

The Essence of Christmas

by Rev. Robert Griffith

Have you ever tried to explain the real meaning of Christmas to a child? It isn't easy. There is so much tradition mixed up with spiritual truth that it's sometimes hard to tell Jesus from Santa Claus and the Wise Men from the snowmen. Sometimes our children have a hard time understanding what it all means. I saw a cartoon once called 'Marvin' that illustrates this. In the first frame a young mother has just finished reading the Christmas story to her young son. The lad has a puzzled look on his face as he sorts it all out. Then he thinks to himself, *"Let me see if I've got this straight - Christmas is baby Jesus' birthday, but I get the presents?"* The final frame shows him with a satisfied grin as he says to himself, *"Is this a great religion or what?"* I think the reality of Christmas goes a little deeper.

There's a verse that for me sums up the real meaning of Christmas better than any verse in the whole Bible. It's just one verse tucked away in a forgotten corner of the New Testament: *"For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich."* (2 Corinthians 8:9). That sentence sums up the great truth behind Jesus' birth. There are three simple, yet powerful truths in that one sentence. Firstly:

He Was Rich

How rich was Jesus? In this world there are categories of rich people. There's Average Rich: More money than most people, but not incredibly wealthy. Then there's Medium Rich: These are multi-millionaires. Then there's Super Rich: These are the people you see on reality TV. Then finally, there's Incredibly Rich: That would be Bill Gates and the others on the ten richest people in the world list. They are your basic multi-billionaires. Now the Average Rich fly first class. The Medium Rich charter a jet. The Super Rich own the jet. The Incredibly Rich own the airline!

But Jesus Christ owns the skies. When the Bible says, *"He was rich,"* it is speaking of what He had before He left heaven to come to earth. All the glory of God radiates from Him. (Hebrews 1:3). He shared glory with the Father before the world began (John 17:5). All things were created through Him (John 1:3). All things hold together in Him (Colossians 1:17). He upholds all things (Hebrews 1:3). He is the ruler of the kings of the earth (Revelation 1:5). Before He was born as a human, He was the Mighty God and the Everlasting Father (Isaiah 9:6).

Consider some of His names: Alpha and Omega. Desire of All Nations. Firstborn from the Dead. Master. Light of the World. Bread of Life. Water of Life. I Am. The Door. The Way, the Truth, the Life. The Resurrection and the Life. Chief Cornerstone. Captain of our Salvation. Lord of the Hosts of Heaven. Author and Finisher of our Faith. Faithful and True Witness. Lion of the Tribe of Judah. King of Kings. Lord of Lords.

Here is a Christmas verse that tells us the true identity of the babe in the manger: *"For unto you is born this day in the City of David, a Saviour who is Christ the Lord"* (Luke 2:11). Suppose you thought about it this way: Take the ten richest men and women who ever lived ... and the ten most powerful rulers who ever ruled ... add the ten wisest men who pondered life's questions ... throw in the mightiest generals who ever went to battle ... add the ten strongest athletes in every sport ... and the ten most mesmerizing orators ... plus the ten greatest political leaders ... and any ten other great men and women left on the earth. Then calculate their accumulated wealth, power, influence, skill, experience, genius, wisdom, insight and ability.

Whatever that vast sum comes to, Jesus had more in heaven! No man or collection of men could come close to him. He was rich. He didn't leave heaven in search of riches. He had the universe at His disposal. He wasn't looking for money. All the money in the universe was His for the asking. Theologians speak of the pre-existence of Jesus Christ. That simply means that before Bethlehem, the Son of God existed from all eternity in heaven. Not as a pauper or a beggar, but in glorious splendour. He Was Rich. But that is only part of the story. Christmas begins with what happens next.

He Became Poor

What does it mean? *He was rich in eternity. He became poor in time.* He left heaven for a remote village in a forgotten province, to join a despised race, to be born of an obscure teenage peasant girl in a stable, wrapped in rags, placed in a feeding trough instead of a crib. This much we all know. But notice the verb - He became poor. Not, he was made poor. That's what happens to us. We are made poor by circumstances. But He Himself, of His own free will, became poor. He voluntarily gave up the riches of heaven for the poverty of earth. He who was richer than any man has ever been gave it up freely and became poorer than any man has ever been.

We understand riches ... and we understand poverty. But to choose poverty is beyond us and something we would never do. But that is the heart of the gospel. The richest person in the universe, of His own free will, became poorer than the poor. Theologians also have a word for this. They call it the *incarnation*. The idea comes from John 1:14 which says, "*The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.*" I love how *The Message* puts it: "*The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighbourhood.*" Jesus left the glories of heaven to move into our neighbourhood and become just like us. He knows what we're going through because He has lived here himself.

In what sense did Christ become poor? He left the glories of heaven for the sadness of earth. He stooped to enter the world through a mother's womb. He became a dependent creature. He endured rejection and ridicule. He refused to return evil for evil. He was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. Almost a century ago, two famous essays were written about the life of Christ - "One Solitary Life" and "The Incomparable Life." I have combined the two and done a slight revision because I think taken together, they paint a vivid picture of what it means to say, "He became poor":

Two thousand years ago, a man was born contrary to the laws of life. He lived in poverty and was reared in obscurity. He was the child of a peasant woman and worked in a carpenter's shop until he was 30. Then for three years he was an itinerant preacher. He never owned a home, never wrote a book, never held public office. He never went to college and never set foot in a big city. He never travelled 200 miles from the place where he was born. He possessed none of the usual traits that accompany greatness. He had no credentials but himself. In his infancy he startled a king; in childhood he puzzled doctors; in manhood he ruled the course of nature, walked upon the billows as if on pavement, and hushed the sea to sleep. He healed the multitudes without medicine and made no charge for his service.

While still a young man, the tide of popular opinion turned against him. His friends ran away. One of them denied him. Another betrayed him. He was turned over to his enemies and went through the mockery of a trial. He was nailed on a cross between two thieves. While he was dying, his executioners gambled for the only piece of property he had on earth - his coat. When he was dead, he was taken down and laid in a borrowed tomb.

Why would Jesus choose to live this way? The answer is simple and profound. He became like us because that was the only way he could save us. He didn't mail a letter or shout from heaven. He did the one thing we could understand. God himself came down and entered the human race.

He became poor like us so that forever we would hear him saying, "*I love you.*" No one forced him to do this. No one took the crown of heaven from his brow. No one removed him from the throne. No one stripped him of his royal robes. He removed his own crown of glory that he might wear a crown of thorns. He left his heavenly throne that he might lie in a feeding-trough. He exchanged his royal robes for swaddling clothes. No one forced poverty upon him. He gave up the glories of heaven for the misery of earth that we might share the glories of heaven with him for eternity.

So He was rich and He became Poor ... but why?

That We Might Become Rich

Here is the whole purpose of Christmas. He came so that we who were poor might become rich. How does that happen? Most of you are familiar with the term *guilt by association*. That means if I hang around with a fellow who has committed a crime, I may be considered guilty also because of my close relationship with him. Turn that concept around and you've got Christmas. It is *grace by association*. All the grace of God is available to me by virtue of my relationship with Jesus Christ. Think of it. All the riches, all the power, all the prestige of His good name is mine. But someone will say, "*You don't deserve that.*" Indeed I don't. That's the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. If I deserved it, I wouldn't need Jesus. But through my relationship with Jesus Christ, suddenly I am a rich man.

Theologians have a word for this as well. They call it the doctrine of *imputation*. It's what happens when I come to Jesus Christ. He takes my sin, and I take His righteousness. I don't earn it; it is imputed to me. It is credited to my account. That's grace by association. When I come to Jesus Christ, I come as a pauper in the spiritual realm. My hands are empty, my pockets are bare, I have nothing to offer, no claim to make. All my good works are as filthy rags; my resume is filled with failure. All my life I have gone two steps forward and three steps back. When I come to Christ, I am fed, clothed, filled, forgiven, crowned with every good thing. He takes away my rags and puts around me the robe of his righteousness. Everything that was against me is gone. Everything I lacked, I now have. Once I was poor. Now I am rich. That's the grace of God. And it happened because of Christmas. All because Christ became poor for us.

So there you have the essence of Christmas in one simple statement: **He was rich. He became poor, that we might become rich.** That's the true meaning of Christmas. So let us rejoice this year that these things are true, and let us teach them to our children and grandchildren that they may know what this season is all about.

I know that for some people, Christmas can be a hard season of the year, especially when things have not worked out the way we hoped they would. While I would not minimize the sadness of life, 2 Corinthians 8:9 reminds us of a truth that is both deeper and higher than all the disappointments of this messed-up world. We who were poor have been made rich by Christ who became poor for our sake. Rejoice! Sing! Celebrate! If you belong to Jesus, then Christmas belongs to you. Because Christ became poor, we are now the richest people in the world.

Lord Jesus, what miracles you have done. We were naked, and you clothed us. We were hungry, and you fed us. We were thirsty, and you gave us living water. We were poor, and you made us rich. We were guilty, and you forgave us. We were lost, and you found us. We were dying, and you saved us. Glory be to your name forever! Amen.