

Dear Christian Friends,

It's the American Story—upward mobility. If you know the name Horatio Alger you know exactly what I mean. In the late 19th century, Alger wrote a series of young-adult novels about the impoverished rising to middle-class lives of comfort through hard work and determination: from rags to riches. Now, in the midst of a presidential campaign, we are once again hearing about the American dream: that every generation deserves a better education and a better standard of living, and better circumstances than their parents. From whatever rags you feel you are in, yes, you deserve the riches to which you are entitled.

But we all know it doesn't always work that way, does it? Yeah, we've all heard tales of ne'er-do-well children from well-to-do families, given every advantage and blowing it all, going from riches to rags. We shake our heads and wonder what could move people to self-destruct like that.

But that's the other side of the American story, isn't it? Socioeconomic mobility can work both ways. Oh, (to quote the late great Paul Harvey), through hard work and maximum effort you can rise from the so-called lower class to the middle class. If you're really on the ball, you might even rise from the lower class to the upper class. Industrialist Andrew Carnegie did. But much more common, you can also fall from the upper class to the lower class. Historical accounts of the Great Depression describe the images of former millionaires selling apples on the street after the stock market crashed: from riches to rags.

In today's Epistle we heard a sad story about downward mobility. St. Paul is grieving over his own people, Israel. Talk about being given every advantage, untold riches! Paul lists them:

- God had adopted them as his own.
- He blessed them with the visible sign of his presence, the כְּבוֹד יְהוָה—*the glory of the Lord*—that bright cloud that filled the tabernacle and Solomon's temple.
- As his children, they were heirs of the covenants: the promise God made to Abraham of a great nation, of the land of Canaan, and of a great blessing to come to all nations through Abraham's offspring.
- They were heirs of the promise God had made to David of an eternal dynasty; a descendant who would sit on the throne of Israel forever.
- They were heirs of the covenant at Mt. Sinai, where God promised that he would be their God and they would be his people and would serve him—and then gave them his divine instruction, the Torah.
- They had for centuries worshiped the Lord in his temple in Jerusalem. Even after Solomon's temple was destroyed, they returned from exile and rebuilt it—and, by the time Paul was writing, Herod the Great had enlarged it so that it was again one of the wonders of the world.
- They had the heritage of the patriarchs.
- And now, from them had come Jesus *the Christ, who is God over all, forever to be praised.*

How many advantages could one nation enjoy? How many riches could they possess? But Paul finds himself grieving because Israel appeared to be throwing it all away, willfully embracing rags rather than riches, by rejecting their Messiah Jesus.

In our text for today we only hear Paul's grief for his people. We don't hear the rest of chapters 9-11, where he works through to the conviction that God has a plan for saving Israel, too. We'll get to that next week.

But today's Old Testament Reading gives us a clue of what we'll talk about next week. Elijah is grieving over his people Israel. They had broken God's covenant, torn down his altars, and murdered his prophets – squandered their riches. In frustration and exasperation Elijah cries to the Lord, ***I alone am left, and they are seeking to take my life.*** But the Lord assures Elijah, “You're not as alone as you think you are. I have still reserved seven thousand in Israel who have not bowed down to Baal.”

Yes, sometimes people throw away all the advantages they're given. Often times, that can't even explain why. But human nature being what it is, it's a good bet that downward mobility will be much more frequent than upward, and that sinners will throw away their blessings more often than they'll treasure them. We read the story of Israel's unfaithfulness in the time of Elijah, when they succumbed to the lure of Baal. It's easy to understand why they would. Baal wasn't a demanding God like the Lord. Baal's job was to give pleasure and prosperity. Don't most of your neighbors seek the same things? We read Paul's grief over Israel's rejection of Christ. But look at it from Israel's point of view. Jesus was crucified. Everything about him said *Loser!* As far as they could see, he was a total failure. Who wants to be associated with one of those? Everyone wants to be a winner. Accept a crucified Messiah? Don't be ridiculous!

That's why even Christians are tempted by the theology of glory, attracted to that brand of preaching that promises that *Christ the Winner can make you a winner too! All you need do is accept Christ and you can overcome all your problems, conquer all you bad habits, and become healthy, wealthy, and wise. Not only that, but you'll have a storybook romance in your marriage, and your children will be*

respectful and obedient and won't dress or do their hair of pierce themselves like all those other weird kids. Accept Christ, and you'll get promoted at work and have the respect of everyone around you. Give up the rags and riches can be yours!

Trouble is, that kind of *win with Jesus* religion so often lets you down. You *accept Christ* and still struggle with bad habits, still have trouble paying your bills, still have to work at your marriage, and your kids still make poor choices. *But I accepted Christ? How can I still be a loser? Could it be that I didn't accept Christ enough? Am I doing something wrong? Should I be doing something better?*

It's just at this point that some well-meaning friend will tell you, *You just need more faith!* Right! So, you dig down inside yourself and try to whomp up some more faith—and it just won't whomp!

But that's why we need to hear the Word from today's Gospel. Peter was experiencing the ultimate downward mobility! He was sinking beneath the waves. When Peter's faith gave way and he began to sink, it wasn't Peter's faith that saved him. It was Peter's Lord! ***Immediately Jesus stretched out his hand [and] took hold of him.*** Faith doesn't save. *Jesus saves!* Faith is simply a conduit for salvation, a straw, if you will, through which you get to drink in God's saving grace. Peter may have been choking on lake water at the time, but as he drank in God's saving grace *through* faith, not because of *his* faith, he experienced true upward mobility, rising from rags the rags of fear to the riches of salvation as Christ's hand gripped his and refused to let go.

And Jesus has done the same for you. As we take for granted all the advantages the Lord has given us, as we sink in sin, he reaches out to you and catches you before you fall away from him. He lifts you up out of the swirling sea of your sin and

shame. He rescues you from your doubt and despair. And he brings you into the ship of the church, where he offers healing and hope and saving grace through his Word and Sacraments.

This is the advantage you have been given, the riches with which you have been blessed. When we were nothing but filthy rags, he died for you. He took all of your sins, all of your doubts, all of your fears, carried them to his cross and then died in your place, paying your penalty. And it was then that in place of all those things he gave you his love, his forgiveness, his very life.

This is the advantage you have been given. Yours is the washing of Holy Baptism, where you were buried into that death of Christ, all your sins were washed away, and you were brought to faith in him. In Baptism you were made one with Christ.

This is the advantage you have been given. Yours is the Holy Communion, where Christ gives you the very body and blood he gave for you, where he comes to live within you. In the Lord's Supper Christ becomes one with you.

This is the advantage you have been given. Yours is the communion saints, the assembly of the faithful, where Christ and we and our fellow believers all meet together in sweet fellowship to celebrate the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting that he has given us.

This is the advantage you have been given. The ultimate upward mobility – from rags to riches. Christ has pulled you up from the lowest class of sinner, washed you, cleaned you, and made you nobility, a holy nation, a royal priesthood of those who are his cherished possession forever. Praise be to God! **Amen.**