

Jesus Changes Everything: Advent 2009

Grace and Truth

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Digging Deeper (Questions are on the last page)

Jesus Changes Everything: Grace and Truth

Written by: Robert Ismon Brown (bbrown@chicagofirstnaz.org)

Background Notes

Key Scripture Texts: John 1:16-17; Romans 8:3-4; Hebrews 10:1-18; John 14:6-7

Introduction

The Grace and Truth Paradox. That's how Randy Alcorn characterized the essence of Christ-likeness.¹ In summary of this paradox, we read:

Christ-likeness means living by grace and truth, extending both to others. Instead of the world's apathy and tolerance, we offer grace. Instead of the world's relativism and deception, we offer truth. If we minimize grace the world sees no hope for salvation. If we minimize truth, the world sees no need for salvation. To show the world Jesus, we must offer full-orbed, unabridged truth and grace, magnifying both, never downsizing or apologizing for either.

The grace question:

Why did sinners want to be around Jesus, but don't want to be around us?

The truth question:

Why did sinners crucify Jesus, but have no problem with us?

Truth without grace breeds a self-righteousness legalism that poisons the church and pushes the world away from Christ. Grace without truth breeds moral indifference and keeps people from seeing their need for Christ. Truth is quick to post warning signs and guardrails. Yet it fails to empower people to drive safely, to avoid plunging off the cliff, and fails to help them when they crash. Grace is quick to post ambulances and paramedics at the bottom of the cliff. But without truth, it fails to post warning signs and build guardrails, and therefore encourages the very self-destruction it attempts to heal.

Grace without truth deceives people, and ceases to be grace. Truth without grace crushes people, and ceases to be truth. Any attempt to "soften" the gospel by minimizing truth ultimately keeps the world from grace. Any attempt to "toughen" the gospel by minimizing grace keeps the world from the greatest truth—His redemptive work on man's behalf. Christ went to the cross, in the ultimate act of grace, because He would not ignore the truth of His holiness and our sin. Grace never ignores or violates truth—rather it offers restitution and joy by satisfying Truth's demands. ("Go and sin no more.")

Like a binary star consisting of two suns that revolve around each other, truth and grace are equal and inseparable. Luther said the devil doesn't care which side of the horse we fall off of—as long as we don't stay in the saddle. A saddle has two stirrups. To stay in the saddle, the church needs to mount the horse with one foot solidly in the stirrup of truth, and the other solidly in the stirrup of grace.

Grace and truth make us live in such a way that there is no human explanation for our lives—in the absence of human explanation, people turn to God as the reason behind what they see. Our children, our neighbors, and we ourselves long for Jesus—we can offer Him only by offering His grace and truth.

On the first Sunday after Advent — referred to as the First Sunday after Christmas — we focus our attention on the fruits of Advent. Ordinarily, the lectionary readings for this day concern themselves with the childhood and family of Jesus. More directly, we are drawn to think about the family of God raised up in the world, born from

¹ Randy Alcorn, *The Grace and Truth Paradox*, Multnomah Publishers, 2003.

above by the Spirit of God. At the same time we are drawn to these two equally necessary companions of Christ's coming and of our response to it: grace and truth.

This Week's Main Text: John 1:16-17

16 And from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. 17 For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

We discovered in the previous week's text (1:14) that when the Word became flesh he revealed the glory of the Father and the Son, "full of grace and truth." In our study we noted that the real background to this passage was Exodus 34. As we begin our considerations this week, that original Hebrew Bible excerpt should remain in our minds:

Exodus 34:6-7 ⁶ The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, ⁷ keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation."

What attracted our attention to this Old Testament text was its reference to God as "abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" — *hesed* and *'emet* in the Hebrew language. In John 1:14, the Word-become-flesh was "full" of "grace and truth," which corresponds to the word "abounding" in the *Exodus* text. Of special note is God's "forgiving" sin as an expression of his "steadfast love for thousands." Simultaneous with this is God's determination to deal with "iniquity" "to the third and fourth generation." Presumably, the two actions are contrasted, while God remains the author of them both. The forgiving God is also the judging God, and in this lies something of the paradox which Alcorn noted above.

By his Advent, the Word brings the quintessential "glory" of the Father and Son which radiates with the two dominate features: *grace* (steadfast love) and *truth* (faithfulness). Perhaps our clearest picture of both appears in the cross where Jesus accepted the judgment of God for sin (truth/faithfulness) while offering forgiveness to the sinner (grace/steadfast love). While the light of Advent warms our hearts with the story of the Christ-child, born in a manger, adored by shepherds and worshipped by magi, yet something of the future ordeal of the adult Jesus is also present in the story. Perhaps the shepherds remind us of the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Perhaps the magi with their gift of myrrh, the common element for burying the dead, foreshadow the cross, as do the wicked crimes of Herod against the infants of Bethlehem. Grace and Truth: blessing and judgment.

What we must not ignore is the context for the original Exodus 34 passage which gives the whole account its powerful impact. The setting is Mount Sinai where Moses had received the Torah from Yahweh amidst fire, smoke, lightning and the sound of a trumpet. At the base of the Mountain, Israel, impatient with Moses' delay, party into the night, despairing of any future, and yielding to idolatry by making the golden calf. Furious with their disobedience and faithlessness, Yahweh pronounces judgment on the perpetrators and commissioned the tribe of Levi to carry it out post haste. For his part, Moses acts out his own frustration by breaking the original copies of Torah, symbolizing the failure of Israel even before the documents could be formally entrusted to them. But this also leads Moses to seek an even more perfect expression of God. The following exchange between Moses and Yahweh takes place in the wake of the golden calf tragedy:

12 Moses said to the LORD, "See, you say to me, 'Bring up this people,' but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, 'I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.' 13 Now therefore, if I have found favor in your sight, please show me now your ways, that I may know you in order to find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people." 14 And he said, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." 15 And he said to him, "If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here. 16 For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people? Is it not in your going with us, so that we are distinct, I and your people, from every other people on the face of the earth?" 17 And the LORD said to Moses, "This very thing that you have spoken I will do, for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name." 18 Moses said, "Please show me your glory." 19 And he said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name 'The LORD.' And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. 20 But," he said, "you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live." 21 And the LORD said, "Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the

rock, 22 and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by. 23 Then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen." (Exodus 33:12-23)

Seeing the glory of God is the sincere desire of Moses. Knowing Yahweh personally and having the assurance that Yahweh will "go with" His people are the requirements which Moses lays before God. The Lord yields to Moses' request, "Show me your glory," by arranging a close encounter of the God-kind. Though the prophet of God desires earnestly to see the face of God, he cannot, but is offered a glimpse of God's "back." A certain disappointment suffuses this account. Moses wants the presence of God, and he wants to see the face of God, yet God withholds the one while granting the other.

More immediate, in practical terms, is the need for God's Torah to be renewed. Moses receives fresh instructions to "chisel" new tablet copies just like the "first ones" (see chapter 34). He complies with these orders and brings the tablets before Yahweh. Holding the two copies of the Torah in his hands, Moses experiences a new revelation of God — the one which we read in 34:6-7. Based on this encounter, God renews the broken covenant with Israel, setting forth its essential terms. God characterizes the newly written documents in this way:

Exodus 34:27 And the LORD said to Moses, "Write these words, for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel."

We might say that "the words became stone" in the hands of Moses, the human mediator of the covenant. What God spoke took form in human language on the two legal documents which served as duplicate copies of God's binding law with His people.

But what happened that day was about more than words written in stone. The *Exodus* story continues:

Exodus 34:28-35 28 So he was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights. He neither ate bread nor drank water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments. 29 When Moses came down from Mount Sinai, with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand as he came down from the mountain, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. 30 Aaron and all the people of Israel saw Moses, and behold, the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to come near him. 31 But Moses called to them, and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses talked with them. 32 Afterward all the people of Israel came near, and he commanded them all that the LORD had spoken with him in Mount Sinai. 33 And when Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil over his face. 34 Whenever Moses went in before the LORD to speak with him, he would remove the veil, until he came out. And when he came out and told the people of Israel what he was commanded, 35 the people of Israel would see the face of Moses, that the skin of Moses' face was shining. And Moses would put the veil over his face again, until he went in to speak with him.

The only reasonable interpretation of the "shining face" of Moses is the "glory of God" experienced by Moses "because he had been talking with God" (34:29). Ironically, "the words which became stone" as a result of Moses' conversation with God were, at the same time, words which transformed the face of Moses but created fear among the people of Israel. In order to allow contact with his people, Moses "put on a veil" to mask the radiating glory of God's presence. Yet it was the glory of God which they desperately needed — the glory which was denied them. We are led to query, "How will Israel ever be able to see the glory of God?" To this need, John 1:14 offers its reply: when the Word becomes *flesh* and lives among us so that we might see the glory of the Father and the Son, full of grace and truth.

We are not the first (or the last) to reflect on the deeper significance of the *Exodus* story as it relates to the Advent of Jesus. Quite early in the history of the Christian community, Paul meditated on these words and was granted insight from the Holy Spirit in the form of a Christian *midrash*. The content of that *interpretation* appears in the following New Testament passage from Paul's letters:

2 Corinthians 3:7-18 7 Now if the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses' face because of its glory, which was being brought to an end, 8 will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory? 9 For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory. 10 Indeed, in this case, what once had glory has come to have no

glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it. 11 For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory. 12 Since we have such a hope, we are very bold, 13 not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face so that the Israelites might not gaze at the outcome of what was being brought to an end. 14 But their minds were hardened. For to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. 15 Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts. 16 But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. 17 Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. 18 And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

Once we digest Paul's marvelous argument in this passage, we come at last to the essence of it in 3:18. Here the apostle makes the point that Christ followers really do "see the glory of the Lord", but with truly wonderful results. By seeing, we are *transformed* (Greek: *metamorphoō*) "from one degree of glory to another" through the work of the Holy Spirit. It is this glory which 1:14 told us is full of "grace and truth," in much the same way as the Lord showed Himself to Moses on Mount Sinai.

Thus it is that 1:16 begins with "the fullness of his grace," and how it is that we have received it. For Israel of old, grace appeared when Yahweh gave the Torah to Moses *a second time*, and He did so in spite of Israel's sin with the golden calf. Whereas God might have shared in Moses' initial anger when he broke the testimony tablets, He revealed Himself as abounding in "steadfast love" (=grace) by offering mercy in the midst of judgment. Such "second works of grace" would not end with this second gift of Torah. Often Israel would experience the multiplied gracious deeds of their covenant God who wanted to bring His people, at last, to the land of promise.

On the occasion of Exodus 34, several signs of God's grace and truth can be seen:

Yahweh (the covenant name for Israel's God):

Came down in the cloud

Stood there with Moses

Proclaimed His name: "Yahweh"

Passed in front of Moses, proclaiming: "Yahweh, Yahweh"

Revealed His character:

Compassionate

Gracious

Slow to anger

Abounding in love and faithfulness

Maintaining love to thousands

Forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin

Does not leave the guilty unpunished

Punishes the children to the third and fourth generation

God's nature reveals both His grace and His truth.

From John 1:16 we learn that *all* receive His grace because the Word became flesh. The use of the word "all" alongside the pronoun "we" reinforces the universal and equitable offer of this grace, in keeping with 1:12 where we heard "as many as received him" might become children of God. The Greek has *humeis pantes* ("we all") as the subject of the verb "received," *elabomen*, appearing here in the aorist tense to underscore the definite and final nature of what we have received. This parallels, once more, 1:12: "as many as received him," where the verb has exactly the same form as here. To receive the incarnate Word, Jesus, is exactly the same as to receive God's grace, for he is "full of grace."

The writer uses an interesting grammatical form in 1:16, and the various translations of the Bible handle it in slightly different ways. Let's set out the text from the Greek with its immediate rendering into English and then consider the significance of the form.

<i>Hoti ek tou plērōmatos autou hēmeis pantes elabomen kai charin anti charitos</i>
For from the fullness of him we all received, even grace in place of grace

Here's how some translations handle the phrase *kai charin anti charitos*:

ESV, NAS, NRS, RSV	Grace upon grace
KJV, ASV, NKJ	Grace for grace
NIV	One blessing after another
BBE	Grace on grace
Luther (German)	Gnade um gnade (English: grace to grace)
NAB	Grace in place of grace
NET	One gracious gift after another
NJB	One gift replacing another
NLT	One gracious blessing after another
YLT	Grace over-against grace
MSG	Gift after gift after gift
JBP	There is grace in our lives because of his grace

The Greek construction consists of the preposition *anti* followed by *charis* in the genitive case. Three possible meanings for *anti* arise from this combination:

1. **Substitution:** "on behalf of, in place of;" "You will find a coin; take that and give it to them *for* you and me" (Matt. 17:27).
2. **Exchange:** "for, as, in the place of;" "See that no one repays anyone evil *for* evil" (1 Thess. 5:15).
3. **Causal:** "because of, for the purpose of;" "You will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, *because* you did not believe my words" (Luke 1:20; Eph. 5:31). Note: This is a highly doubtful case. More likely this means "instead."

This preposition does not appear elsewhere in the Johannine literature, and so we cannot rely on a comparable usage by the writer to explain this one.

One approach, based on the first two meanings above, is to suggest "replacement," following the church fathers (Origen, Cyril of Alexandria, etc.). We would then accept the translation, "grace in place of grace," where the grace brought by the incarnate Word, Jesus, replaces the idea of *hesed* as explained in our discussions above. When we use the word "replace," we are not suggesting a *replacement theology* where Israel is set aside and replaced by the church. Rather, we are saying that whenever we read *hesed* in the Hebrew Bible, we ought to read *Jesus* now, since he is the *fulfillment* and true embodiment of God's steadfast love under the New Covenant. Since the writer is plainly alluding to Exodus 34 by using words like "grace and truth," his use of the word *anti* as meaning "in place of" fits into his interpretational scheme of explaining the Old Testament in light of Jesus. We might imagine the writer of John 1:16 telling his readers: "Whenever you find *hesed* in the Hebrew Bible read *Jesus* instead."

Another possible nuance of *anti* is "accumulation." The Hellenistic Jewish scholar Philo in his *De Posteritate Caini* (147) uses the preposition in this fashion. Some translations follow this suggestion when they render the phrase as "grace upon grace" or similar translations. Oddly, the writer would have better achieved this idea with the preposition *epi*, and so this suggestion draws criticism.

Still another suggestion proposes "correspondence" in which something is given in return for something else. In this case, the grace we receive *corresponds* to the grace which the incarnate Jesus offers us since it derives from that grace.

We are inclined to see the idea of substitution or perhaps, better stated, *fulfillment*. What Israel experienced as *hesed* under Torah, we experience as *grace* through Jesus Christ. They (the graces) do not derive from different sources but from the same source. However, because the Word became flesh, this grace has reached new heights so that we can now treat the grace in Jesus Christ as the *fullness* (or fulfillment) of the grace experienced by Israel through the ministry of Moses on Mount Sinai. Whereas the graciousness of Yahweh could be seen in his coming a second time to give Torah to Israel, His graciousness can now be seen in his coming in the flesh to give salvation to the whole world, including Israel. That said, we might translate our text: "For the *fulfillment* of his grace we have all received: *Jesus-Grace* taking the place of *Sinai-Grace* as its *fullness*."

In support of this, we turn to 1:17 where the writer explains the inner meaning of 1:16.

Torah and Moses; Grace, Truth and Jesus: Contrast or Complement?

If the reader compares several English translations of 1:17, she will more than likely encounter a sharp contrast between what Moses provided and what Jesus gave. A typical translation reads:

"For the Law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ."

The clear implication is this: "Moses gave the Law, and that was fine for back then. However, Jesus Christ gave us something so much better: grace and truth." Such a rendering diminishes Law and supercedes its significance. It also suggests that "grace and truth" were nowhere to be found in the Law. Behind such a translation is the belief that 1:17 intends to contrast Law and Gospel, and proclaims the superiority of the latter over the former. The operative word is "but" which seems to connect the two clauses in the sentence.

But, there is no "but" in the original Greek; it is supplied by those translations which want to play up the contrast:

Hoti ho nomos dia Mōuseōs edothē, hē charis kai hē alētheia dia Iēsou Christou egeneto.

Because the Law through Moses was given, the grace and the truth through Jesus Christ came.

If anything, the grammatical construction mimics a Hebrew consecutive in which the first clause indicates the cause, and the second clause the result. In this case, the meaning could be: Precisely *because* Torah came through Moses, grace and truth came into beginning through Jesus Christ. Far from being a harsh contrast, the sentence forms a complementary whole. Just as 1:16 tells us that Jesus is the *fullness* by being the *fulfillment*, so 1:17 makes Torah the original source and ground of "grace and truth," and Jesus Christ embodies the true goal of Torah in them. As we explained above, Exodus 34 plainly reveals God as abounding in "grace and truth" by His willingness to forgive sinful Israel and give to them Torah once more *through Moses*. Just as God revealed his mercy and grace by giving Torah *a second time*, so Jesus Christ reveals God's grace and truth by "becoming flesh" and causing God's glory to be clearly seen. The same God who made possible Torah, in the face of human sin, also makes possible Jesus Christ. But actions reveal His "grace and truth."

Therefore, 1:17 demonstrate not the inferiority of Law to Gospel but the seamless fulfillment of Law in Gospel. In the remaining readings for this week, we see how the New Testament readers, like Paul, make sense out this important concept.

What Law Could Not Do Because We Are Weak: Romans 8:3-4

3 For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, 4 in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

In the second reading, we have the confident declaration: "For God ..." The story of Advent and its sequel in the life of the church is essentially about *what God has done*. More importantly, it is about what God has done

because we were unable to do it. The coming of Jesus took place *just in time*, since *time was running out* for the human race (see Romans 5:6). For countless millennia, God's creation hurtled through space and time, bearing its precious human cargo. Yet, as the history of civilization has revealed, left to themselves, the human species fails to achieve their high moral and spiritual calling. By giving the Torah (Law) to Israel, God entrusted His Word to His people for their moral and spiritual well-being. God did not misjudge the outcome of this stewardship, but honored the human race by inviting a higher and holier righteousness than the human mind alone could conceive or practice. Torah was not just *law*, it was also *instruction* and *truth* — the revealed word of God in human language. Torah was the *will of God* revealed, and Israel was challenged to obey it.

However, the failure of this enterprise rested, not with Torah, but with *us*. The phrase "weakened by the flesh" (Greek: *esthenei dia tēs sarkos*). From the root, *astheneō* which means "to be sick or weak," this particular form of the verb is in the imperfect tense, implying a *progressive weakening* of the flesh as time passed. Human nature was unraveling, and required decisive action if it was to survive.

Let's examine the flow of the passage. "For the impossible [thing] about the Torah [consists] in this: it is weak through the flesh. God, having sent his own son in the likeness of sinful flesh and concerning sin, condemned sin in the flesh."

1. "Impossible" comes from *adunaton*, and refers to something that lacks ability. In this case, human beings in their weakness and frailty fail to obey God's word. The fault lies, not in Torah itself, but in Torah plus weak human nature.
2. The weakness of human nature is not due to anything implicit in the way God made it, but to a rival power which seeks to control, dominate and rule over it. That adversary is *sin* which has, since the Fall, taken up residence in human beings, occupying territory not its own, and beset them everywhere with its corrupting influence.
3. The whole point of the incarnation of the Word was to mount a frontal assault on sin and defeat it, thereby reclaiming human nature for relationship with God. The word *katekrinen* derives from *katakrinō*, and has to do with "judgment" in the judicial and legal sense. Sin has been found out, apprehended, tried, convicted and judged by the incarnation of the Word. Of course, the "sending of the son" refers not only to his birth but to the whole scope of his earthly ministry, climaxing in his death and resurrection.
4. In some ways, the coming of Jesus *into flesh* was a sort of undercover operation whereby he who was truly human concealed himself in human nature, while all along being the Word who existed with God from all eternity. As a human being, Jesus appeared wholly vulnerable to Satan, who imagined him as susceptible to defeat as the first Adam in Eden. The weakness of Jesus *in the flesh* became a subtle invitation for the enemy to attack and hurl the whole force of his power to destroy. Once dead on the cross and lying in the tomb, the ultimate defeat of God's son appeared certain. But then, on Easter morning, God effected the greatest coup d'état in human history by raising Jesus from the dead.

The text continues: "...in order that the righteous plea of Torah might be fulfilled in us — to those who walk not according to flesh but according to Spirit." By his incarnation, Jesus the Word becomes the agent of Torah's fulfillment in human lives. Torah, as God's holy Word and the disclosure of His will, longs for human beings to live righteous lives. Torah is what God wants His people to become. However, until the coming of Jesus, Torah failed to achieve its aims due to the weakness of human nature ruled by sin. Now that sin has met its match and been defeated, human beings have been set free to realize the righteous plea of Torah. This possibility belongs to the fullness of grace which John 1:17 promises as the fruit of the Word become flesh. The fulfillment of Torah belongs to the fullness of grace. And, according to Romans 8:4, the way Torah is fulfilled in us lies with the Holy Spirit, God's gift to His people. The first great gift of God, in light of Jesus, is the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2), something which God "poured out" in rich fullness and gracious generosity. Within Judaism, Pentecost (*Shavuot*), among other things, celebrated the giving of Torah. Under the new covenant, Pentecost acquires a fresh meaning: the giving of the Holy Spirit, the New Torah living in human hearts.

From Shadow to Reality: Hebrews 10:1-18

For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near. 2 Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, since the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have any consciousness of sin? 3 But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sin every year. 4 For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. 5 Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, "Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body have you prepared for me; 6 in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. 7 Then I said, 'Behold, I have come to do your will, O God, as it is written of me in the scroll of the book.'" 8 When he said above, "You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings" (these are offered according to the law), 9 then he added, "Behold, I have come to do your will." He abolishes the first in order to establish the second. 10 And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. 11 And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. 12 But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, 13 waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. 14 For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified. 15 And the Holy Spirit also bears witness to us; for after saying, 16 "This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws on their hearts, and write them on their minds," 17 then he adds, "I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more." 18 Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin.

When the Word becomes flesh, Torah undergoes a transformation from *shadow* to *reality*. The writer of *Hebrews*, in the passage cited above, moves beyond the intermediate goals of Torah to its final goal: to "make perfect (or complete) those who draw near."

1. The intermediate goals of Torah include a serious view of sin, and why we must deal with it. The innumerable forms of sacrifice commissioned by God under Torah all draw attention to the destructive nature of sin. Adapted to the needs of a culture already accustomed to such ritual forms, those sacrifices were constant reminders that sin is real and to be reckoned with. However, Torah in itself only offered the "consciousness of sin," and any remedies it offered through animal sacrifices merely confirmed the fact of Sin's insidious hold on human nature. The bodies of animals could not ultimately restore human beings.
2. But the body of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word, would do what animal bodies could not: finally and forever "take away sin."
3. On the altars of Israel, Torah taught God's people the deadly lesson of sin. On the cross of Jesus Christ, Torah reached its fulfillment in offering true forgiveness of sins and in the hopeful promise that at last God's "enemies would be made a footstool for his feet." Because of the Word become flesh, many sacrifices are replaced by "a single offering," never again to be repeated.
4. Torah in itself could not bring humanity to its true goal. But the Word become flesh "writes Torah on human hearts," no longer "remembers their sins," and "perfects for all time" those whom God counts among His holy people.

The overwhelming message of Hebrews 10 is that Jesus is grace multiplied: in Jesus Torah reaches its true goal.

The Truth Which Sees and Knows God: John 14:6-7

⁶ Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷ If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him."

We have come a long distance from Moses on Mount Sinai, pleading to see the face of God! What Moses could only imagine has become a fact in human history. Flooding the world with grace, the Word become flesh also reveals the truth. Our last reading this week is familiar. We usually quote it when we want to make the case for Jesus as the only way to God. But what does it mean to "come to the Father" in the sense Jesus intends it in this passage?

Truth appears in good company in this passage along with "way" and "truth." Occasionally I overhear an exchange between young teens who exchange doubtful glances, accompanied by the words "No Way!" only to

be followed with the retort, "Way!" Curiously, we could easily replace the word "way" in that conversation with some form of "not true" and "true." Conversely, truth belongs to a journey — a very human journey. Cynics like Pilate could scoff at Jesus with "What is truth?" Contemporary critics of modernity scorn the thought that a single truth even exists, and contend that truth is relative to me and to you. On one level, the cynic and the critic have it right: human truth is relative and claims to the contrary live in denial of human fallibility.

"Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ," maintains the Gospel of John (1:17). Truth *through a human being* looks significantly different from truth as mere words or ideas. When we met the *Logos* in John 1, we were led to the original Word of Creation: "And God said..." In him Torah found fresh expression in flesh and blood existence. To say that Jesus is the Truth means more than an embodiment of a few sage ideas or the revelation of hidden mysteries. According to 14:6-7, Jesus is the way to God and to life itself. Such truth is no abstraction.

John's Gospel uses the familiar Greek word *alētheia* when it refers to "truth." Among the Greeks, truth was a rich legacy dating back to the earliest philosophers, such as Thales, who belonged to a cohort of thinkers looking for the ultimate "stuff" from which all things came. Famously, Socrates contended with the Sophists, as he staunchly challenged their relativized understanding of truth which followed the dictum of Protagoras: "Man is the measure of all things: Of things which are, that they are; of things that are not, that they are not." But in their quest for truth, such thinkers scarcely reached the depths of Hebrew thought. Within the Old Testament Scriptures we encounter the *wisdom tradition* which grew out of the Torah's quest to understand its own precepts and make sense of them in everyday life. A common counterpoint opposed Wisdom to Foolishness, as taught in the *Proverbs*. Or the somber reflections of an aged king near the end of his life who counsels the "fear of God" and the tempering of material with spiritual goods, as found in *Ecclesiastes*. Among the prophets, the truth of God was higher than human thought and His ways than human ways (Isaiah 55:9).

For Jesus, truth found its true expression in the Hebrew idea of *'emeth*, a word which meant more than volumes of verities. Understand in this way, truth was that on which a person *leans*. The object of trust is the faithful support uplifting the traveler on his journey. It is *'emūnah*, the traveler's walking stick along the uneven ground and across the eroded highway. Jesus as truth, bears the weight and steadies the feet on the path which leads home to God. That is why John's Gospel is free to bring together all three words in one context: way, truth, life.

Flowing from the Word become flesh is the sort of life which only reliable truth and navigated paths can promise. We hear echoes of Isaiah in all of this: "Prepare the way of Yahweh...a highway for our God." Valleys carved into the thoroughfares require smoothing and piles of fallen stone, removing. God is coming and Jesus makes the way in the desert of human foolishness by his truth.

Jesus allows us to know God and thereby "see" Him. What had been denied to Moses on Mount Sinai ("No one can see God and live") becomes a living reality because Jesus is the truth. Surrounding the biblical notion of truth is our idea of "genuineness" or "authenticity." Reliable and authentic. That is how we may see God through the lens of Jesus. Consider the words Jesus uses in 14:7, noting the interplay of verb tenses in Greek:

If you have known (perfect) me,
Then you will know (future) my Father.
And from now on [if] you know (present) him,
Then you have seen (perfect) him.

This may be a case where *John* follows an underlying Hebrew source which connects its clauses through narrative sequences. In the first pair, the disciples have already come to know Jesus through their regular experiences with him over a period of time. The result of this "knowing" of Jesus is the consequential knowing of the Father. The future tense imitates the imperfect in Hebrew and, in this case, is dependent on the force of the perfect tense which precedes it. That is, *because you have come to know me, you also are coming to know*

the Father. But this "knowing" of God through the "knowing" of Jesus has a further implication, as seen in the second pair: *because you have to know God, you are also coming to see God*.

Of course, any claim that a person "sees God" must come under close scrutiny, particularly in light of Moses' experience on Mount Sinai. What Jesus offers us is a fresh *vision of God*, one that is inaccessible to ordinary human perception, but deeper and truer in the knowledge which it gives. In effect, "seeing God" and "knowing God" in the way Jesus promises, amount to the same experience. As we discover in the post-resurrection narratives (John 20-21), a certain blessedness comes to those who "see" (as in the case of Thomas), but an ever greater blessing comes to those who believe *without seeing* in the ordinary sense.

"No one comes to the Father, except through me." What are we to make of the uncomfortable exclusiveness of Jesus' claim? At the outset, it must be acknowledged that he presents the claim to everyone, including ourselves. Jesus, *the Way*, is not *our way*, or *our truth*, or *our life*. We cannot monopolize or franchise this Jesus who is the only way, anymore than we can insist on ownership of gravity or inertia or nuclear binding forces. Such realities of nature belong to no one, yet lay claim on everyone. No one gives a second thought to the exclusivity of cosmic law, but then no one can live without it. Were we to treat Jesus as our own private religious leader or the champion of a movement in which we invested private ownership, he would cease to be *the way* and become, instead, *our way*, and the mascot of a religious fiefdom to which we happened to give allegiance. But Jesus is none of those things. He cannot be owned, manipulated, aggrandized or privatized. He simply *is* — the "I am" whose predicates remain his prerogatives, while we fall in utter worship and adoration at the mere mention of his name. He does not belong to us, and we do not impose his will on others. For Jesus to be *the way*, *he* must be the one to utter freely — and on his own authority — those awesome words, "no one comes to the Father but by me."

Concluding Thoughts

We have been considering the "fullness" of the Word as he releases "grace and truth" into the lives of human beings. Throughout the New Testament letters, the enriching work of Jesus receives thorough attention, especially in Paul. As we end this week's study, several key texts come to mind. Allow the message of Jesus' fullness to enrich your life as you meditate on these passages.

Romans 15:29 I know that when I come to you I will come in the **fullness** of the blessing of Christ.

Ephesians 4:11-13 11 And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, 12 to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, 13 until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the **fullness** of Christ,

Colossians 1:19-20 19 For in him all the **fullness** of God was pleased to dwell, 20 and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

Colossians 2:9-10 9 For in him the whole **fullness** of deity dwells bodily, 10 and you have been **filled** in him, who is the head of all rule and authority.

The enriching of the Church is not for its own sake but for the final reconciliation of the whole creation. Our introduction began with some thoughts from Randy Alcorn. I'd like to leave you with a moving account from his book which drives home the valuable point about the balance which the two words "grace and truth" make possible.

A Lesbian Responds to Grace & Truth
by Randy Alcorn

Some churches today embrace truth, but need a heavy dose of grace.

Other churches talk about grace, but cry out for a heavy dose of truth.

I invited an outspoken lesbian activist, who was also a prominent abortion activist, to lunch. For the first hour, she hammered me, telling of all the Christians who'd mistreated her. She seemed hard as nails. I listened, trying to show her God's grace, praying she'd see the Jesus she desperately needed. She raised her voice and cursed freely. People stared. But that was OK. Jesus went to the cross for her—the least I could do was listen.

Suddenly she was crying, sobbing, broken. I reached across the table and took her hand. For the next two hours I heard her story, her heartsickness, her doubts about the causes she championed. I told her about Christ's grace.

After four hours we walked out of that restaurant, side by side. We hugged.

In our conversation, truth wasn't shared at the expense of grace, or grace at the expense of truth.

Birds need two wings to fly. With only one wing, they're grounded. The gospel flies with the wings of grace and truth. Not one, but both.

The apparent conflict between grace and truth isn't because they're incompatible, but because we lack perspective to resolve their paradox. The two are interdependent. We should never approach truth except in a spirit of grace, or grace except in a spirit of truth. Jesus wasn't 50% grace, 50% truth, but 100% grace, 100% truth.

[Postscript on the lesbian activist] This woman was one of the most outspoken abortion and homosexual activists in our area. By God's grace, she came to faith in Christ. She now fellowships with the same Christians she used to despise. Her life has not been easy, but when I see her—the last time was when I did a book signing at Costco, to which she brought several family members—she hugs me and we talk about our Jesus. She is precious. I look forward to walking with her on God's New Earth. And I know there are countless others, as deserving as Hell and undeserving of grace as I, who will join us there.

(Excerpts from *The Grace & Truth Paradox* by Randy Alcorn)

Glory to God! Amen.

Digger Deeper: *Jesus Changes Everything: Grace and Truth*
(Bob Brown)

To gain a deeper understanding of *Jesus Changes Everything: Grace and Truth*, carefully read the selected passages below. To aid you in your study, we invite you to visit the website <http://notes.chicagofirstnaz.org>, or pick up a copy of the *Background Notes* at the **Information** desk, or from your ABF leader. Now consider the following questions, as you ask the Lord to teach you.

1. Carefully read this week's main text from John 1:16-17, comparing its message with 1:14. Explain the meaning of "his fullness" as it appears in 1:16.
2. The Old Testament background for these verses is found in Exodus 34:6-7. Examine that text in its wider context. What events in the life of Israel surround this passage? How does God prove Himself as One "abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness"? How does this compare with John 1:16-17?
3. Was there *grace and truth* in the Old Testament? How do those qualities of God take on fresh meaning in the New Testament?
4. In what ways are "grace" and "truth" contrasting features of God's character? Complementary ones? How might these ideas get "out of balance"? What keeps them "in balance"? Give some examples.
5. "The *fullness* of grace and truth is the *fulfillment* of grace and truth in Jesus Christ." Comment on that statement in light of this week's reading.
6. How does Jesus change the way we experience "the Law," according to 2 Corinthians 3:7-18. Compare Exodus 34:28-35 as you work out your answer.
7. What does 1:16 mean by the phrase "grace upon grace"?
8. Paul develops the relationship between Law and grace in Romans 8:3-4. What was the Law (Torah) "unable to do," and how did God remedy that weakness? In what ways is Torah transformed because of the Advent of Jesus? What role does the Spirit have in the transformation?
9. In Hebrews 10:1-18, the writer further develops the theme of Torah's preliminary role which ultimately reached fulfillment in the coming of Jesus. Discuss his argument. Why were the *rituals* of Torah eventually "abolished"? Does that mean Torah was abolished? How does grace shine more brightly because of Jesus Christ?
10. Our last text for the week is John 14:6-7, where Jesus is called "the truth." What other words stand alongside "truth" in this passage? How are all three connected?
11. Analyze the sentence structure of 14:7 and explain the impact of "Jesus the truth" on our understanding of who God is. How do you interpret the clause, "and have seen him," as it pertains to God? Do you find it amazing that Jesus lets us "see God," especially in light of Exodus 33:20? Can you resolve the seeming contradiction?
12. "No one comes to the Father except through me." How can we maintain the truth of that statement and still remain humble messengers of the Gospel to the world? Discuss various strategies for bringing that message to a multi-cultural and highly diverse audience.