the LORD, and they shall be afraid of you. ¹¹And the LORD will grant you plenty of goods, in the fruit of your body, in the increase of your livestock, and in the produce of your ground, in the land of which the LORD swore to your fathers to give you. ¹²The LORD will open to you His good treasure, the heavens, to give the rain to your land in its season, and to bless all the work of your hand. You shall lend to many nations, but you shall not borrow. ¹³And the LORD will make you the head and not the tail; you shall be above only, and not be beneath, if you heed the commandments of the LORD your God, which I command you today, and are careful to observe them. ¹⁴So you shall not turn aside from any of the words which I command you this day, to the right or the left, to go after other gods to serve them. (Deut. 28:1-14)

Moses, when rehearsing the law before Israel, expressed the great privilege and blessing that was theirs for God having given to them His law. Moses said,

⁷“For what great nation is there that has God so near to it, as the LORD our God is to us, for whatever reason we may call upon Him? ⁸And what great nation is there that has such statutes and righteous judgments as are in all this law which I set before you this day?” (Deut. 4:7f)

But even when we look to the Apostle Paul’s writings, we may see that he also spoke very highly of the law in some respects. Paul never denigrated the law, but rather, he rebuked and corrected law-breakers. But he highly regarded the law, asserting in places that it was a gracious God that had given His law to His people. Paul came to the defense of the law of God in Romans 7. He wrote:

Therefore *the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good.* ¹³Has then what is good become death to me? Certainly not! But sin, that it might appear sin, was producing death in me through what is good, so that sin through the commandment might become exceedingly sinful. ¹⁴For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am carnal, sold under sin. ¹⁵For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do. ¹⁶If, then, I do what I will not to do, I agree with *the law that it is good.* (Rom. 7:12-16)

Paul also declared that the law was “spiritual” in nature. Paul wrote, “For we know that *the law is* spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin” (Rom. 7:14). I used to believe that the law was not spiritual, but carnal, for I had adopted only a negative view of God’s law, a teaching that was commonly and widely taught. To illustrate this, I can recount the surprise and somewhat rejection of the title of a book that I obtained many years ago. It is entitled, *The Grace of Law*, authored by **Ernest Kevan**. When I began to read this book, I thought that I had a good understanding of the nature and role of the law set forth in the Scriptures. Kevan took me to school and I learned more truth about God’s law from that book than from any other I had read before.

One of the chapters in Kevan’s book is entitled, “The Place of the Law in the Purpose of God.” The opening words of this chapter read this way,

The object of this chapter is to exhibit the ways in which the Puritans understood the Mosaic Law and its place in God’s purpose of grace for mankind, for

The Mystery of the Gospel cannot be thoroughly apprehended by us, without some good understanding of the Oeconomy of the Law, yea, and also of the State of things before the Law.

First, the two-fold use of the word “law”—sometimes as that which is solely preceptive, and sometimes as a covenant—is distinguished, and then an examination is made of the Puritan view of the relation of the Law to the different forms and administrations of the Covenant of Grace, showing that *the*

Law itself is an instrument of grace. Then it is necessary to inquire into Paul's deprecatory language about the Law, and the appearance of opposition of the Law and the Gospel.¹³

Paul also had written of the glory of God revealed in the law. The law was indeed glorious, implying that God was gracious in giving His law to Israel. Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 3:

⁷But if the ministry of death, written and engraved on stones, was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of the glory of his countenance, which glory was passing away, ⁸how will the ministry of the Spirit not be more glorious? ⁹For if the ministry of condemnation had glory, the ministry of righteousness exceeds much more in glory. ¹⁰For even what was made glorious had no glory in this respect, because of the glory that excels. ¹¹For if what is passing away was glorious, what remains is much more glorious. (2 Cor. 3:7-11)

When God revealed His glory through His law that He had given to Israel through Moses, it was the grace of God manifested to His people.¹⁴

But the writer of the Fourth Gospel, although describing both the law and the revelation of God in Jesus Christ to be manifestations of God's grace, clearly sets forth a contrast between them--the latter manifestation of God's grace in Christ replaced the former manifestation of God's grace in the law. Again, the end of verse 16 states that God gave grace instead of, or in the place of, the grace that He had given in His law through Moses. The grace of God in Jesus Christ is vastly greater than the grace of the law that God had given through Moses.

There are those who argue against this understanding. They say, "for John the law continues in force: the Scriptures cannot be broken (10:34), and therefore it is unreasonable to think that John in 1:16-17 can view the grace of the gospel, the grace that has come in Jesus Christ, as *replacing* the law."¹⁵ **D. A. Carson** addressed this objection:

But again, close attention to the way the Fourth Gospel treats the Old Testament alleviates the difficulty. In the passages already mentioned, and in a large number of others, the Old Testament Scriptures are understood to point forward to Jesus, to anticipate him, and thus to prophesy of him. In that sense he fulfils them. If even the covenant of law is 'prophetic' in this sense (*cf.* Matt. 11:13), then when that to which it points arrived, it is in some sense displaced. It may continue in force as a continual pointer to that which it predicted, but its valid authority lies primarily in that which it announced and which has now arrived. The law, *i.e.* the law-covenant, was given by grace, and anticipated the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ; now that he has come, that same prophetic law-covenant is necessarily superseded by that which it 'prophesied' would come. The thought is not dissimilar to Matthew 5:17-20. It is this prophecy/fulfilment motif that explains why the two displays of grace are not precisely identical. The flow of the passage and the burden of the book as a whole magnify the fresh 'grace' that has come in Jesus Christ. That grace is necessarily greater than the 'grace' of the law whose function, in John's view, was primarily to anticipate the coming of the Word.¹⁶

5. The Son has declared the Father. (1:18)

¹³ Ernest Kevan, *The Grace of Law; A Study in Puritan Theology* (Baker Book House, 1965), p. 109.

¹⁴ There is a great deal of discussion about the nature of the Mosaic covenant. Is it to be classified as a manifestation of a covenant of works or a covenant of grace with God? Reformed Baptists historically argued that the Mosaic covenant was a covenant of works. But even agreeing with this understanding of the Mosaic covenant, it can, nevertheless, be argued that it was gracious act of God in establishing this covenant with Israel, for it furthered the purpose of God revealing His grace and bringing to pass His promise of grace in the coming of the Messiah.

¹⁵ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (William B. Eerdmans, 1991), p. 133.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

We read in verse 18, ***“No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him.”*** John closed his prologue by declaring that although no one has seen God, His Son Jesus Christ has declared Him. Let us consider each of the phrases and clauses of this verse.

(1) “No one has seen God at any time.”

Almighty God has never been seen by any human being. There are reasons why this is so. For one reason, God is invisible. This means that God is incapable of being sensed or known through our physical senses. That God is invisible is stated in several places in the Scriptures. Paul wrote this word of praise in his letter to Timothy: “To the King of the ages, immortal, ***invisible***, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen” (1 Tim. 1:17). The reason that God is invisible, is because He is a Spirit Being. Jesus said, “God is Spirit.” He has no physical body or features that are visible to His creatures. When the disciples questioned the resurrection of Jesus Christ, even when He stood among them, Jesus said to them:

And He said to them, “Why are you troubled? And why do doubts arise in your hearts? ³⁹Behold My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself. Handle Me and see, for ***a spirit does not have flesh and bones*** as you see I have.” ⁴⁰When He had said this, He showed them His hands and His feet. (Luke 24:38-40)

God does not have a body that can be seen.

There are warnings in Scripture against those who would attempt to “see” even a manifestation of God. Moses desired to see the glory of God. We read of this in Exodus 33. There we read:

¹⁸And he said, “Please, show me Your glory.”

¹⁹Then He said, “I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim the name of the LORD before you. I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.” ²⁰But He said, ***“You cannot see My face; for no man shall see Me, and live.”***

²¹And the LORD said, “Here is a place by Me, and you shall stand on the rock. ²²So it shall be, while My glory passes by, that I will put you in the cleft of the rock, and will cover you with My hand while I pass by. ²³Then I will take away My hand, and you shall see My back; but My face shall not be seen.”

Moses only saw the afterglow of God’s glory. That was all that he was capable of seeing as a mortal having a very limited vision of God.

And yet, even though the Word of God clearly says that “No one has seen God at any time”, there seem to be a number of encounters of people in the Scriptures who did just that—they saw God. Consider these examples:

(a) We read of this description of Moses: “Thus ***the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face***, as a man speaks to his friend” (Exo. 33:11).

(b) Jacob is said to have wrestled with God “face to face.”¹⁷ (Gen. 32:22-32)

²²And he arose that night and took his two wives, his two female servants, and his eleven sons, and crossed over the ford of Jabbok. ²³He took them, sent them over the brook, and sent over what he had.

²⁴Then Jacob was left alone; and a Man wrestled with him until the breaking of day. ²⁵Now when He saw that He did not prevail against him, He touched the socket of his hip; and the socket of Jacob’s hip was out of joint as He wrestled with him. ²⁶And He said, “Let Me go, for the day breaks.”

But he said, “I will not let You go unless You bless me!”

²⁷So He said to him, “What is your name?”

¹⁷ The expression in Hebrew, which is translated, “face to face”, depicts standing in the presence of someone. The Hebrew word in the singular for one side of the face is פָּנֶה (*paneh*), the plural form is פָּנִים (*panim*), which speaks of seeing both sides of the face, looking directly into the face of someone. This word, “face” in the plural is the word translated “presence.”

He said, “Jacob.”

²⁸And He said, “Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel; for you have struggled with God and with men, and have prevailed.”

²⁹Then Jacob asked, saying, “Tell me Your name, I pray.”

And He said, “Why is it that you ask about My name?” And He blessed him there.

³⁰So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: “***For I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved.***” ³¹Just as he crossed over Penuel the sun rose on him, and he limped on his hip. ³²Therefore to this day the children of Israel do not eat the muscle that shrank, which is on the hip socket, because He touched the socket of Jacob’s hip in the muscle that shrank. (Gen. 32:22-32)

(c) Isaiah saw God on His throne in heaven. (Isaiah 6:1-5)

In the year that King Uzziah died, ***I saw the Lord sitting on a throne***, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple. ²Above it stood seraphim; each one had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. ³And one cried to another and said:

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
The whole earth is full of His glory!”

⁴And the posts of the door were shaken by the voice of him who cried out, and the house was filled with smoke.

⁵So I said:

“Woe is me, for I am undone!
Because I am a man of unclean lips,
And I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips;
***For my eyes have seen the King,
The LORD of hosts.***”

(d) John “saw” God the Father sitting on His throne in heaven. (Rev. 4:1-3)

After these things I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven. And the first voice which I heard was like a trumpet speaking with me, saying, “Come up here, and I will show you things which must take place after this.”

²Immediately I was in the Spirit; ***and behold, a throne set in heaven, and One sat on the throne.***

³And He who sat there was like a jasper and a sardius stone in appearance; and there was a rainbow around the throne, in appearance like an emerald.

How do we understand these (and other) accounts of people who “saw” God but we read here in John 1:18, and elsewhere, “**No one has seen God at any time**”? We should understand that these encounters with God were not the revelation of the full essential nature of God. Every visible manifestation of God is a condescension on God’s part, in which He manifested Himself in a form and in a very limited way that communicated His presence, but it was not a full disclosure of Him, for that would not be possible.

God is a spirit, and is therefore everywhere, not subject to space (and time). He is infinitely glorious. A finite, physical being, such as you and I are, cannot see God fully disclosed. It is not possible. “**No one has seen God at any time.**”

Then we read of...

2. “the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father...”

We have previously addressed Jesus Christ as “the only begotten Son.” This does not speak of Jesus being born in Bethlehem to the virgin Mary. Rather, Jesus Christ was God’s Son *eternally* begotten, or eternally generated of the Father. There never was a time when the Son of God was not begotten of the Father. There was never a time when there was not God *the Father*.

What is expressed in the words of the Son, “*who is in the bosom of the Father*”? It could be paraphrased as saying something like “He is in the side of the Father.” It carries the idea of the closest, most intimate relationship. It does not say of the Son, “who *was* in the bosom of the Father”, but “who *is* in the bosom of the Father.” Even after the incarnation, when Jesus Christ ministered here on earth, and certainly after His resurrection and ascension to be seated at the right hand of the Father in heaven, Jesus Christ was/is in the bosom of the Father. There is One God, and the Father and the Son (and also the Holy Spirit) are one in essence, one God, though separate Persons in the Godhood.

When the Word became flesh, he did not cease to perform his cosmic activities as if the incarnation demanded an episodic interruption of his true being. At the same time, by taking on flesh, God himself fully shares in humanity, creating an intimacy between the Father and his “children.”¹⁸

3. “*He has declared Him.*”

John concludes his prologue declaring that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Word that was with God in the beginning, the Word who was God, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared the true God to the world. The world can only know the true God through the revelation of God through His Son, Jesus Christ. Our Lord Himself confirmed this same idea in His own words:

“All things have been delivered to Me by My Father, and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, and who the Father is except the Son, and the one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him.” (Luke 10:22).

We will conclude with the words of **J. C. Ryle**:

Christ... is the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father. He is one who is most intimately united from all eternity to God the Father, and is equal to Him in all things. He, during the time of His earthly ministry here, fully showed to man all that man can bear to know concerning His Father. He has revealed His Father’s wisdom, and holiness, and compassion, and power, and hatred of sin, and love of sinners, in the fullest possible way. He has brought into clear light the great mystery how God the Father can be just, and yet justify the ungodly. The knowledge of the Father which a man derived from the teaching of Moses, is as different from that derived from the teaching of Christ as twilight is different from noonday.¹⁹

Now may the God of peace who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make you complete in every good work to do His will, working in you what is well pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom *be* glory forever and ever. Amen.
(Heb. 13:20f)

¹⁸ Klink, *John*, p. 118.

¹⁹ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on John*, vol. 1 (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987, orig. 1869), p. 41.