
JOHN 1:14 : GOD'S SUPREME REVELATION [7]

... full of grace and truth. [1]

No. EE112

God sent his beloved Son as His supreme and final revelation to us, one in whom we see the essence of who and what God really is.

What do we see when we look at the Son? We see that He is "full of grace and truth", and therefore we may also say with certainty that this is true of the Father as well. In fact, we may accept that these are the essential attributes of the Father, since John has chosen them rather than any of the other divine characteristics.

It is significant that the word "grace" (Gr. *charis*), which lies at the heart of the New Testament revelation, appears only 4 times in the gospel of John, namely here in verses 14, 16 and 17. We should therefore deduce the exact meaning that John attaches to the word firstly from its use here, and then from elsewhere in Scripture.

On the other hand the word "truth" is one of the outstanding concepts in this gospel. John uses it 25 times, loaded with meaning. Yet we must not try to explain these two words separately from each other. They go hand in hand and together convey *one* very precious message.

OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS

□ As we have already seen (when we considered the fact that John describes the Word as having "tabernacled" among us), our text deals with God's self-revelation to us in the Person of the Word, and more specifically with the display of his glory in

wonderful love, humility and servanthood. It inevitably reminds a person of one of the most outstanding moments in the whole of the Old Testament: Exodus 33 and 34.

After the tragedy of the golden calf, Moses expresses the wish to get to know God better (33:13). More particularly he wants to see the *glory* of the Lord (33:18). Eventually it leads to the Lord descending to Moses and proclaiming about Himself, "The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in *love and faithfulness*, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation" (34:6-7).

Although the Lord also talks about his wrath over sin, it is his indescribable love that stands out in this stirring self-revelation. This is especially true of the fact that He abounds "in love and faithfulness".

These two concepts, translated in the NIV with *love and faithfulness*, are combined in many places in the Old Testament (Hb. *chesed* and *emeth*). If we compare these two Hebrew concepts with the words in our text in John 1 - "grace" and "truth" - we see that the two expressions to all intents and purposes have the same meaning. Many commentators in fact accept that in Jn 1 the apostle is alluding to Ex 34:6.

What do these two Old Testament words mean? We only have time here to discuss the first (*chesed*). Next time we can look at the second (*emeth*).

GOD'S CHESED IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

□ This is one of the most brilliant concepts in the Old Testament, where it appears 240 times. It is used as an attribute of human godliness, but is particularly one of God's own and outstanding characteristics. In every verse of Psalm 136, which has as its main theme that there is no end to God's love, it is stated that His *chesed* endures forever.

The word is translated in various ways in the different English translations: as "mercy", "steadfast

love", "lovingkindness", and "love". But this is a very specific type of love. It is not just an impersonal love (love at a distance, as it were), it is a love associated with a relationship, with a covenant. With God it is his covenant love for his chosen people - and specifically for those within the nation who are serious about the covenant.

The term implies personal involvement and dedication extending beyond the demands of duty, convention or law. One dictionary emphasises that it is a love which involves strength and perseverance¹ - strength to heed the demands of love, and perseverance to keep on in the face of whatever obstacles that may be encountered.

A study of the concept shows furthermore that it also conveys the idea of God's *grace*², which is probably why John uses the Greek word for "grace" in the text. And who can deny that the concept of grace does indeed lie at the heart of the New Testament? In fact, if we were to remove grace from the gospel, everything would collapse.

Chesed therefore signifies God's unwavering and determined devotion to the people with whom He stands in a covenantal relationship. J.I. Packer puts it as follows: "it is essentially a matter of faithfulness to the covenant promise whereby He bound Himself to be Israel's God and to use all the resources of deity to bless them."³ The best translation would therefore be "*covenant love*".

THE NEW TESTAMENT : GRACE

We can define God's grace as follows: *God's grace is His free, unmerited and unforced gift of love in granting life everlasting to guilty sinners - who not*

1. Nelson's Expository Dictionary of the Old Testament (Ed's Unger & White), Thomas Nelson, 1980, p.232.

2. D.A. Carson, The Gospel according to John, Eerdmans, 1991, p.129.

3. J.I. Packer, God's Words, IVP, 1981, p.97.

only don't merit it, but in fact deserve the opposite, namely eternal condemnation.

God's grace therefore entails his sovereign, spontaneous goodness and saving mercy towards sinners, which finds expression in the fact that He (on the basis of Christ's atonement) saves them from his wrath. In the process He loves "the unlovely, making covenant with them, pardoning their sins, accepting their persons, revealing Himself to them, moving them to response, leading them ultimately into full knowledge and enjoyment of himself, and overcoming all obstacles to the fulfilment of this purpose ..."⁴

GRACE UPON GRACE

In John 1:15 John interrupts himself as it were. The mind-boggling statements that he makes in v. 14 are not exaggerated. The respected John the Baptist said similar things about the Word Who had become flesh: He was truly God from all eternity!

And should the readers wonder if they are not perhaps dealing here with two eccentrics, John reminds them that all true believers know from their own experience that what he says is true. *Because* (Gr.) "from the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another" (16).

Take note, John is not talking about a trickle. The expression is loaded with meaning. Literally it means "grace in the place of grace". In other words, the blessings from His grace come like never-ending waves rolling out on a beach.

A FEW POINTS OF APPLICATION

1. Nothing is more typical of God's character than to show *chesed* - or in other words, to show grace.

Of all the many wonderful things that are true about God, He has chosen to reveal to us these two

4. J.I. Packer, *God's Words*, IVP, 1981, p.97.

character traits, grace and truth, as first and foremost true of Him. First He revealed this to Moses. And then He reveals it to us in His Son.

The first of these is his *chesed-grace*. In this you and I need to rejoice over and over again. Our walk with our God should be permeated with it. Let us not be satisfied with a watered down, third rate Christianity. Let us lay hold of the Lord in prayer so that his covenant love may roll over us like waves, day after day.

Nothing pleases Him more than his children drinking from the fountains of his grace again and again. There is no better way to glorify Him. There is no better way to adorn the gospel. There is no better way to make the church attractive. Therefore, stay off the treadmill of religious merit at all costs!

More than that, a life under the shower of God's grace is a life of incomparable adventure. It is a life of an ever deepening experience of the presence and blessing of the Lord.

2. Let us in times of tribulation cling like drowning men to God's *chesed-grace*.

Let us not panic and forget about God's covenant faithfulness. Remember the Past Tense used in v. 16: we have already received it! The Lord *will* carry his children through. He has done it innumerable times before and He will do it again.

Even if our hands do happen to slip, He will not abandon us - because his covenant faithfulness is not dependent on anything! He has promised and He will stand by his promise. *My* faithlessness cannot rob Him of this character trait. That is why Paul could assure Timothy with the words, "if we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself" (2Tim 2:13).

3. We must copy the Lord by showing *chesed-grace* ourselves.

Although this is in the first place a character trait of God, it is not limited to Him. We, over whom his faithful favour washes like waves, must also show

undeserved grace to others (cp. 2Sam 9:1,7). Like Him, we must practise that which people consider to be impossible. I must consider irrelevant the question whether the other person deserves it or not. How will I achieve this? The Lord's *chesed-grace* will equip me if I trust Him fully to do so.

4. Last but not least, what encouragement this character trait offers to sinners!

Let them know that the merciful God finds joy in saving people. His Word teaches us emphatically that He finds no pleasure in the death of sinners. It is his will that they should repent and live (Ezek 18:23, 30-32). That is why I can, with the full mandate of the Word, call upon every sinner to cast himself or herself on Christ: "*Admit that you are a sinner who deserves eternal damnation. Take a stand against your sins, confess them and beg God on the strength of the mediatory work of Jesus Christ to forgive you and save you from their hold over you, and their consequences!*"

Nothing gives the Lord more joy and glorifies Him more than to save the worst of sinners! Therefore each and every sinner may come to the Lord and know for certain that He will show mercy, and that His *chesed-grace* will embrace him or her like the father did his lost son!

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