

Captives of Christ

By William den Hollander

2 Corinthians 2:14

“But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him.”

Throughout his epistles, Paul describes his relationship as an apostle with Christ in various ways. Most familiar is his reference to himself as a ‘slave/servant of Christ’, found in the opening remarks of most of his letters. Elsewhere he refers to himself as an ambassador of Christ, even an ambassador in chains. In the passage above, Paul is also speaking about his position as herald of the good news. But he draws on an image that may not resonate as readily today. He evokes one of the most powerful and tangible expressions of Roman power to illustrate the nature of his apostleship, the Roman triumph.

The triumph was a spectacle of epic proportions and the height of any general’s career, awarded only for exceptional victories. It lent the general so much prestige that when the Roman empire began to be ruled by an emperor rather than the Senate celebration of a triumph became restricted to the emperor and members of his family. It was not safe to share this honour with anyone else. For the underling generals, a lesser version, the ovation, had to suffice.

The triumph proper was conducted in the city of Rome, but the image was a familiar one to anyone in the provinces of the Roman empire who would have experienced mini-triumphs when generals went on victory tours, especially in the east and Greece, or when the emperors

paid visits to various large cities throughout the empire. Triumphs were also often memorialized on public architecture, such as the Arch of Titus in the city of Rome, which celebrated the victory over the Jews in AD 70. It is not surprising, then, that Paul could use this technical language for his Corinthian audience. The triumph was an event shared by all under Roman sway.

Before we turn to Paul’s use of this image, however, I’d like to paint a picture in your minds of the supreme spectacle that was the Roman triumph. Prior to the procession entering the Triumphal Gate, the city itself was made ready. The temples were thrown open, festooned with garlands and smoking with incense. The people lined the parade route, which wound through or past every building that could serve as a vantage point for the spectators. This was an *event*. The Jewish historian Josephus claims that not a soul could be found indoors when the Flavians (Vespasian, Titus, and Domitian) celebrated their victory over the Jews.

Meanwhile, the procession ordered itself in preparation for the triumphal entry. The first to enter the city was the Senate, followed by a group of trumpeters. Behind these forerunners came the heaps of spoils from the enemy, carried along on floats like a Santa Claus parade, along with, not nativity scenes or sleighs and reindeer, but re-enactments of particular battle scenes. On the heels of these floats came the prisoners, specifically chosen for their ‘stature and beauty’: first the leaders and their families, followed by a host of lesser captives. Any wounds or bodily disfigurements were covered over by fine garments. A ragged bunch of enemies would hardly reflect well on the triumphing general. Instead, the enemy and rivers of spoil were paraded along to magnify his victory and encourage the crowds to celebrate the might of Rome and the splendour of the man of the hour. For directly behind

these prisoners came the triumphal chariot. The general, looking out over his defeated enemies and gazing out over the adoring crowds, was in his glory. In fact, the glory was so great that a slave traditionally rode along with the general, whispering in his ear, “Remember, you are not a god”, while the soldiers in his train were given license to shout rude and obscene jokes at him, all in an attempt to keep him human.

In this fashion the procession wound through the imperial forum, the market place, the Circus Maximus, past all the crowds seated on scaffolding, on the steps of temples, or the benches of the theatres and the circus. Finally, it ascended the Capitoline hill, on its way to the great Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus, where the headline captives were executed and sacrifices were offered. The day closed off with feasting throughout the city.

So where amidst all this pomp and circumstance did the apostle Paul envision himself? We could let our imagination run wild envisioning our participation in these victory celebrations as soldiers in the salvation army triumphing along with our victorious general, without the rude joking of course. But is this what our passage is suggesting? The NIV 1984 (above) is somewhat ambiguous, but gives this impression. The KJV made its interpretation clearer, translating the passage as, “Now thanks [be] unto God, which always causeth us to triumph in Christ.” The phrase Paul uses, however, (θριαμβευοντι ημας) does not normally have this sense. Instead, the verb is almost always used to indicate the act of *leading someone as captive* in triumphal procession, as indeed Paul uses it in Colossians 2:15, where he writes, “And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.” Here the powers and authorities are clearly in a position of submission to Christ, not triumphing alongside him.

What then does Paul mean? Let me explain briefly. First of all, the image is now clear. Paul is a captive and, by extension a slave, led in

triumphal procession with Christ as the *triumphator* following behind in his four-horse chariot. Christ is the glorious general, but no slave whispers in this general’s ear for he *is* God! As for Paul, in his role as prisoner he serves to highlight the glory and majesty of the victorious general and to broadcast the activity of God in Christ as a fragrance to the crowds. Moreover, the fate that awaits Paul as prisoner is entirely dependent upon the goodwill of the general.

Read in this way, our passage presents a vivid picture of one of the wonderful paradoxes of Christianity. Captivity to Christ leads to life, not death. Slavery means freedom, not bondage. The cross represents victory, not shame. When we suffer, we are more than conquerors. These paradoxes find their height in the appearance on earth of the God-man, Jesus Christ.

The world scorns this as foolishness but it is the power of God for those who are being saved (1 Cor. 1:18). For the unbelieving Roman the idea that Paul, a Roman citizen himself, would imagine himself among the captives in a triumphal procession was absurd. But for the believing Corinthian, Paul’s image illustrated the blessed backwardness of the Christian message. Paul was certainly involved with the glorious task of spreading abroad the fragrance of Christ (thinking perhaps of the smell of the flowers and incense that hung over the city), yet the glory is all Christ’s. The captives are there to magnify the victory of the general. *Our* weakness underlines *his* strength. Later Paul puts it differently, “we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us” (2 Cor. 4:7). It is our absolute *insufficiency* that reveals the total *sufficiency* of our gracious God.



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