

Grace Upon Grace

Ephesians 1: 3-14

John 1: 1-18

Jan 2, 2022

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Ephesians 1: 3-14

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

John 1: 1-18

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

Such a sweet, beautiful baby, such a blessing. This child will grow to do many great things, this child will accomplish so much in God's name and to God's glory. This infant is a

unique child of God, loved and beloved into being. God's eyes were surely upon this baby formed and growing in the womb, tenderly watched over even before coming into the world. There is a purpose and a time for this particular child, and the world will be forever changed because of this birth, this life. The worth of this child is priceless.

This baby, this beloved child of God, is not who you would think it is in the midst of the 12 days of Christmas. This baby, this beloved child of God, according to the Gospel of John, is you—is me—is every child going back thousands of years, on to the newborn taking its first breath in this very moment, and to generations yet to be.

A line from the lyrics from the 1971 Carpenters duet 'They Long to Be Close to You,' are secular yet they speak to John's message:

On the day that you were born the angels got together

And decided to create a dream come true.

Over the past few weeks the Gospels of Matthew and Luke have told us of angelic announcements, a taxing journey to Bethlehem for a blessed young woman and her fiancée, the innkeeper's stable, the heavenly choir of angels, the terrified shepherds who were the first visitors and the brilliant star to lead the Magi to celebrate that the time had finally come for the long-promised Messiah, Redeemer, Savior, to be born. Yet John's Gospel is incredibly different, as his Christmas story holds none of these familiar and loved details, as his birth of Jesus story is summed up in just two verses, two sentences:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

In these few profound lyrical words God becomes human, God shares our lot and our life, fills humanity with hope, light, and eternal life, fills humanity with grace upon grace. In spiritual poetry John tells us that Jesus has always been, that he is God from that elusive, mysterious beginning, that he clothed himself in all that it is to be human—physically, biologically, psychologically and emotionally—to tell us, to show us, who God is. God is revealed through Jesus in ways that cannot be found any other way—even through the beauty and majesty of creation, not by any great human deed or accomplishment. In Jesus's life we see and hear that God welcomes all, cares, heals, teaches, forgives, comforts, encourages, prays for those who hurt others, prays for those who are hurting, feeds and nurtures, tends to the most vulnerable and forgotten, understands rejection, denial, pain, suffering, humiliation and death. Through Emmanuel, we know that God knows that we—individually and as a world—need a Savior, a Redeemer. The Word became flesh and lived among us because we need victory over defeat, despair and death, and this was God's plan all along. These are the riches of grace lavished upon us

Jesus, then is as theologian Hughes Oliphant Old said, "God's sermon preached to us in the living out of a human life."

John's message and focus is on *why* Jesus came among us as God Incarnate, as Emmanuel, God-with-us, not *how* he came into the world. What matters to John is the difference that the birth of Jesus makes for all of us.

Hear again these words from John:

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

As pastor and author David Loseⁱⁱ says, “To fully appreciate the significance of what John is saying, I think we need to distinguish briefly between those things that describe us and those that define us. All too often, I believe, we allow certain elements of our life to dominate and define us. Things like our upbringing or interests, our good experiences and our bad ones, our current marital state or our sexuality, our past triumphs or tragedies. Don’t get me wrong, these things matter and are what I would call descriptively true. But all too often we allow them not just to describe parts of our life but to define us completely. In these verses, John invites us to hold all of the ordinary things that describe us as important but insufficient, as valuable but partial, as meaningful but not definitive. What is definitive — and therefore more important than all the good or bad things we carry with us — is that God has called us God’s own children, individuals who hold infinite worth in God’s eyes, deserve love and respect, and will be used by God to care for God’s beloved world. Can we imagine that? That Jesus came and was born, lived, died, and was raised again not simply to pay some obscure “penalty for sin” but rather to remind us, and even convince us that God loves us more than anything? More than that, can we practice it?

Paul’s message to the Ephesians—and to us—says the same thing yet in different words as he emphasizes our adoption and inheritance as grace upon grace upon grace. God chose us by the Word from the beginning of the world, Jews and Gentiles, all humanity, and marked us with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit. God’s grand plan is profoundly one of grace, blessings and redemption, and our recognition of this is to praise God.

My first lesson in seminary came on the first day of orientation and emphasized this very message of grace upon grace. An alum told our group of nervous, eager, seminarians of a potential student interview question that he had been asked years before but never forgot. The Admissions Counselor sent him to look out the window and out across what he could see of the city of Newton. He looked outside, turned and responded with what he thought would be the perfect answer for a wanna-be minister, “I see sinners in need of God’s grace.” The Counselor responded with, “I see beloved children of God in need of God’s grace.

God’s beloved, you, we, have been blessed with grace upon grace. Some of us embrace this blessing, some doubt, some deny, some even horribly trample it, yet God’s plan does not change. We are each God’s own children who hold infinite worth in God’s eyes, deserve love and respect, and will be used by God to care for God’s beloved world. Amen.

ⁱ They Long to Be Close to You, Hal David & Burt Bacharach, 1971 publisher: ©Warner/Chappell Music, Inc., Universal Music Publishing Group writers: Glen Ballard, Shelby Lynne

ⁱⁱ David Lose- <https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/an-unsentimental-christmas-sermon>