

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church,
Springfield, Virginia, on Sunday, November 27, 1994, by the
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2 CORINTHIANS 8:9

"You know how gracious our Lord Jesus Christ was; though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you, by His poverty, might become rich."

BECAUSE HE LOVED ME SO!

You will find, if you read this passage as a whole, that Paul was talking about raising money. The Christians at Jerusalem were extremely poor, and Paul was endeavouring to organize a relief fund to help them. The believers at Corinth had held a congregational meeting to discuss the matter and had decided, unanimously and enthusiastically, to give Paul's fund their wholehearted support. But time had passed, and they hadn't done much about it; they hadn't paid up their faith-promises; so Paul sends them a gentle reminder! And suddenly, in the middle of it, comes this compelling argument: "You know the generosity of our Lord Jesus: He came all the way from the riches of heaven to the poverty of earth, to lift you out of poverty into wealth!" The thrust of Paul's argument, you see, is simply this: "Since God, in Christ, has done so much for you, ought you not to be doing all you possibly can for your impoverished fellow Christians at Jerusalem?" Paul was punching hard with a soft glove!

We are now, in the Christian year, at the season of Advent. The word "advent," of course, signifies a "coming," an "arrival"; the coming of our promised Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. The word speaks first of His historical arrival on the human scene at Bethlehem; but it also reminds us of what we call His second coming in great power and glory at the end of the age. But we remember too that there is a third meaning of this word "advent"; for Christ is always coming; coming to our lives day by day, challenging us to a more complete commitment and a more fruitful discipleship.

But here in our text this morning we have Paul's sublime summary of our Lord's first advent. Will you notice the four cardinal truths which are presented here; what we might call the four points of the Advent compass?

1. The WEALTH of Christ -- "though He was rich..." that means, quite simply, that our Christian faith did not start on earth; it started in heaven. Christmas did not begin with the stable and the manger and the squalid sights and sounds and

smells of a little Eastern town; it began at the throne of God. Christ, the Redeemer, was not a newcomer at Bethlehem; He is older than the universe itself. Listen again to that awesome word He Himself uttered -- "Before Abraham was, I AM" (John 8:58). You remember how, when God revealed Himself to Moses at the burning bush, Moses said to God, "Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is His Name?' Then what shall I tell them?" "God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM.' This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.'" So when our Lord said, "Before Abraham was, I AM," He was stating quite unequivocally that He was God Almighty in human form.

Let us be quite clear about this. What we shall be celebrating when Christmas comes again this year is not the birth of a religious genius who, when he grew up, taught wonderful lessons about the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man and held views on morality and international politics far in advance of his time. No!

Why was it that Christianity hit the Roman Empire like a thunderbolt and routed the darkness of the pagan world? It was because those early Christians went everywhere proclaiming that Almighty God Himself had clothed Himself in our humanity by a gracious and self-humbling act of incarnation. He took upon Himself our human flesh. He became one of us. We've never really understood the faith until we realize that our Lord Jesus was not just a man reaching up after God; rather, He was God stooping down to man, to save us from our sin and from eternal ruin.

The wealth of Christ! In the 17th Chapter of the Gospel according to St. John is recorded what we call "our Lord's great High-priestly prayer." In it He reminds the Father that before the world was created He had shared the Father's glory. You remember how, after His temptations in the wilderness, we read that "angels came and ministered to Him." (Matthew 4:11) From this it is fair to assume that in the ages before He came into the world He enjoyed the adoration, the fellowship, and the glad service of all the heavenly host. In the first chapter of St. John's Gospel we read that "all things were made by Him, and without Him was not anything made that was made." (John 1:3) And in that magnificent passage in Colossians, Paul says of Christ that "He is the visible expression of the invisible God...for by Him all things were created..." Just think of it! He was the Creator, and therefore from the beginning of time the absolute Owner of every atom of material

wealth in the entire universe! The wealth of Christ! I repeat, we have never really understood the faith till we have seen Bethlehem against its proper background which is that massive background of the eternal world.

In the old Greek drama, as the tragedy mounted and there seemed nothing but certain death for the actors on the stage, suddenly there would come down from the rafters on a rope, the "god" who would effect a rescue just in the nick of time -- a "deus ex machina" as he was called. That, in reality, is what happened at Bethlehem.

"The Word," says the majestic prologue to John's Gospel, "became flesh and dwelt among us" -- for 33 brief years. That is Advent -- God storming the beaches of time; the heavenly lightning being "earthed," as it were, at a humble stable.

But it means more than that. It means that behind all the mystery, the heartache, the suffering and the sin of earth, there is the magnificent availability of infinite grace to help each one of us in our every time of need! You need never be discouraged or despondent or defeated, for you have Jesus, and He is all-sufficient. The incarnate Saviour, rich with all the wealth of eternity!

2. The POVERTY of Christ. Here is Paul's second point in the compass of our Advent faith: "Though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor." Look at the record of His life -- born in a stable, driven out, while He was still a little Child, into a refugee camp in Egypt. Jesus knew what it was to be an impoverished, homeless, displaced Person. Eventually He became a village carpenter, and toiled at the bench for most of His life, except for those brief two or three years at the end -- a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief -- a real Man, not an angel or an archangel, but a real Man, knowing the ache of weariness, the sweat of toil, the pressure of temptation, and the ingratitude of men, that struck Him like a lash in the face; the victim, at last, of bigotry and devilish scheming, of power politics and legalized murder. He was buried in a borrowed tomb.

And yet the thing that amazed and thrilled the men and women of the New Testament was the fact that at the back of that humiliation and poverty there was all the riches of the Eternal, all the splendour and glory of God! From such a height, they said, He had come down to such a depth. He had been stripped of every atom of glory, every shred of power,

every rag of reputation. He had fathomed the lowest depths of man's degradation and corruption. He endured the most degrading form of death, a form reserved for criminals of the most abandoned type. He bore the curse and punishment of our sin, and He despised the shame.

"His brow was pierced with many a thorn,
His hands by cruel nails were torn,
When from my guilt and shame forlorn,
In love He lifted me!"

"You know how gracious our Lord Jesus Christ was. Though He was rich, yet, for your sake He became poor."

3. Our POVERTY apart from Christ -- "...so that you, by His poverty, might be made rich." The implication, of course, is that in ourselves we are as poor as beggars, spiritually. Without Christ, a person may be existing, but he is certainly not living.

I am going to put it to you like this -- suppose there never had been an Advent or a Bethlehem. Or suppose that by some unthinkable calamity Jesus were suddenly taken right out of your life. Suppose you were left to fight alone your battle against temptation and to live by bread alone. Tell me, would anything else, anything the wide world could give you, ever compensate for a loss so shattering and terrible?

If you are a Christian, such a thought makes you shudder, doesn't it? John Henry Newman has a memorable passage in which he imagines what it would feel like to look out into the world and see no trace of God at all. "That would be," he says, "just as if I were to look into a mirror and not see my face." Think of it, that sudden, almost terrifying suggestion; looking straight into a mirror and seeing only a blank! It is that same shudder of the soul that we experience when we think of a world into which Jesus had never come.

Or think of this -- suppose that one day this earth were suddenly to break out of its own orbit, were not to go circling around the sun anymore, but were to fly off at a tangent, farther and ever farther away out into the cold immensities of space; and people waited expectantly and wonderingly for the coming of the spring, and it never came; waited apprehensively for the return of the birds, and the buds on the trees, and there was never a sign of them, but only deeper and ever deeper winter, with the snow piled up against the windows of the

homes; and they said, "Surely tomorrow we will waken to a breath of springtime!" And still nothing happened; no spring, no summer, but only that deathly coldness gripping the earth as it whirled farther and farther away, until at last the truth broke on them, and there was a great bitter cry, "We're doomed!" It is the same wild shudder of the soul that the Christian experiences if he thinks of a world without Jesus.

From our earliest days we have known the goodness of God as He has revealed Himself to us through the love of Christ. We have passed through life's most moving experiences; joy and sorrow, love and parenthood. We have known the hush when death has entered our home; and we know that all these experiences of life have been transfigured because of the reality of Jesus Christ. Take away God, as He has come to us in Christ, and what is left? Dust and ashes and emptiness and desolation; no meaning or purpose in life, no forgiveness, no hope for the future, no heaven, no hope of ever meeting our loved ones again. It was to save us from that that Heaven stooped down to earth at Bethlehem.

"Just as I am, poor, wretched, blind,
Sight, riches, healing of the mind;
Yes, all I need in Thee to find,
O Lamb of God, I come!"

It was Dr. D. T. Niles, of Sri Lanka, who defined "evangelism" as "one poor beggar telling another poor beggar where he can find bread." And Jesus is "The Bread of life," as He Himself said (John 6:35), and therefore without Him we perish!

"You know this grace of Christ," says Paul, "how He became poor that you might become rich." You know it, and have proved it, and you know that you are bankrupt without it!

4. Our WEALTH when we are in union with Christ -- "...so that you, by His poverty, might be made rich!"

Jesus once drew a picture, in words, of a poor farmer ploughing a field. The man's income was a mere pittance; the family could never quite make ends meet. And then one day, suddenly, there in the field, his plough struck something -- buried treasure! He dashed home, careering wildly across the fields, breaking in on his wife and children, babbling almost incoherently, but getting the news out at last -- "We're rich; our troubles are over; we're rich beyond our dreams!"

(Matthew 13:44) "That's what it means," say the New Testament writers, "to find Christ and to be found by Him!"

But do we believe it? Many of us don't appear to believe it at all. The saintly Samuel Rutherford believed it. Imprisoned in Aberdeen because of his unswerving loyalty to Christ, in the days when the Covenanters were being ruthlessly persecuted, he wrote a letter one day to a friend in which he exclaimed, "Jesus Christ came into my cell last night and every stone flashed like a ruby!"

The early English Methodist preachers were poor as church mice so far as this world's good were concerned. One of them, John Jane, died at Epworth. His entire wardrobe, we are told, was insufficient to pay his funeral expenses which amounted to one pound seventeen shillings and threepence (about \$9). All the money he possessed was one shilling and fourpence (30 cents). "Enough," records John Wesley briefly, "for any unmarried preacher of the Gospel to leave to his executors." He was poor according to the standards of this world, but fabulously rich in the currency of heaven.

In the early days of the Salvation Army in England, a Salvationist wrote these few lines of verse --

"In the heart of London city
'Mid the dwellings of the poor,
These bright golden words were uttered,
'I have Christ; what want I more?'

Spoken by a lonely woman,
Dying on a garret floor,
Having not one earthly comfort;
'I have Christ; what want I more?' "

With Christ we are incredibly rich; without Him we are unspeakably poor!

Do you really know Him? Are you a true believer? Religion will never save you, but a relationship will: A relationship with Christ.

Advent has always been associated with judgment. The unbiblical sentimentality and commercialism which, unfortunately, have come to adhere to our ideas of Christmas are of recent origin. As I have told you before, for hundreds of years the traditional themes for preaching during the four

Sundays of Advent were: Death, Judgment, Heaven, and Hell. The Christ-Child came to save us from a lost eternity.

It was the last of the prophets, Malachi, who exclaimed concerning the promised Messiah, "But who can endure the day of His coming, and who can stand when He appears?" (3:2) What does that mean? Jesus Himself explained it. He said, "This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, but men love darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil." (John 3:19)

Jesus Himself is the Light. It is the sunlight streaming in through the living room window that shows up the dust on the coffee table! The coming of Jesus is a judgment upon us. He is the Light, and in His presence the baseness and evil of the human heart is shown up in its true colours. Confronted by Christ we see ourselves as we really are; and when we do, there are only two courses open to us: We must either get rid of Him, or we must get rid of the sin which His presence reveals and condemns.

What is our response to be to this unspeakable Gift of God in Christ? G. K. Chesterton in his magnificent biography of St. Francis of Assisi, tells us that Francis took all men to his heart because he saw in them the Christ to Whom he owed everything. Are we doing all we can to serve and help and evangelize our friends and those with whom we work, because of what Christ has done for us? Chesterton sums it all up with his inimitable insight of faith. He says, "It is the highest and holiest of the paradoxes that the person who really knows he cannot pay his debt, will be forever paying it...He will be always throwing things away into a bottomless pit of unfathomable thanks."

Two hundred years earlier Isaac Watts had said virtually the same thing when he wrote:

"Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were an offering far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all."

Amen.