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## THE GRACE OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST

JEWELS, beautiful in themselves, often have their loveliness enhanced by their setting. That great verse in Paul, 2 Corinthians viii. 9, is a whole casket of gems which suddenly dazzle our eyes amid rather unexpected surroundings, yet their setting, because it is the work of the Holy Spirit, must be the best possible setting that could have been devised for them.

In this great verse we have a notable example of one of the striking peculiarities of Paul's Epistles. Over and over again, he tells us that lowly duty and sublime doctrine are inextricably linked together, that, in fact, the finest morality has its roots deep down in the fruitful soil of the most subtle truths of revelation.

Paul has been exhorting the believers in Corinth to the grace of liberality in connection with the relief of distress. He urges them to exercise that grace with Bethlehem and Calvary in full view. He has been telling them about the fine example of Christian liberality given by the Churches of Macedonia. "I do not speak," he says, "by way of commandment in urging you to be liberal: I am only taking occasion, through the earnestness of others, to put the sincerity of your love to the proof. If you truly love the brethren, you will not grudge to help them in their distress. The Macedonians, of course, are no law for you; and, as a matter of fact, I do not need to urge their example, for you have a far more wonderful example, a transcendently glorious example; 'for ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ . . .'"

"Ordinary charity," says Denney here, in *The Expositor's Bible*, "is but the crumbs from the rich man's table; but if we catch Christ's spirit, it will carry us far beyond that." No one can be mean or stingy or closefisted who has really seen Him, who really knows Him.

In his day Dr. R. W. Dale lamented the fact that the word "Grace" was heard so seldom in preaching. To-day things are, perhaps, somewhat better in that respect, in some quarters, at least. If a deeper sense of sin were to be born in the modern

mind, this great word "Grace" would come into still larger use in our preaching, for, what is Grace? It is Love, but Love regarded in a special way. It is the love of the King of heaven for the condemned rebels who have flouted His authority and violated all His laws; it is the love of the altogether Lovely One for the altogether unlovely; it is the love of the Holy One lavished on the depraved, the vile, the worthless; it is the love that *stoops* in mercy and saving power from the Throne of glory to those who are in the horrible pit, to the beggar on the dung-hill, to the outcast on the scrap-heap.

Paul's words suggest four ways in which we can at least endeavour to measure the Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

## I

We may think of the HEIGHT from which He viewed those whom He loves. "He was rich." "A small Saviour," says Dr. J. H. Jowett, "invariably means a cheap redemption. If there be nothing beyond the Carpenter of Nazareth, then He takes His place in the common ranks of the long succession of prophets; His ministry is just the crusade of the ordinary reformer, and His progress is but the march to a martyr's crown. If we would touch the unique and awful mystery of Calvary, we must reverently move beyond the regions of Nazareth and Bethlehem into 'the glory which I had with Thee before the world was.'" He was

"Christ by highest heaven adored,  
Christ the everlasting Lord".

He was rich, in possessing the glory and the attributes of God. That is the New Testament doctrine of Christ.

"Who is He in yonder stall,  
At whose feet the shepherds fall?  
'Tis the Lord! O wondrous story!  
'Tis the Lord, the King of glory!"

In our Saviour we see One, who, from all eternity, was rich with all the riches of the Infinite God.

He was rich in possessing, from times eternal, *the love of the Father*. "The Father loveth the Son, and hath given all things into His hands." Van Oosterzee, in *The Image of Christ*,

suggests that "in order to form a conception, to some extent worthy, of the glory of the Son of God before His incarnation, it is not even necessary that a rapt imagination should depict Him clothed with light as with a garment; surrounded with millions of blessed spirits, of every rank and every order, about His throne, who minister at His footstool, and sing His praise; crowned with a glory and honour which dazzle the vision of every created being. The one thought, that He was the perfect object of the Father's love transcends, if possible, all that has just been said."

He was rich in the glory of having created all things visible and invisible, as Paul tells us in Col. i. 16. In the Prologue to His Gospel, John writes: "All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing that exists came into being" (John i. 3, in Weymouth). All things came into existence through Him, from the spinning stars to the pebble at your feet, all forms of life from the highest angel in the realms of light to the tiniest insect that crawls across the leaf.

He was rich in power and glory, as the Preserver of all worlds, for, if it be true that all things were created through Him, it is also true that "in Him all things consist, all things cohere", as Paul says in Col. i. 17. "He is the principle of cohesion in the Universe," as Lightfoot says on that verse. "He impresses upon creation that unity and solidarity which makes it a cosmos instead of a chaos."

"One Spirit, His  
Who wore the platted thorn with bleeding brows,  
Rules universal Nature. Not a flower  
But shews some touch, in freckle, streak, or stain,  
Of His unrivalled pencil."

That exalted doctrine of Christ is the consistent doctrine of the New Testament, in all parts of it. And, it is only as we firmly grasp that doctrine, that we can ever hope to begin to realise the wonder of what Christ did for us.

## II

We may think of the DEPTH of need and misery in which He beheld us lying. "For your sakes." It was not for angels that the Lord of glory did what He did, but for men and women like you. And what sort of people were they? There

is a terrific passage in Paul's first letter to these people, a passage which first seems to shut the Kingdom of God on men for ever, and then announces the glorious fact that the Kingdom has been opened by a pierced hand to the lowest of the low. "Neither fornicators, nor idolators, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified, in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God." "The sunshine of the Good News," to use a radiant phrase of Weymouth's in an earlier verse of 2 Corinthians (iv. 4), has dawned on a darkness like that!

When Paul writes, "Such were some of you", he is very far indeed from meaning that he stands in a class apart, that he needs no cleansing, no justifying and sanctifying grace. Nothing could be farther from his thoughts. "There but for the grace of God, goes Paul!" He knows that the seeds of all these vile things are in his own heart, though, by the grace of God, they may not have come to so terrible a harvest as they have in the case of others.

When he writes to Titus, he again describes the awful darkness on which "the sunshine of the Good News" dawned, and he says that his own spiritual home was in that darkness. "There was a time when *we* also were deficient in understanding, obstinate, deluded, the slaves of various cravings and pleasures, spending our lives in malice and envy, hateful ourselves and hating one another. But when the goodness of God our Saviour, and His love to man, dawned upon us . . ." (Titus iii. 3ff. Weymouth). For the sake of men and women like that, He who was rich became poor, the Lord of glory went to the tree of shame.

When we lift up our eyes to the Great White Throne, and the merciless searchlight of the law of Him who desires "truth in the inward parts" shines into all the nooks and crannies of our being, all our illusions about ourselves are shattered. We know then that we are hell-deserving sinners. And then the Gospel of the grace of God begins to have a meaning for us. It may be that we will feel like old Thomas Bilney, who said to Hugh Latimer that, when he read the words "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners", it seemed to him as if, in the middle of a dark night, *day suddenly broke*.

## III

We may think of the SACRIFICE which Christ made and of the SUFFERINGS which He endured. "He became poor." The man who is satisfied with the purely humanitarian view of the Person of Christ possesses no plummet which can sound the depths of a saying like that: these words yield up the fullness of their meaning only to the man who remembers the "riches" which were Christ's from times eternal, the man who sees in Christ "Light of Light, God of God, Very God of Very God".

We cannot write at length on this part of our subject. A whole treatise would be required for that. It may suffice just now to refer briefly to the first step in Our Lord's pathway of humiliation, and then to the culmination of it.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism says that "Christ's humiliation consisted in His being born, and that in a low condition, made under the law, undergoing the miseries of this life, the wrath of God, and the cursed death of the cross; in being buried, and continuing under the power of death for a time". When Paul writes the words, "He became poor", he means all that.

To become man at all meant for Him impoverishment. For us being born means enrichment, for it means coming from nothingness to conscious, personal existence, but for Him being born meant becoming poor. And so the Shorter Catechism rightly affirms that the first step in the humiliation of Christ was His being born. And what a step! Who can measure the distance from the Throne of glory to the manger of Bethlehem? "Christ by highest heaven adored" is seen surrounded by the beasts of the stall; the Eternal Son who from times eternal was in the bosom of the Eternal Father is seen lying as a babe in swaddling clothes in a woman's arms. "Great is the mystery of godliness; God was manifest in the flesh."

"Being found in fashion as a man, He humbled Himself, becoming obedient even to the length of death, yea, the death of the cross." Step by step He went down ever deeper and deeper into the Valley of Humiliation, until at last He came to that awful darkness out of which the mysterious cry reaches our ears, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?"

Calvin says that "Christ's love to us moved Him to unite

Himself to us, and He completed that union by His Death". Brunner says in his book, *The Mediator*: "The Mediator gives Himself up completely to this suffering of the wrath which comes to man from God. In this self-sacrifice His identification with humanity rises to its greatest height, in this giving of Himself to the real endurance of the divine judgment, the divine wrath." The Heidelberg Catechism asks the question, "What dost thou understand by the word: *Suffered*?" (In the Apostles' Creed.) The answer is: "That all the time He lived on earth, but especially at the end of His life, He bore, in body and soul, the wrath of God against the sin of the whole human race; in order that by His passion, as the only atoning sacrifice, He might redeem our body and soul from everlasting damnation, and obtain for us the grace of God, and eternal life."

It is when that awe-inspiring fact is really grasped by us that we really know the *grace* of our Lord Jesus Christ.

#### IV

We may think of the BENEFITS which we receive through the atoning work of Christ. "He became poor, *that ye through His poverty might be rich.*" The whole of the New Testament may be regarded as a commentary on those glowing words. The writers of the New Testament are men who know that, by the grace of God in Christ, they have been endowed with riches of pardon, riches of love, riches of spiritual power, riches inexhaustible. "*We have redemption in His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace*"; "*we have A Great High Priest*"; "*we have an Advocate with the Father*"; "*we have peace with God.*"

James Smetham, the painter, tells in one of his letters about a humble member of his Methodist class-meeting. "He sold a bit of tea . . . and staggered along in June days with a tendency to hernia, and prayed as if he had a fortune of ten thousand a year, and were the best-off man in the world!" He was in the line of the true Apostolic Succession, for he had the consciousness of a spiritual millionaire.

The people to whom Paul is writing were, no doubt, very poor indeed in this world's goods. He reminds them in the first chapter of his First Epistle to them, that very few indeed of them were men of position and influence, or men of noble

birth. But, he proceeds to say to them, "you—and it is all God's doing—are in Christ Jesus; He has become for us a wisdom which is from God, consisting of righteousness and sanctification, and redemption; that, according as it is written, He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord". There we have the riches which moth and rust can never corrupt, the riches that thieves can never get at, and this sin-cursed, spiritually-bankrupt world of ours needs them to-day more than ever it did.

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