

Thou Who Wast Rich Beyond All Splendor  
2 Corinthians 8:9, Philippians 2:5-8  
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## Introduction

Frank Houghton was born in 1894 in Stafford, England into a pastor's family. At the age of 17, he and his brother almost drowned in the sea, but were washed to shore in what they considered a miracle rescue. They both devoted their lives to the Lord, so after studying at the London College of Divinity, Frank was ordained as an Anglican priest at the age of 23. He served churches around England for the next few years, but before he turned 30, inspired by missionary Hudson Taylor's example, he joined the China Inland Mission and moved to that country. He met and married his wife, Dorothy, the daughter of another bishop, while there. They spent 30 years in missions work, but eventually returned to England, and served a few churches before retirement and death in their seventies.<sup>1</sup>

Frank was more accomplished as a writer of books than as a writer of hymns; we only have four hymns that he wrote but six books. His most well-known hymn is called "Facing A Task Unfinished," a song urging Christians to continue to be faithful in missions and evangelism. We look today at his song that has become a Christmas hymn, "Thou Who Wast Rich Beyond All Splendor." This hymn was written to honor John and Betty Stam, who were fellow missionaries to China in the 1930s, which was a period of Christian persecution. The Communist Red Army was kidnapping missionaries because they believed they represented the true enemies of the nation. In 1934, John, Betty, and their three-month-old baby, Helen, were taken prisoner by Communist soldiers and marched 12 miles from their village. The first night of their captivity, John was able to write a letter to his ministry's leaders: "My wife, baby and myself are today in the hands of communist bandits. Whether we will be released or not no one knows. May God be magnified in our bodies, whether by life or by death. Philippians 1:20." That verse, Philippians 1:20, is Paul's statement when he was imprisoned that "*it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death.*"

The next morning, John and Betty were marched to their deaths and beheaded. Miraculously, baby Helen, hidden in a sleeping bag, survived and was discovered five days later by their friends in the village. She was taken back to the States to be reunited with her extended family.<sup>23</sup> The news of the Stam's martyrdom spread all over the world. Upon hearing of their deaths, Frank Houghton wrote this hymn, basing it on two passages of Scripture:

2 Corinthians 8:9 – "*... that though He was rich, yet for your sake he became poor*" and Philippians 2:5-8: "*5 Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, 6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*"

(*"The grass withers and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord endures forever. Let's pray.*)

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<sup>1</sup> [https://hymnary.org/person/Houghton\\_F](https://hymnary.org/person/Houghton_F), [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frank\\_Houghton](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frank_Houghton)

<sup>2</sup> <https://omf.org/us/the-martyrdom-of-john-and-betty-stam/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://trinitybiblechurch.org/hymn-story-thou-who-wast-rich-2/>

Let's look first at 2 Corinthians 8 and the context surrounding it. Chapters 8-9 of 2 Corinthians is Paul's great discussions of Christian giving, teaching that those who sow bountifully reap bountifully. God had blessed the Corinthians so they should look to pass on those blessings to others. He pointed them to the example of some other churches in Macedonia who had very little but loved to donate money to help other churches. Verses 7-9:

*"7 But as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in our love for you—see that you excel in this act of grace also. 8 I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine. 9 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 by his poverty might become rich."*

So verse 9 about Jesus being rich but becoming poor is in the midst of this discussion of money and generosity. *"Though He was rich"* is not referring to Jesus' bank account, it refers to Jesus' existence before He came to earth; He was in heaven with the other members of the Trinity, the angels, and the heavenly council. It's what Jesus referred to in His prayer to the Father in John 17:5 – *"the glory that I had with you before the world existed."* Jesus could have come to earth in all His majesty and awesomeness, but instead He surrendered that exalted state for the lowly status of a servant. But how does Jesus becoming poor in status make the Corinthians (and us) rich, as the end of verse 9 says? Again, don't think money, this is the riches of salvation given to us because of His death on the cross. Jesus took on our sin, paying the penalty of God's wrath in our place. Because of that, we take on His record of sinlessness and are counted as righteous in God's sight. We go from being condemned to death and hell **without** Christ, to being heirs of the eternal riches of God **with** Christ.

Paul starts the whole section out in verse 7 by saying, "You Corinthians are great at so many things – you're smart, you're loving, you're full of faith. But there's one area that you could stand to improve in: generosity." You have to understand what Jesus has done for you so that you can strive to be like Him. When we have been on the receiving end of *"the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,"* having been given God's undeserved mercy and goodwill towards us, how can we stingy? How can we begrudge our fellow brothers and sisters in need? If we are to follow the example of our Savior and become more Christ-like, being lavishly generous will be part of that.<sup>4</sup> We are all challenged to give generously. Not only at Christmas time and not only when we are flush with cash; but at all times. Luke 16:10: *"One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much."*

Next, let us look at the Philippians 2 passage again:

*"5 Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, 6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."*

As I've already talked about a little, for all of eternity past, Jesus had lived as one of the members of the Trinity, the three-in-one God. He was surrounded by angels worshipping Him. He never got tired or hurt, He only experienced the pure joy and love that is found in heaven. And He left all of that for this broken, corrupt world. He took a human body knowing that would experience pain, hunger, exhaustion, temptation, and many other things that He had never experienced before. He didn't come as an honored king, He came as a baby born to a peasant couple, entirely dependent on two of His created beings to keep Him alive. If we think we have sacrificed anything in this life, it pales in comparison to what He sacrificed in emptying Himself and becoming one of us.

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<sup>4</sup> David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition* (Nashville: Holman, 1999).

The word “form” is used three times here: Jesus was “*in the form of God*” in verse 6, then took “*the form of a servant*” in verse 7, then He was “*found in human form*” in verse 8. Some theologians think that the word “form” means a false appearance, a disguise. In other words, He only appeared to be human, but was not truly. But that is not what “form” means here – it means “an outward appearance consistent with what is true. The form perfectly expresses the inner reality.”<sup>5</sup> This is how Paul explains the merging of the two natures within Jesus here – fully God and fully man.

Verse 6 – Jesus “*did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped.*” Even though Jesus was equal to God the Father, He embraced submission to the Father’s will for His life. It’s the opposite of Adam and Eve, whom Satan got to eat the forbidden fruit by promising, “*you will be like God, knowing good and evil*” (Genesis 3:5). Despite all the amazing blessings that God had given them, it wasn’t enough - they wanted to grasp equality with God, and it was their downfall. So there is a compelling contrast between the first Adam, who brought untold pain and misery to humanity because of his pride with the second Adam, Jesus, who brought redemption and salvation to humanity by laying down His rights and giving up His life in obedience to the Father’s plan. His ultimate act of servanthood was submitting to death on the cross where He took our punishment for us. In dying as a sinless substitute, Jesus bore the wrath of the Father that each one of us deserves. And so, back to verse 5 – we are to “*have this mind among yourselves,*” in other words, give of yourself as Jesus did.

Let’s turn to the words of our hymn. The first stanza focuses on Christ’s humbling Himself:

1) Thou who wast rich beyond all splendor, all for love’s sake becamest poor;  
Thrones for a manger didst surrender, sapphire paved courts for stable floor.  
Thou who wast rich beyond all splendor, all for love’s sake becamest poor.

The first and last lines paraphrase the 2 Corinthians 8:9 verse, changing it slightly to “rich *beyond all splendor*” and “for *love’s sake.*” Rich beyond splendor reminds us that Jesus left heaven, the place of unimaginable beauty and glory. It’s not that Jesus had a huge bank account up in heaven, it’s that His existence was fully, spiritually rich – the closest thing to perfection that we can imagine. Because God loved the world, Jesus gave all that up for His time here. He may have been monetarily poor or maybe middle-class with His family that lived on a carpenter’s salary, but that’s not the point of His poor estate – it’s that He gave up glory for a life of pain and humiliation.

The middle line reminds us that Jesus is the King of the Universe, and sits on the throne of heaven, yet He gave that up for being born in a stable. What is the phrase “sapphire paved courts for stable floor” referring to? We understand the stable floor being where Jesus was born to Mary, but does heaven have floors made of sapphire? Most of us look to Revelation 21 for the description of the New Jerusalem, but there the streets are made of gold and the foundations of the walls are made of all kinds of jewels, sapphires being one of them. But this is more likely a reference to Exodus 24 where Moses, Aaron, and 70 of the elders of Israel went up a mountain to see God, and it says that “*there was under his feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness.*”

The second stanza focuses on Jesus’ incarnation and the eternal plan of God in redemption:

2) Thou who art God beyond all praising, all for love’s sake becamest man;  
Stooping so low, but sinners raising, heavenward by Thine eternal plan.  
Thou who art God beyond all praising, all for love’s sake becamest man.

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<sup>5</sup> Richard R. Melick Jr, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon* (Nashville: Holman, 1991).

The hymn states directly that Jesus is God and that He is worthy of our praise. And paralleling the first verse, love compelled Him to take on the form of a man. "Stooping so low, but sinners raising" is a rephrasing of the 2 Corinthians "*he become poor... that you by his poverty might become rich.*" It is also the language of the "Great Exchange," the idea that Jesus was made low, He died on the cross, He took on our sins so that we could be forgiven and crowned with eternal glory. Romans 8:11 says this well: "*God raised Jesus from the dead, and if God's Spirit is living in you, He will also give life to your bodies that die. God is the One who raised Christ from the dead, and He will give life through His Spirit that lives in you.*" The bottom line is that Jesus did not just humble Himself and take on a human body to show how humble He was; He did it to accomplish something - our salvation. It was all part of the divine plan to redeem His people and save them from their sins.

The third stanza focuses on Jesus' exaltation:

3) Thou who art love beyond all telling, Savior and King, we worship Thee.  
Emmanuel, within us dwelling, make us what Thou wouldst have us be.  
Thou who art love beyond all telling, Savior and King, we worship Thee.

We have seen that Jesus became a man for us and that He died for us in the other stanzas; this stanza adds two other things that He does for us: He dwells within us and He transforms us. It's interesting that the second line starts with "Emmanuel" which means "God with us" and generally refers to Jesus coming in the flesh. But it takes it deeper to say that Jesus "dwells within us." I've sometimes been asked: "Who lives inside of us: Jesus or the Holy Spirit?" The Bible says that both do. Galatians 2:20 says, "*It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.*" And Romans 8:9: "*You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you.*"

What is our response to these glorious truths? We worship Him! He is both our eternal King to whom we owe allegiance and our glorious Savior who poured out His love and mercy on those who don't deserve it. Constantly remind yourself that you don't deserve anything, that God's work on your behalf is purely because of His kindness, not your worthiness.

## **Conclusion**

I was reminded of this recently when someone sent me a link to a recent Christmas song. It's a song that pushes back against the idea that Christmas is only for those who are jolly and festive and in the Christmas spirit. And when we sing songs like "O Come All Ye Faithful," there's a sense that we're implying that in order for you to come before God, you have to be full of faith and prove yourself worthy. And yet, none of us is truly worthy or faithful. We need to remind one another and the world that the unfaithful are invited as well. And so Bob Kauflin and Lisa Clow of Sovereign Grace Music wrote a song a few years ago that captures this idea of Christmas being for those who don't deserve it, which is all of us. It's called "O Come, All You Unfaithful." The lyrics are:

O come, all you unfaithful / Come, weak and unstable / Come, know you are not alone  
O come, barren and waiting ones / Weary of praying, come / See what your God has done  
Christ is born, Christ is born, Christ is born for you.  
O come, bitter and broken / Come with fears unspoken / Come, taste of His perfect love  
O come, guilty and hiding ones / There is no need to run / See what your God has done  
Christ is born, Christ is born, Christ is born for you.  
He's the Lamb who was given / Slain for our pardon /  
His promise is peace / for those who believe / So come, though you have nothing /  
Come, He is the offering / Come, see what your God has done.

A writer named Matt Redmond (not the singer) wrote, “We have it sunk deep into our collective cultural consciousness that Christmas is for the happy people. You know, those with idyllic family situations enjoyed around stocking-strewn hearth dreams.” Matt then goes on to remind us that Jesus came for those who needed to be rescued. In the spirit of Luke 5:32, where Jesus said, “*I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance,*” he says:

“Jesus came for those who look in the mirror and see ugliness. Jesus came for daughters whose fathers never told them they were beautiful. Christmas is for those who go to ‘wing night’ ... alone. Christmas is for those whose lives have been wrecked by cancer, and the thought of another Christmas seems like an impossible dream. Christmas is for those who would be nothing but lonely if not for social media. Christmas is for those whose marriages have careened against the retaining wall and are threatening to flip over the edge... Christmas is for smokers who cannot quit even in the face of a death sentence... Christmas is for college students who are sitting in the midst of their family and already can’t wait to get out for another drink. Christmas is for those who traffic in failed dreams. Christmas is for those who have squandered the family name and fortune — they want to be ‘home’ — but cannot imagine a gracious reception. Christmas is for parents watching their children’s marriage fall into disarray. Christmas is really about the gospel of grace for sinners.”<sup>6</sup>

You and I are fallen, broken, imperfect vessels that God has called to Himself and redeemed with a forgiving love achieved through Jesus’ sacrifice. We never forget that we don’t deserve it, but that God chose us anyways. And we are called to model that incarnational love. What does that mean, since we are already creatures “in the flesh”? It means that rather than just praying for people in need or writing checks to help alleviate suffering, sometimes we show up in person. Prayer is wonderful, giving generously is great, but Jesus’ example is showing up and being among the people. Texting and social media can connect you, but nothing like it does when you connect with others in person.

Frank Houghton saw that John and Betty Stam’s martyrdom was rooted in their appreciation for what their Savior had done for them. If Jesus could leave the majesty and excellence of heaven to come to live among us as an expression of God’s love for His people, we can suffer major and minor sacrifices and inconveniences in our lives. As we give of ourselves, we honor the Savior who gave everything to us out of His great love. That’s a message we need to hear at Christmastime and all year round. Amen.

Benediction - 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 - “*Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; He will surely do it.*”

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<sup>6</sup> Matt Redmond quote is taken from “Christmas is for Those Who Hate it Most,” [www.thegospelcoalition.org](http://www.thegospelcoalition.org), 12/16/10.