

J. C. RYLE'S NOTES ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN
1:15-18

15. John bare witness of him, and cried, saying, This was he of whom I spake, He that comes 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 has seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he has declared *him*.

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 comes 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 far too slightingly 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 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, DeDieu, 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 à 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 proportioned 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 unfailling, 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, Zwingli, 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 the nineteenth verse, "This is the record of John."

This is the opinion of Cyril, Chrysostom, Euthymius, Beda, Lyranus, Brentius, Beza, Ferus, Grotius, Aretius, Barradius, Maldonatus, Cornelius à Lapede, 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.