

## **“Grace Upon Grace”**

**John 1:16**

**Christmas Day**

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It's Christmas morning and here we are. Why are we here? What does it all mean? What difference does it make? The writer of John's Gospel sums it up in one short sentence. *“From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace”* (John 1:16).

The poet T. S. Eliot in his poem “Four Quartets” speaks of Christmas and the Incarnation as “the hint half guessed, the gift half understood.”<sup>1</sup>

The church in its wisdom has celebrated the feast of Christmas, not as a single day, but as a season—twelve days to be exact. In many Western traditions the “twelve days of Christmas” begin on Christmas Day and extend up to the Day of Epiphany on January 6. Rather than one day, the “twelve days of Christmas” are a season to reflect on the meaning, mystery, and gift of Christmas—“the gift half understood.”

I don't know about you, but when I hear the phrase “the twelve days of Christmas,” I always think of that song. “The Twelve Days of Christmas” is an old English Christmas carol describing that large number of strange gifts “my true love gave to me.” It's a song most people love to sing:

“On the first day of Christmas my true love gave to me a partridge in a pear tree. On the second day of Christmas my true love gave to me two turtledoves and a partridge in a pear tree. On the third day of Christmas my true love gave to me three French hens, two turtledoves, and a partridge in a pear tree.”

The gifts keep piling up and by the last verse you're out of breath. “On the twelfth day of Christmas my true love gave to me twelve drummers drumming, eleven pipers piping, ten lords a leaping, nine ladies dancing, eight maids a milking, seven swans a swimming, six geese a laying, five golden rings, four calling birds, three French hens, two turtle doves, and a partridge in a pear tree.”

Some people think the song is silly, wacky, annoying. But people have been singing it for hundreds of years. “My true love gave to me” an enormous number of strange and extravagant gifts. Maybe this song is about more than just two lovers. Maybe this song is about Christmas itself.

The song is filled with joy. The drummers are drumming, the pipers are piping, the lords are leaping, the ladies are dancing for joy. The gifts are unusual, unexpected, lavish. Maybe that's why people have sung the song for hundreds of years at Christmastime—because the gift we celebrate at Christmas is so unusual, so unexpected, so lavish.

A line from the New Testament Letter to the Ephesians comes to mind: “In Christ we

have redemption and forgiveness of our sins, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us” (Ephesians 1:7-8).

The riches of God’s grace that God lavished on us. “*Lavished*” is the word—not just enough, but far more than enough—over the top, extravagant gifts. In Christ, God has chosen us, has made us part of God’s family, forgiven us, redeemed us, and freely bestowed on us the riches of his grace.

But it all began in a barn. The first Christmas gift was a baby born in a stable. Who wanted it? Who expected it? What people wanted was a king, like David, who would rally the troops, drive out the hated Romans once and for all, reestablish the monarchy, and restore the nation of Israel to power and prosperity. That’s what people had hoped for in a messiah. People longed for a powerful king. But instead in the quiet of night a fragile, vulnerable child was born. He grew into One who lived not by the power of the sword but by the power of love. He came to change the world, not by force, but by softening human hearts. An unusual, unexpected gift.

In telling the story, Luke’s Gospel says the first words announcing the gift of Christmas are “Fear not! For see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all people....” In a world where there’s plenty of bad news and often little cause for joy.... In a world where there’s one sad story after another.... In a world of pain, suffering, and conflict.... In a world where we sometimes wonder if there is a God, where God is, or whether God cares.... Into our fears and doubts, our weariness and cynicism of soul, Christmas comes with the bold and audacious gift of good news of great joy for all people.

“Fear not! Don’t be afraid of the present, the past, or the future. Don’t be afraid of the year ahead, of the economy, your finances, health, or safety. Don’t be afraid about the kind of world your children or grandchildren will inherit. Don’t be afraid about relationships, loneliness, or aging. Don’t be afraid of that which is uncertain in your life. Don’t be afraid of God.”

“To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Christ, the Lord.” The gift at the heart of Christmas is that God became human and came among us. In Jesus we see the face and the heart of God, and it is the heart of love. In the One who is called “Savior” God’s love is revealed in the mystery of the Incarnation. And that love has the power to “save” us, to change and transform our lives, to make us whole.

The gift at the heart of Christmas is that God loves us and wants to give us the riches of his grace—unusual, lavish gifts. Gifts we cannot comprehend, only experience. That’s why T. S. Eliot says the Incarnation is “the hint half guessed, the gift half understood.” But Eliot also says, “The rest is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action.”<sup>2</sup> Maybe all of this is something to be lived, not understood.

So here we are on Christmas morning. What does it all mean? The writer of John’s Gospel gives us that one sentence: “From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace” (John 1:16). That is what it means!

Grace: special, undeserved favor. Gift upon gift. Fresh grace that replaces grace already

received. Something we can never get for ourselves, but only be given. Inexhaustible grace that cannot be understood, but only received and experienced by faith.

The God revealed in Jesus Christ is the God of inexhaustible grace, the God of new beginnings. This One comes into our world and into our lives to give us a future and a hope, no matter how dark the way may seem. This Lord of new beginnings comes to make us whole and promises to be with us always.

You hear me say it again and again. It's the most precious gift of all: the promise of God's presence with us. A presence that is real, whether we recognize it or not. Christmas will soon be over. But the gifts of Christmas—the gifts of God's continuing presence—will go with us into the new year.

A partridge in a pear tree? What on earth could anyone do with that? Twelve drummers drumming, eleven pipers piping, ten lords a leaping, nine ladies dancing?

No, just "grace." Lavish grace. Something we can never get for ourselves, but only be given. Grace is something we can never understand, but only live.

The gift of Christmas is "the hint half guessed, the gift half understood." And the rest is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action." "Grace upon grace" is not an idea to be understood. It is a life to be lived.... A life of prayer, observance, discipline, thought, and action.

Grace upon grace. It's the gift "my true love gave to me." Live it, not as an idea to be understood, but as a life to be lived. Merry Christmas!

Notes

<sup>1</sup>T. S. Eliot, "The Dry Salvages," the third poem from "Four Quartets."

<sup>2</sup>Eliot, "The Dry Salvages."