

GRACE UPON GRACE

John 1:1-5, 14, 16 ESV

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 were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it...

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth... For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.

UBS Handbook for Bible Translators - John 1:16

The first clause, “For from his fullness we have all received,” could be translated in some languages to read: “because he was so gracious, he has blessed us all” or “because of his great love for us, he has been so good to us all.”

The second clause “grace upon grace” is somewhat ambiguous in the Greek. The most popular understanding among scholars has been the truth that “the Christian life consists of one expression of God’s grace after another.” It could be translated in some languages to read: “God has blessed us time after time” or “God has caused goodness to happen to us time after time.”

The UBS Handbook suggests the translation of John 1:16 as: *Out of the fullness of his grace he has blessed us all, giving us one blessing after another.*

Another possible understanding of the phrase “grace upon grace” is the truth that the grace of God’s covenant through Jesus surpasses the grace of God’s covenant through Moses.

The Bible doesn't teach the absence of grace in the Mosaic Covenant—far from it. The Old Testament is replete with historical accounts of God's merciful and gracious dealings with sinful people. Perhaps the most poignant of these is the fact that God chose and redeemed Israel *before* he gave them the Law. The blood of a lamb smeared upon their door posts and thresholds saved them *before* God gave them any commandments. Even the Law itself provided for their daily, ongoing relationship with God by means of the sacrificial system. God appointed it as the basis for the forgiveness of their sins, pointing to the eventual, ultimate, permanent sacrifice of Jesus for the sins of the world.

But the New Testament authors all emphasize the fullness of God's grace being expressed through Jesus in a way that far surpasses what God had extended through Moses. It was only fitting that God's best and greatest and ultimate expression of his grace should come through his Son and not through a prophet, as great as Moses was.

John wrote (John 1:14, 16-18 ESV):

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth... For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.

Jesus has revealed the Father as no one else ever has. He surpasses all the prophets of Israel and all the religious teachers of the world. His revelation of the Father was one that was full of grace. Peter said that "God anointed Jesus...with the Holy Spirit and with power" and that "he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him" (Ac 10:38).

Jesus himself said, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father," and "whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise" (Jn 14:9; 5:19).

So then, the phrase “grace upon grace” can be understood to mean that “the Christian life consists of one expression of God’s grace after another,” or that the Christian lives under the grace of God’s covenant through Jesus, which surpasses that which came through Moses.

Both understandings are permitted by the Greek text, and both are possible because both are true according to the rest of Scripture. Because of this I want to suggest two pastoral implications that will benefit your life and the lives of those around you.

First, live your life in the light of the fullness of God’s grace revealed to us and given to us through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Learn about what Jesus did for us on the cross: what it means to be justified, to be declared righteous, to be forgiven, to be cleansed, to be adopted into God’s family. Think about these things. Renew your mind. Live according to them. Treat other people in light of the fullness of God’s grace given to you.

Don’t live under a works-based understanding of being loved and accepted by God. You will only either be miserable or arrogant, and you will treat other people poorly. You won’t be attractive for the Gospel of God’s grace in Jesus Christ.

Second, realize that you are blessed by God every day. Every day you live in the light of God’s forgiveness and mercy. Every day you are the object of his affection, his heart’s desire. Every day God’s blessings, great and small, touch your life. Take time to appreciate all that God has given you, and remember that the best of all of his promises are yet to be fulfilled in the Age to come when Jesus returns.

Expect God’s blessings to come into your life. Look for them. Receive them gladly and with thanksgiving. And just as importantly, look for ways to be a channel of God’s blessings to others. God always blesses us to be a blessing to others.