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The Crown of the Incorruptible

by T. Austin-Sparks

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"An inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you..."
(1 Peter 1:4)

The verdict of the long run, that is, what abides as incorruptible when all else has passed, is the verdict upon life and work. How much will be found afterwards to the praise and glory of God? That word 'incorruptible', then, is the word which governs all, is the standard of all.

Glory the Crown of the Incorruptible

The crown of the incorruptible is glory. That is the verdict upon the life of the Lord Jesus. John says, many years afterwards: "we beheld his glory" (John 1:14). That was the issue. Neither John nor any of his fellow-apostles was very much alive to it while the Lord was with them; nevertheless He was gaining on them all the time, He was overtaking them. Eventually they were left with one deep and indelible impression which stood the test of many years, many experiences, many trials, much suffering; and at last, at the end of that particular phase, the apostolic age, John, the one lonely remaining apostle of the whole group, wrote the verdict: "We beheld his glory" - the glory of the incorruptible.

Peter also, at the end of his life, when he was saying that he was about to be offered up, recorded the same verdict. Referring to that wonderful experience on the Mount of Transfiguration, he wrote: "We were eye-witnesses of his majesty. For he received from God the Father honour and glory" (2 Peter 1:16-17) - the verdict of the incorruptible.

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews, whom I always suspect as being Paul, said: "We behold him

who hath been made a little lower than the angels, even Jesus, because of the suffering of death crowned with glory and honour" (Hebrews 2:9). Whether that was Paul or not, it was someone who passed the same verdict; but Paul did join in with the words: "Now unto the King eternal, incorruptible... be honour and glory". The verdict of the incorruptible is glory.

We have been seeing that the glory of Christ was due to certain incorruptible characteristics. First, His union with His Father; something so deep, so real, so unshakeable, as to abide all tests and go right through, in spite of all the efforts of man and demons and the very Devil himself to part the Two, to come between them. That union with the Father was uninterrupted; it went through. And we said that the Lord Jesus made it perfectly clear that such a union as existed between Him and His Father could exist between us and Himself, and with the Father; not in Deity, but in real, living organic oneness and fellowship; by being born of God. That union is the basis of glory. It is something incorruptible.

Man Made for Glory

'O loving wisdom of our God!
When all was sin and shame,
A final Adam to the fight
And to the rescue came.

'O wisest love! that flesh and blood,
Which did in Adam fail,
Should strive afresh against the foe,
Should strive and should prevail.'

Paul it is who calls Jesus "the second man", "the last Adam". Our hymn-writer made a little slip, and so we correct; not a second Adam but a *LAST* Adam. A second *MAN*, a last Adam. Paul indicates that God takes another step in a second man, and a final and inclusive step in a last Adam. Christ is God's next move and Christ is God's final move, but Christ comes into the place which the first Adam held as representing the intention of God concerning man. As we are thrown back, by this way in which Paul speaks of Him, to the first man Adam, we are shown by the Scriptures that God's intention for man was that he was to be glorified, to be "crowned with glory" (Hebrews 2:7). He was made for glory. That is the definite statement of Scripture.

But that glory was conditioned upon life, a peculiar life, the particular life of God. The glory was contingent upon man having that life, because the glory was the very essence of that life; that particular divine life held all the nature and potentiality of glory. So the glory depended upon his having that life, and that life was dependent upon faith and obedience - upon whether man would believe God to be true, to be honest, to be faithful, that God meant what He said: and so believing, would act accordingly, that is, be obedient to God. The life was contingent or dependent upon that.

Man's Falling Short of God's Glory

But we know that man did not believe God, did not trust God, did not take the attitude that God was to be trusted. He disbelieved, and acted accordingly; he disobeyed. The result was that he brought into his own being, and into all his seed, first corruption and then death. A state of corruption entered into his moral being, and that corruption led to death. Thus, for that man, the prospect of glory ended, the intention of his being came to a full-stop. No glory for that man. Heaven is closed, the glory departs; man is excluded.

But man strangely did not accept that divine verdict. This thing had become such a positive factor in his being, this corruption was so active, that he refused to accept the verdict, and set out upon a course of making his own glory, getting glory for himself. The history of man is the history of an effort to get glory without getting it from God. That covers a very great deal. It started very early in the Bible story, and we see it going all the way through; but the glory of man, as we have said earlier, always ends in corruption. However much glory he draws to himself, however much he achieves of that which is called "the glory of man" it ends in corruption. We who are at the end of the history of this world - as it now is - are seeing how the glory of man is bringing his own undoing, the most universal corruption. That is the glory of man. Is that glory? He cannot help himself, he is energised by another power, he is not his own master. He calls it glory and the thing which is so strange is the blindness of man all the time. He wages a war and calls it 'a war to end war', and he wages a worse war and thinks and believes that this surely is the end of war, and on he goes and still it gets worse and worse; and now it is true that we are in sight of the disintegration of humanity, and the possibility of the wiping out of the human race. We understand today, more than ever it could possibly have been understood before, the meaning of our Lord's words: "except those days had been shortened, no flesh would have been saved" (Matthew 24:22). Is that not true? That is our present condition - corruption with false glory.

Christianity a System of Glory

But another Adam came. There are three statements made regarding Him. "The Word was made flesh" - that is the Incarnation. "In him was life" - that is the incorruption. "We beheld his glory" - that is the effect of the life. Glory works out from the life, and this final Adam, this last Adam, retrieves the loss of the first: He secures a life that was missed, secures the incorruptibility that was never known, and secures the glory. That is the story of Christ in three words - life, incorruptibility, glory. In those three words He comes to us, and says: 'Have faith in Me, believe in Me, and life, that life, is for you' and through that life offers us incorruptibility and glory. From one point of view Christianity may be described as a system of glory. God is called "the God of glory" (Acts 7:2). Christianity is a family and its Father called: "The Father of glory". Paul spoke of: "the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory" (Ephesians 1:17). Christ, who brought Christianity into being, is called: "the Lord of glory" (1 Corinthians 2:8). The Holy Spirit, the energy of this whole heavenly system, is called "the Spirit of glory" (1 Peter 4:14). So the three Persons of the divine Trinity are all related to glory, all interested in glory.

The Father produces the whole system of glory; it emanates from Him as Father. The Son, as the Lord of glory, is governing everything in relation to glory. What a glorious statement that is, how much is gathered into it - the Lord of glory. So we have in our Bible a whole book containing the record of the activities of the Lord of glory. Situations and positions seem at first sight all the work of the Devil, all the work of devil-inspired and energised people - situations so difficult that they look hopeless. And that book contains the verdict of the long run, that every one of those situations was turned to glory, something glorious came out of every hopeless and impossible situation. The Lord of glory was seeing to that.

The Spirit of glory, so called by Peter in a context when believers are passing through fiery trial; they are persecuted, they are misunderstood, they are slandered, they are misrepresented. And Peter says: 'It is all right, if you take this humbly, if you take this without bitterness; the Spirit of glory will rest upon you'; that is, in adversity believers find that right in the midst of persecution and opposition, something of inexplicable joy rises up, a deep and wonderful peace, The persecutors hurl their stones, or whatever else they may do, and somehow there is a glory in the heart. That is

the story of many a martyr, of many a murdered servant of God - the Spirit of glory. Glory is not some place to which we are going presently, although glory may be a sphere in which everything is glorious: glory is for now. It is a part of the very life that we have now received. It is the essence of Christ in us, as the hope of glory. It is the very nature of what we have received through faith in Jesus Christ. The Lord wants us to have a life and to live according to that life, which will produce more and more glory in us. It will again be only as we live according to that incorruptible life that the glory will be manifested.

Christ the Pattern

So we have to look again at the One who has set for us the pattern, indicated the principles of the incorruptible which result in glory; to look at what was true of Him, as this incorruptible One, that resulted in God giving Him glory. One or two things I will indicate because they are very important. Firstly, it was His inward separation from sin. There was a great gap between Him and sin. It is said of Him that He "knew no sin" (2 Corinthians 5:21), that He was "separated from sinners" (Hebrews 7:26). That is, that in His nature He was separate from the rest of men, there was an inward separation. Now, we are not constituted as He was, as sinless, but we are told and made to understand in the New Testament that that inward separation which was so true of Him, can be made true in us. Paul has a way of putting it. He calls it: "the circumcision of Christ" (Colossians 2:11), and he says that it is a thing of the heart, an inward separating between what we are in ourselves and what we are in Christ, the putting of a gap between the two. And then the New Testament says that by the Holy Spirit's enablement, by the Holy Spirit's power, you need not live on the ground of what you are in yourself, you can live on the ground of Christ, and living on the ground of Christ you need not be the slave of yourself and your sinfulness, you are delivered. There is something that has separated inside, and if you live on the ground of what Christ is and not on the ground of what you are in yourself, you are on the ground of the incorruptible and you are on the ground of the glory.

That sounds very technical, I know, but it is very practical. We know it very well. We who are Christians know that a cleavage has been made in us, and that we are now two people. There is that side which is our new life, our new relationship, which is our Christ-connection. There is that other side which is still our old relationship with the old Adam. It is there: it is not cauterised, it is not annihilated; and we know now that it is for us to take continually the power of the Holy Spirit, in virtue of that separating cross, to keep on the Christ side, on the new side; and if we do, we know that it is glory. Very often we know more of the meaning of the glory by a touch of the other. Step over on to the other side and give way to the old Adam, and you know quite well there is no glory there.

Now that thing existed perfectly, fully and finally in the case of the Lord Jesus; but the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of that glory has come into us to make the divide, and the Christian who has the most glory is the Christian who is walking most on the Christ side of the line. There was the divine in Him, of course; there were no two natures, there was no need for dividing between a sinful nature and a divine nature in Him; but there was a constant gap between Him and sinful man. The enemy, the great enemy of the glory, was ever seeking to contaminate Him, involve Him, pollute Him, corrupt Him. Do not let us think that He never had to resist anything, that He never had to say 'No' to another. That matter of how a sinless Man could be tempted is of course an old theological problem, but there is no doubt about it that He fought our battle in all reality. So that is the first thing - an inward separation, a divide, and on the one side the new life, the ground of the incorruptible, which is the ground of glory. "This mystery," says Paul, "which is Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:27).

Outward Separation from the World

The inward separation had its outward effect or outworking in separation from the world, and no one will think for a moment that I mean physical separation from the world. No, He was here right in it, in its throng and press, in its affairs, with everything pressing upon Him; never seeking to live the life of a hermit, detached from the world, but right in it - and yet while rubbing shoulder to shoulder with the world, having all the contacts of this world in every form, there was a distinctiveness about Him. He was not a part of it, but apart from it, a wonderful outward separation. While being able to talk with the grossest and the most defiled and the people most involved in this world, He was yet by no means a part of their system, their order, their way of life, but outwardly separate from the world. The most unhappy people in this world are Christians who try to have both worlds. It is my experience that if you want to find a miserable Christian, you must find what is called 'a worldly Christian', one in whom a constant civil war goes on between two kingdoms. Yes, a Christian in this world, trying to get something out of this world is a miserable creature. I used to illustrate it by the old Border battles between Scotland and England. The people who lived in the Border country never had a day's rest all their lives. One day it would be the overrunning from one side, the next day from the other side, and these poor people on the Border line had the most miserable existence possible. It is like that. You try to live on a border-line or border-land Christian life and you will be a miserable person, without rest or peace or joy or anything else. You will never know exactly where you are, who is your master, which way you are going, to whom you belong. It is a miserable existence.

The Lord Jesus was not like that. He was on one side and absolutely on one side. The border line was a very wide one for Him. Indeed, there was no border line. He was attached to heaven, and He maintained that attachment. You and I, if we are going to know glory now and glory afterward, will have to be on the same ground as He was in this matter - no compromise with the world; in it, having to do our work here, having to meet people here, having to be friendly in a way, yet not one with their nature, their realm, their way. It is a difficult thing - not as easy to do as to say - it works out in many practical ways. The point is that Christ was wholly for God, and because of that, His Father was the Father of glory, and the Spirit of glory rested upon Him, and the Father could give Him glory.

Christ's Humanity was Glorifiable

Christ's humanity was a glorifiable humanity. Not all humanity, indeed no other humanity, is glorifiable. His was a unique humanity, capable of being glorified, and it was glorified. Paul speaks of His body as a glorified body. He said that we are to be "conformed to the body of his glory" (Philippians 3:21). He was capable of being glorified, and that actually took place on the Mount of Transfiguration. He had fought through all those tests and trials, all those efforts to compromise Him, to make Him let go and become involved. He had fought them right through to the pinnacle of that mount. There was nothing more for Him to do, so far as He was concerned; anything more was for us. At that point He had proved Himself worthy of being glorified, and as Peter says, on that mount God gave Him glory. In the transfiguration of the Lord Jesus, God is showing in a representative Man what He intends for you and for all - that we shall be transfigured, glorified, made like Him. His was a glorifiable humanity. His humanity as glorified is the standard in heaven to which God is working for every believer in Jesus Christ. It is a Man in glory glorified, and He is there as the last Adam, the second Man. Those very titles have no significance apart from other men of the same kind. What does 'Adam' mean? What does 'man' mean, if it is not an inclusive and comprehensive and representative designation? The Scripture states that quite clearly: "the firstborn among many brethren" (Romans 8:29). This is what He was to be, as many other Scriptures confirm.

I believe that was the secret of the apostle Paul's life, from the very first day of his conversion, right up to the end when, after so many years, and after seeing and knowing so much, he was still found aspiring, still stretched out. He had seen Jesus of Nazareth glorified, and he said: 'That is the on-high calling!' This is so much in keeping with what we have read in the letter to the Hebrews. We read: "We behold... Jesus... crowned with glory and honour" and then we read on: "Wherefore, holy brethren, partakers of a heavenly calling..." (Hebrews 3:1). What is this heavenly calling? It is Jesus crowned with glory, as the Man according to God's eternal intention for man. Christ in a glorified humanity is the model, the pattern, the representation of God's intention for all who believe in the Lord Jesus.

So then, if we have received that eternal life, if Christ is in us, dwelling in our hearts through faith, this is our destiny. We have the basis of an incorruptible life, which will eventually emerge in the fullness of that glory which He, as our Representative, now knows. Faith not only believes for the forgiveness of sins, not only for pardon, not only for justification and redemption. Faith in Jesus Christ apprehends Him as the very humanity to which we are to be conformed. Faith takes hold of Him as He is now, and says: 'He is as He is because God wants me to be like that'; and, if we did but know, the Spirit of glory is operating for us on that basis every day, to make us like Him, to transform us that we may be transfigured, to conform us to His image. All the meaning of the activities and methods of the Spirit of God in our lives is to lay a foundation for glory.

And it is on these principles of the incorruptible. May the Lord teach us how to keep clear of this corrupted world, how to keep clear of that wretched, corrupt old man. You remember that magnificent, though so simple, picture that Bunyan has given us of the man with the muck rake who has a crown of glory over his head, who is so occupied with his rake and so obsessed with what is down in the mud, that he does not see the glory but misses it all. That muck is our old man, and we are always turning him over to see if we can find something good in him, some glory. We are seemingly incapable of learning this one lesson, that there is no glory in that realm. We should finish all these investigations and lift up our eyes to the Lord of glory. This is how we will find the way of glory. Let us keep on the glory line.