

Thou Who Was Rich Beyond All Splendor

2 Corinthians 8:9

By [Dr. J. Ligon Duncan](#)

December 26, 2004

If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to II Corinthians. We'll look at one of the verses that lies behind this beautiful Christmas carol—unknown to many of you, from the sound of your singing! But a story behind this carol, I think I can confidently say, will endear its precious words to your heart. II Corinthians, chapter eight, verse nine. Before we read God's word, let's ask His blessing on the reading and hearing of that word.

Lord God, we thank You for Your word, and we confess, though we have meditated for many days and hours, for beyond a month now, perhaps, on the glory of Your incarnation, yet in our hearts and minds we have only scratched the surface of the amazing grace and glory of that truth. And we pray now that as we hear Your word again that You would, by Your Spirit, stir our hearts to a greater apprehension of Your mercy to us in Jesus Christ, and of the greatness of our Lord's sacrifice on our behalf. These things we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

II Corinthians 8:9. This is the word of God.

“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, that through His poverty, you might become rich.”

Amen. And thus ends this reading of God's holy, inspired, and inerrant word. May He write its eternal truth upon our hearts.

It was a bleak December day seventy years ago to this very month, when John and Betty Stamm made their way back from Methodist Hospital, many miles away, where their firstborn child, Helen Priscilla, had been born. She was about three months old at the time. They made their way to the little town of Tsingteh (today spelled Jingde) It's out in the middle of nowhere, in south Anhwei, China. You had to get there by small roads cut out of the stone, through the mountains.

It was a beautiful place, but as you can recall, seventy years ago to this month, there was a Communist rebellion going on in the country of China. Chinese Communists, bandits, were roaming from village to village committing

unspeakable crimes, bent upon revenge upon a society they felt had wronged them.

John and Betty got back to the little town; they lived in a rented shop. They used that shop not only to live in, but for a little chapel where the people would assemble and God's word would be read and preached, and prayers would be lifted up to the Lord as well as praises. John was picking up Chinese incredibly rapidly, and though he had been only at it for a short period of time, his colleagues commented on how he was able with facility to write down in Chinese messages that he heard, and then read them again himself. The natives commented on how well he spoke.

There were rumors rife in the village that day that the Chinese bandits were on the way, and Betty, as she was bathing little Helen Priscilla that morning, actually said to John, "John, do you think we ought to leave?" And he said, "I don't know. I don't know what to believe."

Well, the bandits came to town. The town's leaders barely got out of the village. The train of those leaders was just leaving the town as the bandits came in, and the bandits began going around rounding up the wealthy people—landowners in the town—and bringing them into the street.

They came to the Stamm's door. They kicked it down. They entered in, and John Stamm offered them tea. They refused his courtesies. They stripped John and Betty of their outer garments, and they led them out into the street in shame; Helen Priscilla in the arms of her mother, Betty. Betty was put on a horse; John's hands were bound tightly behind him. They were led off some miles from the city. That night they were put into a mud hut. At that time, apparently John's hands were unbound, because he was able to leave one last note that he meant somehow to get back to the China Inland Mission. They were missionaries working for the China Inland Mission. You perhaps know the name. Hudson Taylor had founded that mission many, many years before, to spread the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Many of you now support the organization which succeeded the China Inland Mission: The Overseas Missionary Fellowship, still sending out missionaries all over the eastern part of the world.

John wrote a note saying to his colleagues at the China Inland Mission that his wife, his baby, and his own person were in the hands of the Chinese bandits. He didn't know whether they would survive it or not, but he put down a note: Philippians 1:20, and he said, "Whether we live or die, we desire that Christ would be glorified in our bodies."

Betty, that night in that mud hut, wrapped her daughter, Helen Priscilla, in her snuggle bunny, the little hood that covered her. She stuck a ten-dollar bill down in that hood. She stuck the Lactogen, the powdered milk, down into the hood. She bundled her daughter up in some winter clothes, and stuck her off in a corner.

The next day John and Betty were taken out of the mud hut. John was stabbed in front of Betty, to death. Betty's head was hewn from her body immediately thereafter.

We wouldn't know any of this today, if it weren't for a brave Chinese evangelist named Mr. Lo, who followed the Stammers just far enough behind so that he would not be caught by the Chinese Communists. He got there; he searched for them. Many people had been killed. It took him a while. He found them. He secured coffins for their bodies, and he put them in the coffins.

Then he went about looking for little Helen Priscilla. He felt that surely she had met the same fate. He found her, alive and well. For twenty-seven hours she had slept without making a sound. How do you explain it? And there, as he pulled her out, was the ten-dollar bill and the powdered milk. The only person in the area who knew how to use that powdered milk was Mr. Lo's wife.

He took the baby back. It was too dangerous to try and take the bodies back. It was forty days before the bodies could be safely removed from that hillside and taken back to a Christian burial in the area, where only a few China Inland missionaries would gather as the bodies of the Stammers were interred in the earth to await the resurrection.

Frank Houghton was at that time an editorial secretary for the China Inland Mission. He was an Evangelical Anglican, and he was visiting China at the time. He set out on a journey through the Szechwan province to see how the work was going, to encourage missionaries, many of whom were already being moved out of the area. Foreign travel was being discouraged. As he moved through the hills of that Szechwan province, he wrote the words to this carol, to this hymn.

It was known widely, as you might imagine, after its first writing. It's not so well-known today, but it is one well worth relearning. I want you to take out your hymnals and look at No. 230.

But look at each of the phrases here, and let's see what Bishop Frank Houghton was thinking about as he penned these words.

In the first stanza you will see his meditation on the humiliation of Christ. In the second stanza you will see his meditation on the incarnation of Christ. And in the third stanza you'll see his meditation on the adoration of Christ. The Humiliation; The Incarnation; and The Adoration. And you'll notice, as he contemplates the humiliation of Christ in the very first stanza, he is focused on the immeasurable wealth possessed by Jesus Christ which He divested Himself of for the sake of our salvation.

In the second stanza, you'll notice that his focus is on this incomprehensible, this unfathomable God: Christ, fully divine in the flesh, for the sake of our salvation.

And then, in the third stanza, you'll notice that his focus is on an indescribable love: the indescribable love of Jesus Christ: Christ who is rich beyond splendor, God beyond praising, love beyond telling. Immeasurable wealth He has. He is an incomprehensible and unfathomable God, and He is possessed of an indescribable love. And so, paralleling the humiliation, the incarnation and the adoration, is a meditation on Christ's immeasurable wealth; His incomprehensible or unfathomable love—or, His unfathomable deity—and His indescribable love.

Let's look through each of the phrases together, just briefly.

I. The Humiliation

He begins by saying "Thou." If you were here last Wednesday night, we were talking about some of the deficiencies in an otherwise well-beloved carol: It Came Upon a Midnight Clear. And Derek reminded us that that carol focuses on the message of the angels, but not much on the person of Christ. In fact, the very first word gives it away: "It came upon a midnight clear..." and the "it" that is being sung about in that carol through the words of Edmund Sears is the message of the angel: "Glory to God in the highest; peace on earth; good will towards men." And so, that carol is very much about that message.

Notice how this carol begins: "Thou." It is squarely focused on the person and work of Jesus Christ, so in each phrase the "thou" is a direct reference to Jesus Christ. This is a Christologically focused carol. It is Christocentric. It's a hymn of praise to Christ. So every time you see "thou" or "you" it is a reference to Christ: Christ, who was "rich beyond all splendor."

Houghton is there reminding us that Christ is possessed of immeasurable wealth, just like we read in Paul's words in II Corinthians 8:9: "You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich...." He was possessed of immeasurable wealth, and yet, for His love's sake, because of His love for sinners, He divested Himself of that immeasurable wealth and He became poor. He gave up His throne to be born in a manger. He gave up heaven's courts to be born in a stable.

And so the focus of the first stanza is on Christ's humiliation. And Paul, as you'll remember, meditates on this humiliation in the book of Philipppians, in the second chapter. There he says,

Have this attitude in yourselves, which was also in Christ Jesus, who although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a

bondsman, and being made in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance of a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

And so Paul is meditating on the humiliation of Jesus Christ. You wonder what went through the mind of Frank Houghton as he wrote those words. Surely he was moved by the love of the Lord Jesus Christ for His people, that He would have divested Himself of that wealth and come in the poverty in which He came to save us. But perhaps he was also thinking of the cost that had been borne by his friends, John and Betty Stamm. Perhaps he was thinking of the humiliation that they endured, and it spawned him to think of the greater humiliation endured by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Take the hymnals that you have in hand, and turn with me all the way back to page 871. Our Shorter Catechism summarizes the Bible's teaching on the humiliation of Jesus Christ in Question 27. Some of you may still even remember it by heart. Question 27, on page 871, right at the bottom, in the left-hand column, says:

“Wherein did Christ's humiliation consist?”

And it answers this way:

“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.”

Now, our Larger Catechism, which you don't have at the back of your Trinity Hymnal, actually expands on that question and elaborates, giving more biblical detail about what it means for Christ to be humiliated and it asks the question in No. 46:

“What was the estate of Christ's humiliation?”

And it answers:

“The estate of Christ's humiliation was that low condition wherein He, for our sakes, emptying Himself of His glory, took upon the form of a servant in His conception and birth, life, death, and after His death, until His resurrection.”

It then asks:

“How did Christ humble Himself in His conception and birth?”

And it answers:

“Christ humbled Himself in His conception and birth in that, being from all eternity the Son of God in the bosom of the Father, He was pleased in the fullness of time to become the Son of Man, made of a woman of low estate, and to be born of her with diverse circumstances of more than ordinary abasement.”

It then asks:

“How did Christ humble Himself in His life?”

“Christ humbled Himself in His life by subjecting Himself to the law, which He perfectly fulfilled, and by conflicting with the indignities of the world, temptations of Satan, and infirmities in His flesh, whether common to the nature of man or particularly accompanying that of His low condition.”

“How did Christ humble Himself in His death?”

“Christ humbled Himself in His death in that, having been betrayed by Judas, forsaken by His disciples, scorned and rejected by the world, condemned by Pilate and tormented by His persecutors; having also conflicted with the terrors of death and the powers of darkness, felt and borne the weight of God's wrath, He laid down His life an offering for sin, enduring the painful, shameful, and cursed death of the cross.”

“Wherein consisted Christ's humiliation after His death?”

“Christ's humiliation after His death consisted in His being buried, and continuing in the state of the dead and under the power of death until the third day, which hath otherwise been expressed in these words: He descended into hell.”

Frank Houghton, as he moves across the mountains to visit those missionaries, is thinking of the humiliation of Christ on our behalf. And he's thinking, ‘Lord, You left the splendors of glory to come and save people who do this to one another. Lord, You're rich beyond all splendor, and yet for our sakes, You became poor.’ So he meditated on the humiliation of Christ, and he wrote that stanza, focusing on those three phrases on which Christ's humiliation was displayed in His birth: richness for poverty; His throne for a manger; celestial courts for a stable.

II. The Incarnation

And then he goes on to meditate on the incarnation of Jesus Christ. And again, you can look at hymn No. 230, and the second stanza, and see this. He meditates on Christ, God in the flesh. “You” — “Thou who are God beyond all praising.” He's saying to the Lord Jesus Christ, ‘Christ, You are divine. You are deity. You are God. And all our praise isn't enough.’

You know, Margaret Clarkson, in her wonderful missionary hymn has us singing “Our God is Mighty, Worthy of All Praising” and that is true; every syllable of it is true. Our God is mighty, and He's worthy of all praising. But here is Frank Houghton reminding us that Christ is beyond all praise. We can't give Him enough glory to match the glory that is due His name. And I want you to pause and reflect upon that again.

Here are these missionaries who are wondering, ‘Lord, why have You allowed this to happen to these faithful people? Why have You allowed this precious three-month-old girl to be orphaned, to never know her parents? To send these gifted missionaries into the midst of China, and not to bring them back out? Why have You allowed this to happen?’

And you know what Frank Houghton is meditating about? He's meditating about how Christ is so worthy that he can't praise Him enough! You can imagine this missionary making his way across the mountains, thinking these thoughts. So devoted to the Lord Jesus Christ he was; so in love with the Lord Jesus Christ. He says, “You are God beyond all praising, and in Your incarnation, because of Your love, You became man. Your incarnation was because of Your love. You condescended, but in Your condescension, You raised up sinners, raised us to heaven in Your saving purposes.

Turn with me again to Philippians, chapter two, because Paul meditates on this truth about Jesus' humiliation and exaltation. He says (Philippians 2:8), “Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on the cross. Therefore also God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name....” And so we see in Philippians 2 the humiliation of Christ and the exaltation of Christ.

But if you'll turn with me now to Romans, chapter six, the Apostle Paul says that Christ's humiliation and exaltation have implications for you, because when we are baptized (even as we have seen tonight), we are baptized into the death of Christ; but, as we are baptized into the death of Christ, this is done so...(Romans 6:4) “that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.” If we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall be also in the likeness of His resurrection. And so, the Apostle Paul meditates on the glorious fact that Christ's stooping, Christ's condescension, Christ's humiliation was unto our resurrection, according to God's saving purposes. And so, again, at the end of this stanza he says, ‘Christ, You are incomprehensible. Your love is unfathomable, whereby You became man.’

III. The Adoration

And then he turns to praising. He turns to adoration. From humiliation and incarnation, now to adoration: "Thou who art love beyond all telling," he says in the third stanza. 'Christ, Your love is indescribable.' He says, 'You are love.' First John 4:8 tells us that "God is love." But in Christ, we have seen the Father's love. John tells us that in John 1:18. And the Apostle Paul actually prays a prayer for you, as he prays for the Ephesian church as he prays in Ephesians, chapter three. Turn with me there.

In Ephesians chapter three, he prays (verse 18)

"that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth of the love of Christ, and to know the love of Christ, which surpasses knowledge; that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God."

Houghton is saying, 'Lord, Your love is beyond my ability to tell it. I can't even describe Your love'; but the Apostle Paul, whether you can describe it or not, wants you to busy yourself in coming to know that saving love of Jesus Christ.

And then, in the rest of the stanza of this third and final stanza of this beautiful Christmas carol, Houghton begins to pile up names, functions, of the Lord Jesus Christ. He's Savior; He's King; He's Emmanuel, God with us; He's within us, He dwells in us, He abides in us, He lives in us by His Holy Spirit. He begins to pile up all these things that Jesus Christ is, and then he lifts up one solitary petition: do you see it? "Make us what Thou wouldst have us be." Make us what You will, Lord. Make us like You.

You know, there would have been many Chinese nationals, friends of the Stamms, who would have had not difficulty understanding the self-denying, self-sacrificing love of Christ for them after having seen it in the Stamm's, who gave their lives to share the gospel with them. They were little pictures of the glorious Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for our sin. They had been made like Him, and they served as just a tiny snapshot of the greatness of the unfathomable-ness of the indescribable love of Jesus Christ. And so, Houghton sings, "We worship You, O Christ."

May God sanctify us and may God make this to be our prayer to Him for ourselves as we contemplate the humiliation and the incarnation of Christ, and as we respond to that in adoration to the One who became poor for our sakes.

Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, help us to sing with believing, and with thanksgiving for the indescribable gift of Your Son, our Lord. This we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

This transcribed message has been lightly edited and formatted for the web page. No attempt has been made, however, to alter the basic extemporaneous delivery style, or to produce a grammatically accurate, publication-ready manuscript conforming to an established style template. Should there be questions regarding grammar or theological content, the reader should presume any website error to be with the webmaster/transcriber/editor rather than with the original speaker. For full copyright, reproduction and permissions information, please visit the FPC Copyright, Reproduction & Permission statement

©2013 First Presbyterian Church.

This transcribed message has been lightly edited and formatted for the Web site. No attempt has been made, however, to alter the basic extemporaneous delivery style, or to produce a grammatically accurate, publication-ready manuscript conforming to an established style template.

Should there be questions regarding grammar or theological content, the reader should presume any website error to be with the webmaster/transcriber/editor rather than with the original speaker. For full copyright, reproduction and permission information, please visit the First Presbyterian Church Copyright, Reproduction & Permission statement.

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#) (Thirdmill). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*.

Subscribe to *Biblical Perspectives Magazine*

BPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like BPM itself, **subscriptions are free**. To subscribe to [BPM](#), please select this [link](#).