

EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS
ON THE GOSPELS.

FOR FAMILY AND PRIVATE USE.

WITH THE TEXT COMPLETE,

And many Explanatory Notes.

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JOHN I:15-18

15 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.

16 And of his fulness have all we received, and grace for grace.

17 For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ.

18 No man hath seen God at any time, the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him.

THE passage before us contains three great declarations about our Lord Jesus Christ. Each of the three is among the foundation-principles of Christianity.

We are taught, firstly, that *it is Christ alone who supplies all the spiritual needs of all believers*. It is written that “of his fulness have we all received, and grace for grace.”

There is an infinite fulness in Jesus Christ. As Paul says, “It pleased the Father that in him should all fulness dwell.” “In Him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” (Coloss. i. 19; ii. 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 vigour 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.

We are taught, secondly, *the vast superiority of Christ to Moses, and of the Gospel to the Law*. It is written that “the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ.”

Moses was employed by God “as a servant,” to convey to Israel the moral and ceremonial law. (Heb. iii. 5.) As a servant, he was faithful to Him who appointed him, but he was only a servant. The moral law, which he brought down from Mount Sinai, was holy, and just, and good. But it could not justify. It had no healing power. It could wound, but it could not bind up. It “worked wrath.” (Rom. iv. 15.) It pronounced a curse against any imperfect obedience. The ceremonial law, which he was commanded to impose on Israel, was full of deep meaning and typical instruction. Its ordinances and ceremonies made it an excellent schoolmaster to guide men toward Christ. (Gal. iii. 24.) But the ceremonial law was only a schoolmaster. It could not make him that kept it perfect, as pertaining to the conscience. (Heb. ix. 9.) It laid a grievous yoke on men’s hearts, which they were not able to bear. It was a ministration of death

and condemnation. (2 Cor. iii. 7-9.) The light which men got from Moses and the law was at best only starlight compared to noon-day.

Christ, on the other hand, came into the world “as a Son,” with the keys of God’s treasury of grace and truth entirely in His hands, (Heb. iii. 6.) Grace came by Him, when He made fully known God’s gracious plan of salvation, by faith in His own blood, and opened the fountain of mercy to all the world. Truth came by Him, when He fulfilled in His own Person the types of the Old Testament, and revealed Himself as the true Sacrifice, the true mercy-seat, and the true Priest. No doubt there was much of “grace and truth” under the law of Moses. But the whole of God’s grace, and the whole truth about redemption, were never known until Jesus came into the world, and died for sinners.

We are taught, thirdly, that *it is Christ alone who has revealed God the Father to man*. It is written that “no man has seen God at any time—the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has declared him.”

The eye of mortal man has never beheld God the Father. No man could bear the sight. Even to Moses it was said, “Thou canst not see my face—for there shall no man see me, and live.” (Exod. xxxiii. 20.) Yet all that mortal man is capable of knowing about God the Father is fully revealed to us by God the Son. He, who was in the bosom of the Father from all eternity, has been pleased to take our nature upon Him, and to exhibit to us in the form of man, all that our minds can comprehend of the Father’s perfections. In Christ’s words, and deeds, and life, and death, we learn as much concerning God the Father as our feeble minds can at present bear. His perfect wisdom—His almighty power—His unspeakable love to sinners—His incomparable holiness—His hatred of sin, could never be represented to our eyes more clearly than we see them in Christ’s life and death. In truth, “God was manifest in the flesh,” when the Word took on Him a body. “He was the brightness of the Father’s glory, and the express image of His person.” He says Himself, “I and my Father are one.” “He that hath seen me hath seen the Father.” “In Him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily.” (Coloss. ii. 9.) These are deep and mysterious things. But they are true. (1 Tim. iii. 16; Heb. i. 3; John x. 30; xiv. 9.)

And now, after reading this passage, can we ever give too much honour to Christ? Can we ever think too highly of Him? Let us banish the unworthy thought from our minds forever. Let us learn to exalt Him more in our hearts, and to rest more confidently the whole weight of our souls in His hands. Men may easily fall into error about the three Persons in the holy Trinity if they do not carefully adhere to the teaching of Scripture. But no man ever errs on the side of giving too much honour to God the Son. Christ is the meeting-point between the Trinity and the sinner’s soul. “He that honoureth not the Son, honoureth not the Father which sent Him.” (John v. 23.)

NOTES. JOHN I. 15—18.

15.—[*John bare witness...cried.*] The time at which John the Baptist bore this testimony is not specified. We have not yet come to the historic part of John's Gospel, properly speaking. We are still in the introductory preface. It seems therefore probable, as Lightfoot says, that the sentence before us describes the habitual character of John's testimony to Christ. He was, throughout his ministry, continually proclaiming Christ's greatness and superiority to himself, both in nature and dignity.

[*Cried.*] The Greek word so rendered, implies a very loud cry, like that of one making a proclamation. Parkhurst defines it in this place as "speaking out very openly."

[*He that cometh after me.. preferred before...was before me.*] This sentence has caused much discussion and some difference of opinion. The Greek words literally translated would be, "He that cometh after me has become, or been made, in front of me,—for he was first of me." I feel no doubt that our English version gives the correct meaning of the sentence.—Hammond's note on the text is very good.

The first "before," signifies before in place, position, or dignity. The Greek adverb so rendered, is used forty-nine times in the New Testament, but never once in the sense of "before in point of time or age."

The second "before," signifies before in point of time or existence. "He was existing before me, at the time when I was not." The expression is certainly remarkable and uncommon, but there is another exactly like it in this Gospel, "It hated me before it hated you," where the literal rendering would be, "it hated me first of you."

The sentence "He was before me," is a distinct statement of Christ's pre-existence. He was born at least six months after John the Baptist, and was therefore younger in age than John. Yet John says, "He was before me. He was existing when I was born." If he had meant only that our Lord was a more honourable person than himself, he would surely have said, "He is before me."

The greatness of John the Baptist's spiritual knowledge appears in this expression. He understood the doctrine of Christ's pre-existence. Christians are apt to think too slightly of John the Baptist's attainments, and the depths of his teaching.

16.—[*Of His fulness have all we received.*] This sentence means, "all we who believe on Jesus, have received an abundant supply of all that our souls need, out of the full store that resides in Him for His people. It is from Christ and Christ alone, that all our spiritual wants have been supplied."

Waterland, in his book on the Trinity, calls particular attention to this expression. He thinks that it was specially used with a view to the strange doctrines of the Gnostics in general, and the Corinthians [=Cerinthians] in particular, whose heresies arose before St. John's Gospel was written. They seem to have held that there was a certain fulness or plenitude of the Deity, into which only certain spiritual men, including themselves, were to be received, and from which others who were less spiritual, though they had grace, were to be excluded.

"St. John," says Waterland, "here asserts, that all Christians, equally and indifferently, all believers at large, have received of the plenitude or fulness of the divine Word, and that not sparingly, but in the largest measure, even grace upon grace."

Melancthon on this verse, calls particular attention to the word "all." He observes that it embraces the whole Church of God, from Adam downwards. All who have been saved have received out of Christ's fulness, and all other sources of fulness are distinctly excluded.

[*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 specially His favour towards His Son.” This is the view of Zwingle, Melancthon, Chemnitius, Flacius, Rollock, Grotius, Camerarius, Tornovius, Toletus, Barradius, Cartwright, and Cornelius a Lapide.

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

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

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

(6) Some think that 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, Bengel, A. Clarke, Tittman, Olshausen, Barnes, and Alford.

Brentius, Bullinger, Aretius, Jansenius, Hutcheson, Gill, Scott, and Henry, give several views, but signify their adhesion to no one in particular.

On the whole, I am inclined to think that the sixth and last is the correct view. I admit fully that the Greek preposition, here rendered “for,” is only found in three senses in the Greek Testament: viz , “In the room or place of” (Matt. ii. 22), “In return for” (Rom. xii. 17), and “On account of” (Acts xii. 23; Ephes. v. 31.) In composition it also signifies “opposition;” but with that we have nothing to do here. In the present case I think the meaning is “grace in the place of grace; constant, fresh abundant supplies of new grace, to take the place of old grace; and therefore unfailing, abundant grace, continually filling up and supplying all our need.”

17.—[*For the law was given, etc.*] This verse seems intended to show the inferiority of the Law to the Gospel. It does so by putting in strong contrast the leading characteristics of the Old and New dispensations,—the religion which began with Moses, and the religion which began with Christ.

By Moses was given the law,—the moral law, full of high and holy demands, and of stern threatenings against disobedience;—the ceremonial law, full of burdensome sacrifices, ordinances, and ceremonies, which never healed the worshipper’s conscience, and at best were only shadows of good things to come.

By Christ, on the other hand, came grace and truth,—grace by the full manifestation of God’s plan of salvation, and the offer of complete pardon to every soul that believes on Jesus,—and truth, by the unveiled exhibition of Christ Himself, as the true sacrifice, the true Priest, and the true atonement for sin.

Augustine, on this verse, says, “The law threatened, not helped; commanded, not healed; showed, not took away, our feebleness. But it made ready for the Physician, who was to come with grace and truth.”

18.—[*No man hath seen God, etc.*] This verse seems intended to show the infinite personal superiority of Christ to Moses, or to any other saint that ever lived.

No man hath ever seen God the Father; neither Abraham nor Moses, nor Joshua, nor David, nor Isaiah, nor Daniel. All these, however holy and good men, were still only men, and quite incapable of beholding God face to face, from very weakness. What they knew of God the Father, they knew only by report, or by special revelation, vouchsafed to them from time to time. They were but servants, and “The servant knoweth not what his lord

doeth.” (John xv. 15.)

Christ, on the other hand, 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 noon-day.

We must carefully remember that none of the appearances of God to man, described in the Old Testament, were the appearances of God the Father. He whom Abraham, and Jacob, and Moses, and Joshua, and Isaiah, and Daniel saw, was not the First Person in the Trinity, but the Second.

The speculations of some commentators on the sentence now before us, as to whether any created being, angel or spirit, has ever seen God the Father, are, to say the least, unprofitable. The sentence before us speaks of man, being written for man’s use.

The expression, “Which is in the bosom of the Father,” is doubtless a figurative one, mercifully accommodated to man’s capacity. As one who lies in the bosom of another is fairly supposed to be most intimate with him, to know all his secrets, and possess all his affections, so is it, we are to understand, in the union of the Father and the Son. It is more close than man’s mind can conceive.

The Greek word rendered “declared,” means literally, “hath expounded.” It is the root of the words, which are well known among literary students of the Bible, “exegesis and exegetical.” The idea is that of giving a full and particular explanation. (Acts xv. 14.) Whether the “declaring of God the Father,” here described, is to be confined to Christ’s oral teaching about the Father, or whether it means also that Christ has in His Person given a visible representation of many of the Father’s attributes, is a doubtful point. Perhaps both ideas are included in the expression.

In leaving this passage, I must say something about the disputed question,—To whom do the three verses beginning, “and of his fulness,” belong? Are they the words of John the Baptist, and a part of his testimony? Or are they the words of John the Gospel writer, and an explanatory comment of his, such as we occasionally find in his Gospel?—There is something to be said on both sides.

(a) Some think that these three verses were spoken by John the Baptist, because of the awkwardness and abruptness with which his testimony ends upon the other theory,—because they run on harmoniously with the fifteenth verse,—and because there is nothing in them which we might not reasonably expect John the Baptist to say.

This is the opinion of Origen, Athanasius, Basil, Cyprian, Augustine, Theophylact, Rupertus, Melancthon, Calvin, Zwingle, Erasmus, Chemnitius, Gualter, Musculus, Bucer, Flacius, Bullinger, Pellican, Toletus, Gomarus, Nifanius, Rollock, Poole, Burkitt, Hutcheson, Bengel, and Cartwright.

(b) Others think, that the three verses are the comment of John the Gospel writer, arising out of John’s testimony about Christ’s pre-existence, and out of the expression, “grace and truth,” in the fourteenth verse —They regard the verses as an exposition of the expression, “full of grace and truth.”—They question whether the language is such as would have been used by John the Baptist,—whether he would have said “all we,” after just saying “me,”—whether he would have used the word “fulness,”—whether he would, at so early a period, have contrasted the religion of Moses and of Christ,—and whether he would have so

openly declared Christ to be the only-begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father.—Finally, they think that if these were John the Baptist's words, the Gospel would not have begun again in the nineteenth verse, "This is the record of John."

This is the opinion of Cyril, Chrysostom, Euthymms, Beda, Lyranus, Brentius, Beza, Ferus, Grotius, Aretius, Barradius, Maldonatus, Cornelius Lapide, Jansenius, Lightfoot. Arrowsmith, Gill, Doddridge, Lampe, Pearce, Henry, Tittman, A. Clarke, Barnes, Olshausen, Alford, and Wordsworth.—Baxter and Scott decline any decided opinion on the point, and Whitby says nothing about it.

The arguments on either side are so nicely balanced, and the names on either side are so weighty, that I venture an opinion with much diffidence. But on the whole, I am inclined to think that the three verses are not the words of John the Baptist, but of John the Evangelist.—The remarkable style of the first eighteen verses of this chapter makes the abruptness and brevity of the testimony which John the Baptist bears, upon this theory, appear to me not strange.—And the connection between the three verses, and the words "full of grace and truth" in the fourteenth verse, appears to me much more marked and distinct, than the connection between John's testimony, and the words "of His fulness all we have received."

Happily the point is one which involves no serious question, and is therefore one on which Christians may be content to differ, if they cannot convince one another.