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HE BECAME POOR

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The Protestant Faith



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The Apostle Paul makes an interesting comment about Jesus in his second letter to the Corinthians (8:9) where he says "though he was rich yet for your sakes he became poor."

A lot of people become poor because of circumstances beyond their control, but Jesus became poor by the deliberate decision of His will. This is the exact opposite of the normal human will. The whole of our society directs its will to becoming rich and richer and richest if possible. God did not make us for this but to serve one another. Business should be service but it is being turned into making money as its primary objective. And so the whole of modern society aims at increasing its possessions and becoming richer. Even dedicated Christians may find themselves seeking money as their first objective, anxious at least to maintain their present position money-wise if not to improve it slightly but Jesus willed to become steadily poorer. In the end He willed to lay down His own life; no one took it from Him but He willed to lay it down. This is complete poverty as far as this life is concerned. He became poor. St. Paul's life story is similar; he appears to have been born into a rich home and he had excellent prospects; but he became poor; he constantly set his will in that direction, involving himself more and more in poverty. He too, in the end, laid down his life in the course of his ministry.

There is a curious phenomenon often observable amongst Christians, that a man or woman may decide to give up his standard of living and his prospects in order, for example, to become a missionary or minister or minister's wife, or take on some other form of service and then after this initial decision which puts him permanently into a lower income bracket, he begins to be concerned with accumulating just a little extra; a few extra fees, a little better salary, or he may be concerned about the sort of house he is asked to live in or the sort of suburb.

There was a similar phenomenon in St. Paul's day with the ministers of the gospel seeking to make a living out of the gospel - peddling the gospel as St. Paul put it in 2 Cor. 2:17 or making merchandise out of the gospel as Peter put it in his second letter (2 Peter 2:3).

It is rather an awful concept - making money out of the crucifixion of Jesus and anxious to get a little bit more for the ministry of the gospel. St. Paul set his will resolutely against this temptation which he said other ministers had fallen into. He set his will resolutely in the direction of accepting worsening conditions, hardship, poverty, injustice and exposure to the elements, if his ministry involved these things, and finally accepting the loss of his life in the course of his ministry. If Christians are to follow Jesus, as Paul did, we must set our wills in the same direction and be willing to accept injustice. For example, to accept with a quiet mind others getting larger salaries and our contemporaries forging past us in worldly circumstances and so on. And if ministers marry, then their wives, too, must share this outlook.

Jesus became poor; He set His will in this direction. But of course there was a wonderful strength of knowing that in all His poverty God was with Him, and (as Jesus Himself taught His disciples), for those who seek God's Kingdom God will provide whatever is necessary in the circumstances. Our experience will be that of the psalmist who had never seen the righteous forsaken nor his seed begging bread. God will provide the needs of His servants and the needs of their families.

There is a second point, Jesus became poor for the sake of other people; "For your sakes He became poor". He did not choose poverty for its own sake as though there was some virtue in poverty; neither riches nor poverty commend us to God, though both have their temptations. But Jesus accepted poverty as the way through which he was able to bring blessing to others. "For your sakes" says St. Paul "He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich". It was not poverty for its own sake. Poverty for the sake of asceticism, as though it would confer benefit on Himself such as strengthening His will, or obtaining merit with God. Asceticism has no value. The going without for the sake of going without does not strengthen the will nor is it a sacrifice that God is pleased with. It was for other people's sakes that Jesus became poor. He accepted poverty as part of the condition of bringing benefit to us. For our sakes, "for your sakes, He became poor". It was out of concern for us that he accepted these disabilities

for Himself. He found the centre of His life in other people's lives, as God does. It was to make us rich beyond all telling that He accepted poverty.

Notice St. Paul does not say: for God's sake He became poor, but "for your sakes He became poor". It is possible to bypass personal relationships by ascribing everything directly to God and His glory. We can impersonalise our lives or our ministries by saying that we do these things for God's sake. God does not want us to become poor for His sake. We accept poverty (if that is His will for us) simply in the course of our ministry to others. We must be thoroughly concerned with other people's welfare; thoroughly alerted to the disaster of other people's eternal prospects so that we give ourselves entirely and completely to serving them. Our becoming poor must flow from our sense of their need and from our ministry to enrich them. Jesus' ministry terminated on other people and their needs. He came to minister and to give His life a ransom for others. It is possible to be thoroughly orthodox in our Christian opinions and impeccably upright in Christian rectitude without real affection for other people. This is not the way of Jesus. It is true that He drew His strength for His ministry from His love and obedience to His heavenly Father and from fellowship with Him and He was conscious of glorifying God in His ministry but the direction of His ministry was towards other people. It was because He was full of compassion for others in their Godlessness, in their need, of a sense of the awful peril overhanging them through their Godlessness that He gave Himself as a good shepherd to win them back to God. He came to save His people. "For your sakes He became poor". St. Paul described himself as a slave of the congregation but it was in the context of his relationship to Jesus, he was their slave for Jesus sake. (2 Cor. 4:5). Our ministry must be motivated by love and concern for others in their predicament and by a sense of the great benefit that the Word of God manifested through us will bring them. But though our ministry is for others, it must spring out of our relationship with God and our desire to please Him. We will not be able to sustain this ministry unless we are very conscious of God's sending us and of the reward and crown which He promises us for faithfulness. St. Paul was conscious

of this crown, for at the end of his life he said "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course. Henceforth is laid up for me the crown of life" which he added God gives not only to him but to all God's children who live for that heavenly crown, we who are looking for the coming of Christ. Jesus too was conscious of this crown, for it was for the joy that was set before Him that He endured the cross, despising the shame. His crown is His people's salvation "Ask of me" God promised, "and I will give you the heathen for your inheritance and the uttermost parts of the earth for your possession". So too we must be conscious of heavenly realities, conscious of the greatness of the hope which through the gospel others may enter on so that we give ourselves completely to this ministry to other's needs; following the example of Jesus who "though He was rich yet for our sakes He became poor that we through His poverty might become rich".

It is only too possible for us to give merely verbal agreement to the values and realities of heavenly and eternal things but we must allow these things to affect our decisions and out way of life, setting our wills to accept, for example poverty if this is involved in our ministry to bring others to a knowledge of Christ and eternal life, so that we too will have a crown, the crown of eternal fellowship with God and of seeing Him face to face. This is the true riches.

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