

The Amazing Grace of Christ

Pastor A.T. Vergunst

Psalter 261: 1 - 3

Luke 2:1-20

Psalter 399: 1-4

Psalter 422: 3 and 4

Psalter 187: 1-4

Dear congregation,

They had traveled a long way. They were wise men. Not because they learned a lot of things. But because of what it is written about them, *"And are come to worship Him!"*

Hopefully that is also why you joined together this morning. We all realize that what we hear today is in some way not more 'new news' as we have heard the story of Jesus' birth year upon year. But that does not mean that it cannot become 'good news' all over again. As you listen, pray for a new glimpse of the wonder that made angels sing in adoration, and wise men bow in humility.

To draw your attention to the subject of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, let us go in our thoughts to the ocean shore. Many, or all of you have stood looking over the vast waters. What are the secrets it still holds! What depths have remained unexplored? But this morning I invite you to come to an ocean that is far, far bigger. It is the ocean of God's big-heart. "Big" is really not the right word. For God's heart is infinite. Something of God's heart is revealed to us in the verse I ask you to consider together. Let's turn to the story of Christ's birth but then according to Paul in 2 Cor. 8:9

There we read *"For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that ye through His poverty might be rich."*

Let me help you understand the reason why Paul wrote these words. Some time earlier the church of Corinth had promised Paul to have a collection for the poor, probably the poor saints in Jerusalem. But it appears they were a bit slow, or perhaps even reluctant, to fulfill their promise. So Paul wrote to them to remind them, and encourage them.

Guided by the Holy Spirit, Paul tackled the subject wisely. To encourage the Corinthians, Paul used positive peer pressure. "Look...", he began, "look at the churches of Macedonia, brethren. See God's grace in how *they* give! For even though they have had a rough time, and

struggled with poverty, they still went out of their way to give. They were so generous. I hardly dared to take their gift along for the poor.”

But besides their generous giving, Paul noticed something more in the Macedonian churches. They were not just giving their money. They gave themselves. In vs. 5 we can read that, “And this they did, not as we hoped, but first gave their own selves to the Lord, and us by the will of God.” This made their gift even more beautiful. It came out a heart which surrendered all to the Lord. Is that the picture of your and my giving? Have we given ourselves to the Lord, surrendering all our life to Him and to live for Him entirely?

Yet while Paul thought about that beautiful grace, his mind moved on to an even bigger giving. Bigger than any man has ever given. If you know Paul a little, you know he would never think, talk, or write for long until you heard him speak about Jesus Christ. That’s exactly the case here as we read once again in vs. 9. That verse is like the infinite ocean I spoke about earlier.

“For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that ye through His poverty might be rich.”

Someone once strangely said, “Some Scripture verses should never be read in church. Instead, they should only be sung!” This is one of those verses. Oh, may God move our hearts to sing about:

The Amazing Story of Christ’s Grace for Poor Sinners.

First, consider His stunning stoop for poor sinners: *and though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor.*

Secondly, consider His gracious purpose in His stunning stoop: *that ye through His poverty might be rich.*

First, His stunning stoop: *“and though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor.”*

What an opposite in our text: *He was rich – He became poor; we sinners are poor and yet made rich.* Dear friends, this is most amazing. Jesus went from ‘riches to rags.’ He went from the highest honor to the deepest dishonor. No words can accurately describe what this really meant for the Son of God. Besides, He did this for most dishonorable creatures: rebels who tried to dethrone God and become like Him!

Notice that Paul began this sentence with “*Ye know ...*”. The Corinthians had also heard the Christmas story before, just like us here. Yet, Paul realizes there is much more for them to know. Isn’t that true for you also? Let’s walk briefly along the ‘shores of this vast ocean of truth.’

We read from Luke that Jesus was born and laid in a manger, wrapped in swaddling clothes like all babies of common people. Instead of a beautiful baby room, with brand-new crib, and cute baby clothes, God's Son came to earth and was mysteriously joined to the baby born in Bethlehem's night. Is that fitting for God's Son? Is that how we should handle Kings? So poor? So humble? So common? With such poor parents? Why did God not cause His Son to be born in one of the great palaces, with many servants to take care of Him and Mary? These are good questions. Gladly, Paul answered them in our text words.

Hear how he said, 'You know the *grace* of God ...' God's grace is His goodness for guilty people. Grace is doing something nice for those who do not deserve it. So when Jesus came as the Son of God to our earth, He did that freely. None of us, absolutely none of you or I, deserve anything, let alone such a deed of God as this. Why did God do this then?

So you and I would worship and adore Him for His glory! Do you sense some of this sweet adoration in your heart? Is that your growing desire, to make Him greater and greater for what He did when He became poor? To understand the word 'grace' well, children, think of it as God's big-heartedness. 'You know the *big-hearted-ness* of the Lord Jesus Christ.' His 'big-hearted-ness' speaks about Jesus' willing heart to do this. It is what the angels sang about: *Good will toward man*. Another word can be His loving-kindness. You know what lived in Jesus' heart? There was a burning desire to do this for His Father and for His people, who were all completely undeserving.

This is the glory of Jesus' coming. Not just that He went from 'riches to poverty' but that His heart delighted to do His Father's will! Are you like that, children, when your parents ask you to do something for them? Do you drag your feet? Do you say, "Okay, I will do this," but then grumble, inwardly complain, or maybe even feel angry? That is not 'big-hearted' but 'bad-hearted.' But in Jesus' heart it was, "Father, I delight to do thy will, even if I need to go from riches to poverty!" God looks at the heart. The best gift is not in what is your *hand* but what is in your *heart*. Jesus' heart was full of genuine desire to do good to sinners, even to His enemies.

Oh, you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ Who became poor ... His big-heartedness was not just that He was wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger. We need think deeper to behold the glory of God's big-heart. We need to keep in mind the contrast of *His riches and poverty*. But even more, we need to keep in mind that He did that for sinners who had dared to rebel against Him and dishonor Him to highest degree.

Oh, stop and adore Him this morning! Let's not be like the children when they come to the ocean shore. First, they stand in awe of the great waters and waves, but soon are only interested in building sandcastles and playing with toys. Are we not like children? Are we often not just busy with our sandcastles and our big-people toys? How quickly we lose the glow of joy and amazement as we become focussed on the trivial details of our earthly life. Instead of

peering into the depth of the glory of God in His big-heartedness, we focus on our own lives of here and now.

If you want to experience new sweet moments of awe and praise, then you need to be more occupied with the glory of God. Seek closer, more intimate knowledge of God in Christ. I remember when once for some years I was away from the ocean shore. I remembered what it looked like. But then, when you again see the ocean, smell the salty air, see the sunlight reflect on the waters, and stand in awe of the beauty of the colours and sizes of the waves, then it becomes all new again! You could call that an experiential re-visit of what you already knew. Now, spiritually, that is what we should pray for this morning. Behold, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, though He was rich, He became poor ... for your sakes!

Standing at the shore an ocean is impressive. But diving into the depths is even more impressive. What glories of God's creation are hidden below the surface! That is now also true of Paul's words, *"You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor."* He went from riches to rags, to poverty. So what did He leave? What were the riches that He exchanged for poverty?

First, He gave up the joys of being in Heaven with His Father and all His angels. Did you realize that Jesus is the same One who Isaiah saw in the vision of Isaiah 6? Let's hear what Isaiah saw, "In the year that king Uzziah died I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train (or His royal coat) filled the temple. Above it stood the seraphims (angels) ... and one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts: the whole earth is full of His glory." (Is. 6:1-3). But Who did Isaiah see in that vision? According to John 12:41, it was the Lord Jesus *"... these things sayeth Isaiah when he saw His glory and spake of Him."* Pause here for a moment! He left that glorious setting to come to our earth. There He was surrounded by the angels, who worshipped Him with honor and adoration. But He gave that up and exchanged the worship of angels for the company of the devil in the wilderness who tried to make Jesus bow before him! He exchanged the company of these perfect and adoring angels with that of wretched, selfish, and hateful men. Yet the greatness of this was not even the act of doing it but the 'big-hearted-ness' in doing it. He exchanged this. Ponder the joyful willingness of the Lord to leave heaven's glory and come to this earth: to this earth where He was surrounded by people who mocked Him, who accused Him falsely, and who rejected Him even though He loved them, served them, and sought to do them good. He went from the 'riches of heavenly worship to the rags of contemptuous rejection': and He did this gracefully!

Think of it, never did the Lord have to hear a vile temptation while He was in heaven, but when he came to this earth, He was battered and bombarded by the vilest temptations Satan could imagine. He was called a winebibber, and a friend of publicans and sinners as if He was like them; He was called a false teacher, a deceiver, and even an illegitimately born child. Everywhere He went He was surrounded with temptations and hardship. Instead of worship they tried to trick Him with questions. Oh, adore the great-hearted-ness of our Lord Jesus, Who

though He was rich, yet willingly became poor. He was ready to run the race in this world, beginning with His humble birth in Bethlehem and ending on the cross of Golgotha.

But there is more. Not only did He leave the blessed and only holy company of the angels, He was willing to give up something far more precious. He was willing to exchange the riches of His communion with His Father with the poverty of being forsaken by Him. What that meant for Jesus as Son of God is something we cannot explain. But was it real? Was it terrifying? Was it heavy? Was it poverty? Yes, it was real and terrifying as Jesus sweated blood thinking about it. Yes, it was heavy as His cry echoed over Golgotha, "My God, My God, why has thou forsaken Me?"

In Proverbs 8 we are given a glimpse into pre-time, the time before heaven and earth were even created. Hear the amazing words in Proverbs 8:22-31, "The LORD possessed me in the beginning of His way, before His works of old (the works of creation). I was set up from everlasting, from the beginning, or ever the earth was ... then I was by Him, as one brought up with him; and I was daily his delight, rejoicing always before Him; rejoicing in the habitable parts of his earth; and my delights were with the sons of men." It is a sweet picture of God and His Son. He described it as a home-scene: *I was by Him and I was daily His delight*. In a very human way God pictures something of the closeness of their relationship as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He uses language that we can understand. Though much remains a mystery, this is clear: before Jesus came to earth He experienced the most unspeakable delight and pleasure with His Father. He gave all of this up when He was crucified on the cross! There He missed the sweet communion with His Father and could no more see His friendly fatherly Face! He went from the *most glorious riches* to the *most horrifying poverty*!

Come and adore Him, congregation! Oh, lift up your heart to worship Him Who was willing to empty Himself, to give up all those riches to come on this planet to suffer and to die. How well the poet expressed it who wrote the lines, "Out of an ivory palace, into a world of woe, only His great eternal love, made My Savior go." His gracious heart was willing to give up the angel's worship for the devil's temptations, the Father's communion for the God-forsakenness. But then there is yet a third aspect to consider of this grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

When Jesus was born in Bethlehem, He did not come into the world as Adam was created in Paradise. He came as Adam outside of Paradise. That is a big difference. He did not come into the world with a beautiful, healthy, strong body; no, He came clothed with the rags of our fallen human nature. Though He was without sin, He was not without the results of sin. Paul wrote in Romans 8; 'He *came in the likeness of sinful flesh*'. He had no original sin and never committed actual sin. But the body and the human nature that He received was ragged. All the infirmities of the fallen human nature clung unto Him. He had to live within a dying body as we all do. I sometimes have a cold and feel miserable and Jesus would have also experienced this: earaches, colds, flue, pain, thirst, heat, exhaustion. Remember how He was called the Man of Sorrows because His whole life, from the beginning to the end, was

characterized by sorrow. Oh, do you see the grace of the riches of His grace Who for your sake became poor. He was wearied, dying, mortal, from the beginning to the end of His life. He placed Himself under the curse and punishment of the law He had never broken Himself.

For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that ye through His poverty might be rich. Come, friends, Paul knew the grace of God; the Corinthians knew, but do you and I know? As we ponder this incredible stoop of the Lord Jesus Christ in His coming to this earth, let go of all those sentimental and romantic feelings with which we typically surround the Christmas season. Bear in mind, the coming of Christ to our earth is the first step of His humiliation. Yet, He did this with joy, with desire, with eagerness, without grudging, not of necessity but willingly, cheerfully, with a big heartedness. What wonder should fill our hearts, children of God, as we contemplate that while we were yet sinners, with big hearts of sin, hostility, hatred, and disdain, He came, delighting to run His Father's race, eager to make you and I rich through His grace. Peering over this vast ocean, seeking to penetrate something of the depth, is that not worth raising our hearts and voices in singing from Psalter 422:3 and 4.

We sang together, "... Constraining saints to praise Thy wondrous grace abounding." Isn't that what walking at the shores of this immeasurable ocean of God's grace should stir us to do? May God stir our hearts even more when we consider the purpose of the Lord's humbling Himself, as God's Word says, *'For ye know the grace of God, that although he was rich, yet he became poor for your sakes, that ye might become rich'*.

He did this all *for your sakes*. He left the riches and exchanged them for the rags, for your sakes. It would not be correct to say, He did it *entirely* for your sakes. No, all what the Lord Jesus did, He did first and foremost for the glory and honor of God Himself. Let us never think otherwise. The main purpose of all that God does is to glorify Himself. The work of redemption is above all for the manifestation of God's glory. Just as with the ocean. All the beauty and all the resources in it may be pleasing and benefiting for us humans, but its main purpose is as Paul concluded Romans 11, "For of Him, and through Him, and to Him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever, Amen."

Yet Paul brings this great glory of God in Christ Jesus to a very personal level: He did it for your sakes, Corinthian believers! And today it will only become a true celebration, when you may also include yourself by faith in these words, 'For your sake!'

Yes, but how can I believe that? I am not good enough for that. I am so evil, and have so much on my record! I dare not think that there is a message of hope and grace for me. The more I see of myself, the more I hate myself for the things I still do, think, and say. Oh, who shall deliver me from this wretched body! And I cannot dare to hope there is grace for me until I am a better person!

If such are your thoughts this morning, there consider first who Paul was writing to. What kind of persons were these Corinthians? Who were these people for whom Jesus Christ

was willing to leave His glorious heaven and exchange it for this earth? Were they worthy men and women? Were they faithful, amiable, and lovely individuals? From Paul's first letter we learn that the company of believers gathered by the Son of God through the preaching of the Gospel in Corinth were a group of people we might shun to be seen with! In 1 Corinthians 6 Paul wrote, *"Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, 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."* Did you see your name in this list? Who of us isn't covetous? Who has never fallen into sexual sin? Who dares share all that lives within their heart? Even though God may have spared you from many sins, who of us is not a sinner? It is true that such sinners shall not inherit the kingdom of God! Yet hear what Paul wrote next, *"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."* How amazing is God's grace! Through the work of Jesus and the work of the Spirit these vile sinners are turned into saints! Clearly the Corinthian church was not an average church as we are accustomed to. It was a church gathered out of the gutters. Nobody was interested in them as their lives were a stench and a burden. Nobody? Yes, Jesus was! And He sent Paul into their city to preach the Gospel of the grace of God in Jesus Christ. They heard about One able to save them from sin, guilt, and shame and able to restore them into a life of joy, cleanliness, purpose, and hope. They saw the 'big-heartedness' of Jesus as Paul preached. That Gospel became the power of God to change them as they embraced the message of His love, the message that He became poor for sinners like them, the message that Paul preached.

Now, you may not live in the outward or secret sins of these pre-saved Corinthians. But that does not make you a smaller sinner. It makes you a different sinner, but you are still a great sinner. Actually, according to Jesus' teaching, the greatest sinners are not those who live like the Corinthians. According to the mouth of Truth, Jesus Himself, the greatest sinners in the world are bravely sitting in church pews every Sunday. How grieved and dishonored He was by all the people in the cities of Galilee who heard His personal message and saw His personal miracles! Is that not the case of many of you? To be unmoved, unrepentant, unbelieving, and unresponsive to the Gospel preaching would be like the shepherds receiving the angel's message and then just shuffling closer to the warmth of the fire, instead of hastening to see the things the angel had announced.

Does that prick your conscience? Does that make you cringe and think, "Is there yet hope for such a man, woman, boy, or girl like me, who has so often ignored the big-heartedness of Jesus' offer of grace and pleading voice of love? Hear then once more God's message through the mouth of the angel on Christ's birthday, *"Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people, for unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord."* None of us deserve this message but this morning all of us are receiving this message. Also you, who stand afar off! Also you, who feel hard and cold! Also you, who dare not hope that there is a good message for you.

We started with the great ocean! Now we are facing a big mountain! The big mountain of your sin, your guilt, and your transgressions against our holy and just God! None of us can make our mountains smaller, nor can we move them an inch. But God can! Hear how Micah celebrated God's greatness, in Micha 7:18, *"Who is a God like unto thee, that pardoneth iniquity ... He retaineth not His anger forever because He delighteth in mercy? He will have compassion upon us; he will subdue our iniquities; and thou wilt cast all their sins into the depth of the sea."* There is hope for you in this mighty Savior!

Oh, the contrast is so big, so endless! Hear it again in those four words, *"Ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, **yet for your sakes...**"* For your sakes He humbled Himself to be born, to suffer, and to be crucified. No, He didn't look at us and see us as an object of compassion. He saw us as people of rebellion! We were in the bottom of the valley of death, helpless, loathsome, and living out the sinfulness of our hearts. But God in the unsearchable depths of His grace and mercy, love and compassion, came to search and save sinners who had defied Him.

Let all saints today speak and witness about what God did to you and for you! Must you not say, "Yes, Lord, that is true for me also. While I was living for myself, angering Thee with my sin, abusing Thy goodness and patience for my own agenda, while I was resisting thy voice in my conscience, while I was spurning thy knocking at my door, Thou came! Thou left Thy riches and for my sake become poor. No, Thou did not only come into my valley, Thou became *like me* in the valley, taking upon Thee my curse. Thou not only clothed Thyself with the rags of my fallen human nature, but Thou also loaded all my gross sins upon Thy back. Oh, children of the Lord, meditate on these sweet words, *"yet for your sakes."* Paul in Romans 5 exalted this truth also, *"When we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die. But God commendeth His love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."* He died while we were yet sinners; for your sakes, He become poor!

Come, let us walk towards this ocean once more. Look at the immeasurable grace of God. Why would he do this for these Corinthians and for any of His chosen people? How could God love such people? It is because God is so big. Don't measure His heart by ours! For His ways are not like our ways, and His thoughts are not like our thoughts. No, they are a universe apart, as far as heaven is from the earth! There is forgiveness with Him, even for the greatest of sinners.

As we part together from this hour of worship, let us be assured that we have barely walked the shore of this ocean. We only touched the waters of God's immeasurable grace in Christ with our toes. There is infinitely more to explore. But let me put a few closing thoughts to you.

First a question: what do you think of this great grace of Christ? There are so many so-called stars in this world who are the idols of great crowds of people. Yet they are humans. They may

be smart, or successful, or athletic, but they are vain. They will not do you any good when you are dying and when you need to appear before God. Even though these idols are so rich, they will never make *you* rich, not even with their riches. It is foolishness to spend your time pursuing the idols of this world. For even if you gain all the riches of this world, it will never take away your poverty before God! It will never be a payment for your sins! It cannot redeem your soul!

But Jesus can and is willing to save your soul from sin and guilt. Oh, friends, He is worth more than all in your vain life. Be wise, and follow the shepherds as they went after the angelic sermon to seek for Jesus till they found Him! Be wise like the wise men who came, asking where He was and were guided to worship the Child Jesus. I yearn that you will follow on to find Him. I yearn to see more of us bow at His feet like the wise men from the East! Don't blind your eyes, don't sell your soul! Come my friends, look at this big heartedness of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and of His infinite Father Who so willingly, without grudging, not of necessity but cheerfully gave us the most amazing gift the universe has ever witnessed: His only begotten Son!

Let this truth also encourage you. Don't stand back this as you see yourself as so black and so vile in sin. Remember that '**yet for your sakes...**' It was not because God saw anything in the Corinthians. Yet out of His sovereign good pleasure, He spared not His Son and the Son spared not Himself! Oh, maybe by the restraining grace of God you have never lived in those sins of the Corinthians, but don't fool yourselves by thinking you are better because you never lived in the gutter of sin! If you didn't live there, it is because God kept you out of it because the gutter is inside all of us. But let me encourage you: the big heartedness of the grace of God far outdoes the evil heartedness of your fallen nature. Don't hesitate to draw near to this so precious Lord Jesus Christ. Continuing in sins will bar you from heaven but being soiled with such sins as many of the Corinthians were, does not bar you from coming to the Lord Jesus Christ. He receives sinners, publicans, and harlots, and He received them and ate with them. Today He is the same as then and therefore hear His Word from His own mouth, "*And all that come unto me, I will in no wise cast out*".

All that come ... that includes you if you would only come. Let the big heartedness of the Lord Jesus encourage you, friend. He doesn't judge like we judge; He is not haughty like we are. No, hear Him, "*I am lowly and meek of heart.*" Really! He says; '*Come unto me, and I will give you rest*'. I will give you out of my riches ... no, I will give you all of my riches to purchase your freedom and to secure your future!

Maybe you say: 'I don't have any convictions worth the word conviction. How can I think I would be welcome!' Oh friends, don't let any rags of poverty keep you from Him Who calls and invites and encourages you to come to Him as you are, as the prodigal son came back to his father. Remember that no one ever became better by staying away from Him. So do not wait until you have all that you need, for then you don't need the Lord Jesus. He is come to be the Savior of sinners. Bow your knees this morning and cry to Him, "Lord, I don't have

convictions of sin; I do not have a heart for Thee but for the things of this life. Oh, save me;
have mercy upon me!

Amen.

Psalter 187: 1-4