

**Text: II Corinthians 8:1-9**

**Title: “How a Poor Church did a Rich Thing”**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Let's open our Bibles together to II Corinthians 8. Last week I began a series of messages entitled “The Making of a Miracle.” We're looking at some of the more prominent miracles in the Bible, specifically those in which God moved in such a way that dramatically affected an entire group of people. I want us to understand the conditions that were present for God to do such a great work.

Before we read the text, let me give you some background that will help us better understand these verses.

Through his missionary journeys, the Apostle Paul was raising money to send to impoverished believers in Jerusalem. A severe famine occurred there along with persecution that resulted in great need. As Paul made various stops during his travels he challenged churches to take an offering specifically to assist with this great need. And he did this with the church in Corinth, giving them special instructions in the first letter.

**1 Corinthians 16:1-3 (NIV) - Now about the collection for God's people ... <sup>2</sup> On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made. <sup>3</sup> Then, when I arrive, I will give letters of introduction to the men you approve and send them with your gift to Jerusalem.**

Initially the church got excited about it. They apparently had promised to do something generous for the relief effort, but they were dragging their feet ... they hadn't completed the task. It had been a year since they had made the commitment to give, now they were not as zealous. So to fire them up, Paul uses the example of how the believers in Macedonia handled the same appeal. Here is II Corinthians 8 we are told “How a Poor Church did a Rich Thing.”

**ILLUSTRATION** – Some may wonder if this is the proper way to motivate people to give. Paul apparently thought it was. It's sort of like when the wife comes home and casually mentions that fact that her best friend's husband brings flowers to his wife every week, like clockwork. Now some guys will think, “Every week? That's a bit much, isn't it?” But then, men being men, the guy begins to think about what he could do to keep up with this other guy. And soon his wife is basking in the glow of her husband's new expressions of love.

So a little bit of this isn't all bad, is it? So to spur the Corinthian believers to honor their commitment to give, Paul tells them about “How a Poor Church did a Rich Thing.”

There were some amazing things happening among the churches in Macedonia. What if we could look at their bank statement at the Macedonia Savings and Loan? What would we see?

By the way, that's true for us as well. If you really want to know about our commitments, and about our priorities, our bank statement might be a pretty good place to start.

The financial statement of the Macedonian believers is right here on the pages of Scripture beginning in ...

**2 Corinthians 8:1 - And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches.**

As Paul talks about how a poor church does a rich thing, he gives the explanation in the very first entry in this “financial statement.” It happened because “the grace of God” was given to them. God so moved among these believers that they were enabled to do something that really was a miracle.

Their generosity could not be explained in human financial terms. It happened because of the enabling activity of God. That’s what grace is ... the enabling activity of God at work in our lives helping us to do what we couldn’t do otherwise.

The word “grace” appears frequently in this passage, and that’s an important thing to note. All this starts with God’s grace shown to us in Christ. Then it explodes out of our lives in the form of good deeds. Grace is received, and given.

Look at the next entry in their financial statement.

**2 Corinthians 8:2 (NIV) - Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.**

“severe trial” – This might be better translated “trying troubles.” The first word used is the word for the purifying of precious metals by exposing to fire. The second word literally means “crushing.” It was a word used for the crushing of grain or grapes to produce something else. Whatever the trial was, it had the potential of crushing them ... but it didn’t.

“extreme poverty” – the word means not just being poor, but being “plum poor.” And some of you know the difference. It’s not just being a little short on cash, but being destitute. It describes someone who is reduced to begging. Remember that.

**2 Corinthians 8:2 (NIV) - Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.**

“Overflowing joy” = extraordinary gladness. Isn’t that interesting ... that people who are undergoing severe trials and extreme poverty can have extraordinary gladness? And this joy is inspired, not by the circumstances, but by the grace of God that was given to them.

Listen, *without* God’s enabling activity at work in our lives, severe trials and extreme poverty produce, not overflowing joy, but overwhelming sadness. But *with* God’s grace at work in us, the opposite occurs. Our absolute confidence and delight in God causes our hearts to be filled with joy.

And notice what results...

**2 Corinthians 8:2 (NIV) - Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.**

How can extreme poverty and rich generosity appear in the same sentence? In times of hardship we tend to get more selfish. How do you explain this? Grace.

Their severe trials didn't affect their joy. And their extreme poverty didn't affect their generosity. Amazing.

I like the way *The Message* paraphrases this passages. It really gets to the meaning of the words: "Fierce troubles came down on the people of those churches, pushing them to the very limit. The trial exposed their true colors: They were incredibly happy, though desperately poor. The pressure triggered something totally unexpected: an outpouring of pure and generous gifts."

**ILLUSTRATION** – I heard about a preacher admonished his church: "Give 'till it hurts." To which a stingy soul replied, "Pastor, it hurts just thinking about giving." Maybe that's why the Corinthians were dragging their feet. The thought of giving up their hard-earned cash was too much.

But let's continue the analysis of the financial statement of the Macedonian believers.

**2 Corinthians 8:3 (NIV) - For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own,**

Their giving exceeded everyone's expectation.

**ILLUSTRATION** – There's a story of a woman who got a call from the Reader's Digest Association Sweepstakes to informing her that she and her husband had won the sweepstakes and a check for \$1,500,000 would soon arrive by special courier. (Ever dreamed of that happening?). Well, as you can imagine, the wife was absolutely ecstatic. Now all those dreams would come true! But then she remembered, her husband was just getting over a heart attack, and the doctor had said he was not to get overly excited. The wife was afraid that if she told him they had just won such a large sum, he would have another heart attack and die. What should she do?

After some thought, she decided to call their pastor and ask his advice because he had had some experience in breaking difficult news to families. So she calls the pastor and explains her dilemma. The pastor said, "I'll be right over." The pastor comes to the home and their all having a nice chat. The pastor leans over to the man and says, "I have a problem and I need your advice." The pastor takes a deep breath and goes on, "It's a hypothetical situation regarding Christian stewardship. What would you, for instance, do if all of a sudden you found out you had won \$1,500,000? What would you do with all that money?"

"That's easy," the man replied. "I'd start by giving \$750,000 to the church."  
Whereupon Pastor had a massive heart attack and died!"

Well that was totally unexpected. And so was the response of the Macedonians. They gave what they were able ... and even beyond their ability?

Actually, a more literal approach at this verse reads: "They gave what they had the power to give ... and beyond their power, they gave." In other words they were giving in power from another source ... God's power and grace.

I imagine that if they IRS would have audited these people. How could you give that much away when you had so little? Answer: Grace.

Let's examine the records further:

**2 Corinthians 8:3 (NIV) - For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own,**

Note: Paul was trying to motivate the Corinthians to "get on with it." They had been slow in stepping forward with the generous gift they had promised. The Macedonians on the other hand gave spontaneously, and quickly without being coerced.

Something internal drove them to give, not something external. It was the internal experience of grace in their hearts, not the external pressure of others.

**2 Corinthians 8:4 (NIV) - they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints.**

Note: It appears that Paul had not intended to ask the Macedonians to participate in the offering because of their poverty. It seems, however, that they raised the matter, pleading with Paul to have part in the offering. Amazing!

They were beggars. And not because they had experienced extreme poverty. No, they were beggars in that they begged for the opportunity to give.

**2 Corinthians 8:4 (NIV) - they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints.**

They begged Paul, "Let us be partners in this ministry. We want to share in this service to God's people."

**2 Corinthians 8:5 (NIV) - And they did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God's will.**

Now here we are getting to the heart of what was really happening. You see, the Macedonians had settled all this when they gave themselves to the Lord. They surrendered all that they were to Christ. But you cannot do that, and not also give yourself to the Lord's people.

Now let me wrap up here with the strategy that Paul has in mind. It's a great strategy for us as well.

#### **Four strategies:**

##### **1. DON'T JUST TALK; DO SOMETHING (v.6).**

**2 Corinthians 8:6 (NIV) - So we urged Titus, since he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part.**

Paul is saying, "Alright Corinthians. You've been thinking about doing something to help. You've even talked about it. Now "just do it."

##### **2. EXCEL IN GRACE (v.7).**

**2 Corinthians 8:7 (NIV) - But just as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us—see that you also excel in this grace of giving.**

The Corinthians excelled in these other expressions of grace, the spiritual gifts. But that was no excuse to not excel in the grace of giving.

##### **3. CHECK YOUR LOVE LEVEL (v.8).**

**2 Corinthians 8:8 (NIV) - I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others.**

You see, a careful look at our bank statements reveal how much we love our families, how much we love things, and how much we love God, and His work in the lives of people. Check your love level.

##### **4. FOLLOW THE EXAMPLE OF JESUS (v.9)**

**2 Corinthians 8:9 (NIV) - For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.**

Note: Here is one of the great doctrinal passages in the NT. We learn from these verses that Jesus' existence did not begin with his birth in Bethlehem. It says that "he was rich." Those words describe the glorious preexistence of Christ as He dwelt in the magnificent splendor of the presence of God in heaven. The words "he became poor" speak of Jesus' entrance into the human experience in a particular time and place.

Now it's one thing to be motivated by a positive example by humans. But the highest motivation is the example of Christ.

This is the grace of God that turns selfish people into joyful givers.

## **CONCLUSION**

I just couldn't get over those words in v.2: "overflowing joy ... welled up in rich generosity..."

It's God's grace welling up in your life ... or is it bottled up?

**ILLUSTRATION** – Is God's grace bottled up in your life, or is it welling up into rich generosity as it was in the lives of the believers in Macedonia. Bottle with cork a cork in it keeps the water in. The cork is removed and the contents are able to flow freely. This in turn leaves room for the bottle to be filled again and again.

Dear friends, I covet for us the experience of a great outpouring of joy in our lives that will result in something that can only be explained in terms that God did it.