

## **THE WORD AND GRACE**

**JOHN 1:15-17**

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would like to begin today by reading JOHN 1:16-17. Please listen as I read. "From fullness of His grace we have all received one blessing after another. For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ."

Now look at verse 16 and listen again as I translate it directly from the original text. "Of His fullness we have all received, and grace in exchange for grace." The words "one blessing after another" that appear in the New International Version of the Bible actually should read "grace in exchange for grace."

In preparation for Christmas 2001, we have been considering the meaning of the Prologue to the Gospel of John. The declaration of the Prologue is that God became a human being. This is what we call the incarnation. The Greek word John used to describe Jesus is Logos. In our English Bibles, Logos is translated as "Word." So, the declaration of the Prologue is that the Word became flesh.

Along with the declaration, there are three explanations. The first explanation helps us to understand the purpose of the incarnation. The purpose of the incarnation is to make it possible for human beings to experience a new birth and become a part of a second creation. JOHN 1:12-13 says people who receive by faith the incarnate Word of God become children of God. They receive a new birth.

The second explanation deals with the method God uses to bring about the new birth. JOHN 1:14 makes reference to the glory of the One and Only. I believe this is a direct reference to Christ's death on the cross. Although the glory of the Word can refer to many things, nothing can match the glory of the cross. We think of the glory displayed when Jesus calmed the storm and healed people and raised people from the dead. We think about the glory of Jesus seated at the right hand of the Father. But, none of this would have meaning without the cross. It is the glory of the cross that we need to see every day.

Today, we come to the third and last explanation in John's prologue. Again, the first explanation dealt with the purpose for the incarnation and stated that purpose to be the new birth. The second explanation dealt with the method of the new birth, which is the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. Now, in the third explanation, we are going to understand the nature of the new birth. In the first explanation we are taught that people who receive the Word by faith receive a new birth. But, what does it mean to receive the Word by faith? What is the nature of saving faith? Today, as we study this, the third and last explanation found in the prologue, we will attempt to answer this question.

Listen again as I read JOHN 1:16 as it should be translated from the original text. "Of His fullness we have all received, and grace in exchange for grace." What do these words mean? In JOHN 1:12-13 we already read about the new birth. It has already been explained to us that people receive the new birth by believing. Believe in Jesus, and you will be saved. Why does anything more need to be added to that statement? Why do we need another explanation telling us that what we have receive is grace that has been exchanged for grace? Doesn't that complicate the whole issue of salvation?

Many people think and teach that salvation comes at a point in our lives where we believe. At the moment we believe, we receive grace, and we are saved by grace. But now, we have a confusing statement telling us that before we received the grace we now have, we had already received grace. The way salvation is explained here seems to be more of a process rather than a single event.

Let's try to understand this better by looking at verses 16 and 17 together. Verse 16 tells us that we have received grace in exchange for grace. Then verse 17 tells us that, prior to receiving grace and truth that comes through Jesus Christ, we were given the Mosaic law. We had received one kind of grace that has now been exchanged for another kind of grace; namely, the grace Jesus Christ provides when He died on the cross for the sins of mankind. I believe that verse 16 and 17, taken together, clearly imply that the Law is a form of grace. What God did when He gave the Law and what He did when He entered into the flesh of Jesus are both acts of grace. They are

essentially both acts of grace. Even though, in essence, they are the same, there is a very important functional difference between them.

God never intended to use the Law to save people. That was never the function of the Law. The function of the Law is to help people know what God expects of man; and doing that, to help people see their need of salvation. I do not believe the Law has ever been able to save people. GALATIANS 3:24 says, "So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith." I believe that people are not and have never been saved by obeying the Law that was given through Moses.

But, the grace provided because God entered into the flesh of Jesus and died for the sins of mankind **is** meant to save people. That is its primary function. And when a certain person is saved, that person takes on a new nature. He is born again. He not only receives forgiveness of sins committed in the past, but he receives supernatural power and inspiration to do the very things that the moral Law given through Moses require.

Therefore, salvation is a process. It is a process that involves the giving of grace on two levels. We first receive truth about God and ourselves that helps us understand who we are and how we are supposed to live. After receiving that truth we then come under conviction that we cannot be who we are supposed to be and do what we are supposed to do without supernatural help. So we call out to God for salvation and we receive saving grace through Jesus Christ. When God exchanges one grace for another grace, He is not throwing away one because it is no longer useful; rather, he is providing us with a more powerful kind of grace that helps us carry out the requirements of the Law.

Now, it is good for you to be aware that some people have another way of looking at the relationship between the Law and salvation provided through Jesus Christ. In direct contrast to what I have just explained, some people view the two as having the same function, but not having the same essential nature. People who hold this viewpoint say that the Law was used to save people who lived before Jesus died on the cross. Then they go on to say that, after Jesus died on the cross, grace became the only thing that could save people, ensuring them a place in heaven. So they conclude that the Law and grace both have the same function; namely, to save people. It is just that one was used in the past while the other is being used in the present. Therefore, these people conclude that the Law and grace are entirely different in essential nature but have the same function.

But, what I have suggested is that the two are the same in essential nature. Both are forms of grace. But they are different in function. One form of grace was never intended to save while the other form is intended to save.

Down through the ages, the process of salvation has not changed. People receive revelation about God that tells them who they should be and how they should behave. They then call out to God for help, realizing they do not have the ability in and of themselves to meet the requirements of the Law.

If you hold to this viewpoint I am suggesting, then you must conclude that even the people who were saved before the time of Christ were not saved by the Law. They, like us, were saved through the blood of Jesus Christ. Even the people who had never heard the name of Jesus Christ mentioned—even those people—if they were saved, then it was the blood of Christ and not the Law that saved them. This means that what God did when He entered into human flesh affected people from all times. The grace provided through the death of Jesus on the cross is retroactive. When His blood flowed down from the cross, it not only flowed into the future, it also flowed into the past.

I recognize that there are some differences between the people of God in the Old Testament times and the people of God in the New Testament era. I understand that people living after the death of Christ on the cross have access to more revelation than those who preceded them. I realize that the people of God who live after the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ have a closer relationship to the Word than those who preceded them. After the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was actually able to dwell in the hearts of believers, making it possible for them to know God in a deeper way than anyone who lived before that time could have ever imagined. I know that these kinds of differences exist between the old and the new.

But, salvation has always been a process and the requirement for salvation has always been the same. And that requirement is the grace provided when God entered into the human flesh of Jesus and died for our sins. So when we celebrate Christmas, we should not only be celebrating for ourselves, but we should also be celebrating for people who lived many centuries and millenniums before us.

In a few days we will celebrate Christmas. Most of us will do it in the traditional ways we have done for years. But, during these past few Sundays I have suggested using a few non-traditional ways to celebrate Christmas. Two weeks ago I suggested that we make a wish list of people we would like to receive a new birth. That kind of wishing is in harmony with the purpose of the incarnation. I suggested that we pray for the people on our wish list and try to make contact with them during the holidays. Then last Sunday, I suggested that we practice coming to the cross daily, realizing that the cross is the only means by which we can experience salvation, and we are all in desperate need of experiencing salvation every day of our lives. This Sunday, I would like to suggest yet another way to celebrate Christmas.

It is simply to take some extra time out to meditate on the grace of God. In PSALM 119:97 the Psalmist said, "Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long." The Law is grace. It is God's gracious way of revealing to us how we should live. It is necessary in the whole process of our salvation. This Christmas, let's take some time to meditate on the law. And then, let's take some time to meditate on the grace of God that comes to us through the death of Christ on the cross. This is the grace God gives in exchange for the grace He has already given, and we should be thankful for it. Let's worship God, not only for our own salvation but also for the salvation of every child of God—past, present, and future. Few people have taken the time out to thank God for saving those who lived long ago. Let's do it this Christmas. Let's make this kind of worship a part of our Christmas celebration.

I know what I am asking requires a bit of discipline, because our lives are so filled with busy activities. However, worship and Christmas should go hand-in-hand. At the birth of Jesus, the angels sang, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom His favor rests." True peace comes to people who have been saved. They are the ones on whom God's favor rests. The angels knew that the incarnation would provide the salvation for Adam and Eve and all their descendants. The angels responded by worshipping, and we should do the same.

Somehow, let's get alone and make an effort to give thanks and praise to God this Christmas. Let's get up early on Christmas morning and sing the songs of the angels. "Glory to God in the highest for entering into the human flesh of Jesus and making salvation possible to all those who believe."

#### JOHN 1:15-17

<sup>15</sup> John testifies concerning him. He cries out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because He was before me.'"

<sup>16</sup> From the fullness of his grace we have received one blessing after another.

<sup>17</sup> For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.