

# The Excellency of Christ

## John 1:15-18

Our salvation and our spiritual growth is inextricably bound up with our view of Christ. As we see more and more of Christ, His excellence and His fullness, we grow in grace, in faith, and in obedience to God.

In C. S. Lewis's children's series, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, young heroine Lucy meets a majestic lion named Aslan, a symbol of Christ, in the enchanted land of Narnia. Making a return visit a year later, the children discover that everything has changed radically, and they quickly become lost. But after a series of dreadful events, Lucy finally spots Aslan in a forest clearing, rushes to him, throws her arms around his neck, and buries her face in his mane.

The great beast rolled over on his side so that Lucy fell, half sitting and half lying between his front paws. He bent forward and touched her nose with his tongue. His warm breath came all around her. She gazed up into the large wise face.

"Welcome child," he said.

"Aslan," said Lucy, "you're bigger."

"That's because you're older, little one," answered he.

"Not because you are?"

"I'm not. But each year you grow, you'll find me bigger."

I hope that many of you have found that to be true.

My desire is that as we continue our journey through the Gospel of John, that Christ will grow bigger and sweeter every day. I pray that we will grow in grace and grow in faith because we have come to see that Christ is greater than we ever imagined. And I would hope and pray that this greater understanding of Christ's fullness will lead us to an even more spiritually dynamic life than we are already experiencing.

In verse 14, John wrote, "**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.**" In verses 15-18 that we are looking at today, John continues to unfold the glory of Jesus Christ, the eternal Word. Since the purpose of the whole Gospel is that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and have life in His name (John 20:30-31), it fits well with that purpose that John would spend the last few verses of his introduction exalting Jesus Christ, showing His excellency. John said, "**we beheld His glory.**" And as we journey through this Gospel I think John expects that in some sense we will see His glory also so that we will be transformed into His likeness. Someday when we see Jesus in the fullness of His glory that sight will complete our transformation. John writes in his first epistle (1 John 3:2-3): "**Beloved, now we are children of God;**

**and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure."**

The more we know Christ, the bigger He grows. And the more we behold Him, the more we grow to be like Him. Christ is excellent so we must exalt Him.

Please follow along in your Bibles as I read John 1:15-18,

**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.' "**

**16 And 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.**

**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.**

This passage is all about Christ and His excellency. The way we see the excellency of Christ is,

### **1. Christ is greater (1:15).**

John 1:15, **"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.'"** Here the apostle brings back John the Baptist to bear witness of the greatness of the Word, Jesus Christ. Remember that in verses 6-8 he already introduced John as a witness to the light, who is Jesus. He is also setting the stage for the extended section on John the Baptist's witness that immediately follows the prologue (John 1:19-36). In fact if you look down to verse 30 you will find it is identical to John's testimony here in verse 15.

The apostle wants to be clear that the Word he has been writing about—the Word who was in the beginning, who was with God and who was God, the Word who became flesh and dwelt among us, that Word is the same Jesus Christ of whom John the Baptist bears witness. A more literal translation of verse 15 would read, **"John bears witness of him, and has cried, saying..."** He uses the present tense of the verb "to bear witness" because John's witness is still valid and still speaking even though the apostle is writing decades after John the Baptist died. The same kind of thing in the book of Hebrews is said about Abel, the son of Adam and Eve (Heb. 11:4), **"By faith Abel offered to God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts; and through it he being dead still speaks."**

John's testimony still speaks to us today even though he has been dead and gone for centuries. Let me ask you, will your witness for Christ outlive you? Are

you bearing witness of the excellency of Jesus Christ in what you do and say so that it will influence even generations to come?

What is John the Baptist's testimony of Christ that still speaks today? **"This was He of whom I said, 'He who comes after me is preferred before me, for He was before me.'"** From the Gospel of Luke we know that John was six months older than Jesus (Luke 1:24-31). And John began his public ministry before Jesus' ministry. He preached before Jesus. He baptized before Jesus. He drew great crowds of followers before Jesus. So that is what John means by **"He who comes after me."**

But John's testimony ran counter to the cultural view of the Jews that the older man had greater honor than the younger one. John is saying that Jesus is the greater one. He says, **"He who comes after me is preferred before me."** He is greater than me; He is superior to me; He ranks higher than me. John's testimony in the synoptic gospels agrees with his testimony here. Mark 1:7-8 says, **"And he preached, saying, 'There comes One after me who is mightier than I, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to stoop down and loose. I indeed baptized you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'"** Jesus is mightier, greater, superior to John. He is superior in that He ranks before John. His status is greater than John.

John had a great status. In fact Jesus said about him, (Matthew 11:11) **"Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist..."** But John's testimony is that Jesus is even greater than the greatest of the prophets.

Why is Jesus greater than John? The end of verse 15 says, **"for He was before me."** We don't know if John the Baptist was clear from the outset that Jesus eternally existed as the Word. After all, it took the disciples until after the resurrection for the fog to lift so that they understood the truth that Jesus is God. But John's statement is true nonetheless. Even though Jesus came after John, he testifies that Jesus came in time and place before him.

Jesus is the eternal Word. He had a higher rank than John because He existed before John. Throughout the Gospel Jesus will claim be eternal. Just for one example in John 8:58, **"Jesus said to them, 'Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM.'"** If Jesus was before Abraham, He was certainly before John. So John testifies to the eternal existence of Jesus Christ. Therefore Jesus is greater than John and all the prophets because He existed in the beginning. That is John's testimony.

So we see the excellency of Christ in that He is greater than all the prophets. Secondly we see that He is excellent because:

## 2. Christ is full of grace (1:16).

John 1:16, **“And of His fullness we have all received, and grace for grace.”** Verse 16 seems to be explaining what John wrote in verse 14, which said that Jesus is **“full of grace.”**

Paul wrote in Colossians 2:9-10, **“For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power.”** There is an infinite fullness, the very fullness of God, in the Word made flesh, in Jesus Christ. And our fullness, our completeness is found in Him alone. When we receive Christ by believing in Him (John 1:12), we become children of God and thus heirs to all the riches of heaven (Eph. 1:3; Rom. 8:16, 17; Eph. 2:7; 1 Pet. 1:4). All of those who received Jesus, receive His grace upon grace. Remember that salvation is not something we achieve but something we receive. By grace we receive it and by grace we live it out.

What does John mean by the phrase, **“and grace for grace”**? John uses a Greek preposition, *anti*, that means instead of, or in place of. Taken with verse 17, it may mean that the grace of the law was replaced by the grace of Jesus Christ. Verse 17 says, **“For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.”**

But most of our Bibles translate the phrase as “grace for grace” or “grace upon grace” because literally it means grace in the place of grace, like one grace replacing another in rapid succession. I think that John wants us to see that in Christ we get all the grace that we need. It’s an inexhaustible supply.

One of the strange things about John’s Gospel is that although he stresses the word “grace” here in the prologue using it five times, John never uses the word grace again in his narrative. I think John stresses it here because he wants us to read the whole story of Jesus remembering it is all God’s grace. A good definition of grace is “underserved favor from God.” Do we see grace in the rest of the Gospel? Certainly! Jesus is the embodiment of grace.

He shows grace to His mother and the guests at the wedding when He turns water in wine in chapter 2. He speaks grace to Nicodemus in chapter 3 urging him to believe and be born again. He gives grace to the immoral woman at the well in chapter 4 offering her living water. He shows grace to a father healing his dying son. It was His grace that caused Him to heal the lame man in chapter 5, to feed the 5000 in chapter 6, to open the eyes of the blind man in chapter 9, and to raise Lazarus from the dead in chapter 11. It was grace that drove Him to the cross where He died for your sins on the cross. It was grace that tenderly called Mary’s name when she could not believe Christ was raised from the dead. It was grace that reached out His hands to Thomas when he was doubting. It was grace that restored Peter, saying “feed my sheep.” Grace upon grace! That is the message of the Gospel of John.

And it’s the message of grace that we still proclaim. Jesus reaches out to us undeserving sinners and offers us the free gift of eternal life. We are saved by

grace. We are kept by grace. We serve by grace. It is always grace for grace. The key to living the Christian life is the presence of the all-sufficient grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

So we see the excellency of Christ in His greatness and in His grace. Now thirdly we see the Excellency of Christ

### **3. Christ full of truth (1:17).**

John 1:17: **“For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.”** Here John compares Jesus with Moses and the law and specifically what was given through Moses and what came through Jesus. John is saying, “If you thought that God’s gift of the law through Moses was a great thing (and it was), He has given us a greater gift now through Jesus Christ.”

Throughout his Gospel John is going show out how Moses is subordinate to and pointing forward to the Christ (see 5:39, 46; 6:32; 8:32ff.; 9:28ff.). Don’t expect from Moses what only Christ can give. Grace and truth came through Christ. Salvation cannot come through the law, only through Christ. J. C. Ryle explains the contrast:

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.”

As I pointed out in our last study, God’s grace and truth reach their apex at the cross. His truth demanded that the penalty for sin be fully paid. His grace provided Jesus, the eternal Son of God, as that payment for sin for all who believe in Him.

Let me ask you, have you received that grace and truth that is in Jesus Christ?

Thus John says that Jesus is greater than all the prophets, including John the Baptist; that He provides abundant grace for all who believe; and that He is the truth, the one who is superior to Moses as the fullness of God come to earth to die for your sins and be raised from the dead. Finally Christ is excellent because

#### 4. Christ is God's ultimate revelation to us (1:18).

John 1:18: **"No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared *Him*."**

Why does John bring up the fact that no one has seen God? Well, he has just compared Jesus with Moses. And if you were here last time you know that in Exodus 33 & 34, when Moses there asked God to show him His glory, God responded that no man could see Him and live (Exod. 33:20). Moses could only see the backside of the glory of God. No one has seen the essence of God in His unmitigated glory. Those like Moses who got a vision of God either saw Christ in His pre-incarnate glory (John 12:41) or they had an obscured vision of the glory of God.

We cannot know the invisible God unless He reveals Himself to us. God revealed something of Himself and His glory in the Old Testament, but not His fullness. Now in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, God has revealed Himself. The only Son of God, Jesus Christ, the one who was **"with God"** (1:1), and **"who is in the bosom of the Father"** (1:18), **"He has declared *Him*"** to us. Jesus is able to reveal the Father to us because He has an intimate relationship with the Father as His only Son.

The word **"declared"** is the Greek word from which we get our word "exegete." In expositional preaching like I try to do, one of the necessary tasks is to exegete the scripture. Exegesis is the discipline of drawing meaning out of the text. Usually that means I study the original Greek or Hebrew words, the context, the grammar and the history of the text to expose what the scripture means.

So what this verse says is that Jesus "exegeted" God. That Jesus is the only one who could explain God, who could reveal who God is and what He is like. Just as a word explains an unseen thought, so Jesus, the Word, explains the unseen God to us. The only way that you can know the Father is through Jesus His Son (Luke 10:22; John 14:6). In his first epistle John writes (1 John 2:23), **"Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father either; he who acknowledges the Son has the Father also."** In John 5:23 Jesus states, **"He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him."** Again in John 12:45 Jesus says, **"And he who sees Me sees Him who sent Me."**

All though the Gospel we see that Jesus exegeted God, He revealed the Father to us. So we see the excellency of Jesus because He alone reveals God the Father.

#### Conclusion

So this concludes the prologue of John's gospel. What was His main point? Jesus is God. Therefore believe in Him.

John didn't write these things to satisfy our curiosity or to stimulate intellectual discussions. Rather, he wants us to know that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, so that we will believe in Him and have eternal life in Him (20:31). Why

should you believe in Jesus? John says that you should believe in Jesus because He is greater than all the prophets; He provides abundant grace for all that trust in Him; He is the truth greater than Moses and the law; and, He is God's ultimate revelation of Himself to us.

The more we know Christ, the bigger He grows. Bill Gaither said it this way in his old gospel song:

Since I started for the kingdom,  
Since my life He controls;  
Since I gave my heart to Jesus,  
The longer I serve Him, the sweeter He grows.

The longer I serve Him the sweeter He grows;  
The more that I love Him more love He bestows.  
Each day is like Heaven, my heart overflows.  
The longer I serve Him the sweeter He grows.

Every need He is supplying,  
Plenteous grace He bestows.  
Every day my way gets brighter,  
The longer I serve Him the sweeter He grows.

The longer I serve Him the sweeter He grows;  
The more that I love Him more love He bestows.  
Each day is like Heaven, my heart overflows.  
The longer I serve Him the sweeter He grows.

Have you found that to be true? Then let's get to know Him more. Let's believe Him more. Let's love Him more. Let's worship Him more. Let's serve Him more. Let's testify of Him more. The longer I serve Him the sweeter He grows.