

April 4, 2021

BLESSED CAPTIVES OF THE RISEN CHRIST

2 Corinthians 2:12-3:3

*(5 of 22 in a series through 2 Corinthians)*

When we think about the resurrection, we rightly see it as an act of victory. There's a reason that we sing "See the Conqueror" as a celebration that Christ walked out of the tomb. It's because Jesus has conquered Satan, sin, and death through his act of rising from the dead. One of the most powerful images we have of Jesus' conquest over the enemy through his life, death, and resurrection is found in Colossians 2:15 as we are told that our God "disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in [Christ]."

And, as believers, we get to celebrate in this. We are united with Christ in his resurrection, and so death is not the last word for us, sin doesn't have mastery over us, and Satan has lost his ground of accusation against us. But there is a wrong way of thinking that believers can develop in light of these glorious truths. That wrong way of thinking says something like this, "If we are united with Christ so that we benefit from his blessings, then that must mean that as children of God we shouldn't face suffering or poverty or weakness in this life—at least in any lasting way. After all, Jesus has overcome all of that."

Now, no doubt, many of you might recognize this kind of thinking in the so-called "prosperity gospel" or "health and wealth theology" that tells us that the believer shouldn't walk through times of suffering, or poverty, or lasting pain. It says that if a believer is going through suffering, for example, then it is most likely just that he just doesn't have the faith to claim the blessings that belong to him as a child of God. And, of course, we know that this teaching is unbiblical. Sure, we'll one day have no pain, no suffering, no needs, etc., but that day isn't going to be our experience until Jesus comes back and raises us from the dead. What we may not realize is that the Corinthians had strongly felt the lure of this kind of thinking many years prior to the prosperity gospel taking off. In 1 Corinthians Paul had sarcastically written to them, "Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! Without us you have become kings! . . . We are weak, but you are strong" (1 Cor 4:8-10). His sarcasm was meant to make them see the absurdity of how they were thinking. They were acting as if all the blessings that would be theirs at the resurrection belonged to them now. And how this is relevant for our text is that it shows how they might have been prey to some false teachers coming in and telling them to dismiss Paul and his teaching because compared to them, Paul was puny. He didn't have all the worldly success and ease of life that they did, as they touted their outward appearances. They were wealthy, didn't have much suffering to point to, were healthy, were great speakers, and came with letters of recommendation. Paul, on the other hand, was often destitute, his life full of suffering, imprisoned, spoke plainly, and worked with his own hands to provide for himself.

That's the attack that Paul is up against as he writes this letter of 2 Corinthians. But what we see this morning is an entirely different understanding of what Christ's resurrection means for his followers in this life. In other words, Paul is going to show the Corinthians that the reason they

are easy prey for this false teaching that sounds a lot like the so-called prosperity gospel is because they misunderstand who believers are and what we are to do—in light of Christ’s resurrection—at a foundational level. And that’s what I want us to see in our text this morning as we look at 2 Corinthians 2:14-3:3. Who is it then that Paul wants the Corinthians to see that believers are in light of Christ’s resurrection? He wants them to see that we are blessed captives of Christ to spread his glory.

### **We are blessed captives of Christ to spread his glory**

Now, as Paul gets into this image, he first reaffirms his love for the Corinthians. He mentions in verses 12-13 that after he’d sent Titus to find out how the Corinthians had responded to his latest letter (the painful letter), he’d come to Troas and had an open door for preaching the gospel. Most likely he’d been invited to address the Jews at the synagogue and/or address the Gentiles in the public square. But, Paul says, “My spirit was not at rest because I did not find my brother Titus there” (2:12).

If you understand what Paul is saying, you can no doubt identify with him. You have a job to do, but something is weighing on your heart so that you can’t focus and get it done. That’s where Paul was. He loved these Corinthians so deeply that he was eager to hear from Titus how they responded to his letter. But Titus wasn’t in Troas. So, instead of taking advantage of the open door for the gospel there, he left and headed to Macedonia in hopes of running into Titus. It’s as if he couldn’t do anything without first hearing from Titus about the Corinthians. And we know from chapter 7 that he did indeed find Titus there, and Titus gave him the good news that Paul’s letter had led to their repentance.

But this recollection of Paul’s feeling of weakness as he attempted to minister the gospel leads him to reflect on who we are as believers in light of Christ’s victorious resurrection. He writes in verse 13, “But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere.”

What does Paul mean here? With this reference to a “triumphal procession” he’s referring to how the Roman Empire would have something akin to a victory parade after conquering their enemies. The generals and other leaders would be in front, the people would likely line the street and praise them as they paraded through, incense and other aromas would fill the sky, and behind them would be their captives—those whom they were defeated and now were parading about in chains, awaiting their death. This is no doubt the kind of thing Paul has in mind when he thinks of God conquering his enemies through Christ’s death and resurrection and writes, (as we noted previously), “He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.” Christ is the conquering king, and every day as his gospel is proclaimed, Satan, sin, and death know that their end is sure.

But what does this have to do with us? Paul doesn’t in this text speak of rulers and authorities being paraded about. He says, “Christ always leads *us* in triumphal procession.” Now, you could say that what he means is that Christ leads us about in this world as victors. Again, by faith we

share in the blessings of Christ as we are united with him. But I don't think that's what Paul means. Remember the reference I made to him writing sarcastically about the Corinthians already being rich and already being kings? Here's how he continues that section in 1 Corinthians 4. He writes, "I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men. We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute. To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we entreat. We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things" (1 Cor 4:9-13). That doesn't sound like Christ parading us as the obvious victors in this world, does it?

No, rather, Paul is comparing us to those who were taken captive and paraded through the streets by the victor—the conquered enemies whose purpose was to magnify the strength of the conquering king. That's what Paul says we are. But—and this is key—we are *blessed* captives, aren't we? Our own sinful rebellion has been overcome by Christ so that we have been made his, and we are ever blessed because of it. But it does mean that our mission—our entire life—just like those conquered enemies in the Roman triumphal procession, is to bring glory to our conquering king as his blessed captives.

Do you see how Paul is turning the attack of these false teachers on its head? By arguing they're superior to Paul because they have all of these outwardly impressive things to point to about themselves, they're fundamentally missing who we are as believers. We are those whom the resurrected and victorious Christ has taken captive so that we might be his and so that he might use us to spread the fragrance of his glory and victory throughout the earth. That's why you and I exist as children of God. And everything we go through in life we can see through this perspective. But there are a few things Paul wants us to know as we think of ourselves as Christ's blessed captives who are charged to spread his fragrance. He wants us to know that as we proclaim Christ's victory, its reception will be varied.

### **As we proclaim Christ's victory, its reception will be varied**

Now, by spreading the fragrance of our victorious Christ, I believe Paul is referring to us as those who are Christ's witnesses, that is, who *speak* the gospel. The reason I think that is because as Paul will speak of spreading Christ's fragrance, he'll ask in verse 16, "Who is sufficient for these things?" That is, who is sufficient to spread the fragrance of the risen and victorious Christ? So when he answers this, he says, "In the sight of God we *speak* in Christ" (v. 17). And I think the "we speak" is a way of saying, "We speak the gospel" or "We bear witness to Christ."

Moreover, speaking the gospel is indeed a proclaiming Christ's victory. Think of it this way, when Jesus rose from the dead, he rose as the victorious king. Every enemy of his will face his judgment as Satan, sin, and death have been defeated. However, the end has not yet come. Christ is the victor, but we will not see the full fruits of his victory until he returns and every enemy is made a footstool for his feet. We, as believers, have been made his blessed captives.

We who were once his enemies have been reconciled to him through faith. And now, before the day of judgment comes, we have been sent ahead, into all the world, to tell all who stand in opposition to him that judgment is coming, and yet there is an opportunity for them to be reconciled to the coming and conquering king. If they'll repent and believe in the one who lived, died for our sins, and victoriously rose from the dead, they can be reconciled through repentance and faith to him and escape judgment. But if they refuse, they'll face his wrath, as will all his enemies. That's what we're doing as we spread the gospel—which Paul compares to spreading the fragrance of Christ. And yet he wants us to know that the reception that message gets will be varied.

He writes, “For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life” (vv. 15-16). As we go forth speaking the gospel in this world, there will be some who will hear the gospel, and it will be glorious to them. The gospel will carry an aroma that is pleasing and beautiful and life-giving. They'll find it so attractive, they'll give their life to follow Christ, and they'll have eternal life. They'll move “from earthly life to eternal life,”<sup>1</sup> or as Paul says, “from life to life.” For others, however, the aroma will not be a pleasing one. They'll hear the gospel, and it'll only have the effect of hardening them more in their rebellion and resistance.

We no doubt remember the commissioning of Isaiah, when he saw the Lord high and exalted, and the Lord said, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” and Isaiah said, “Here am I! Send me.” (Is 6:8). Well, we may not remember as well that as Isaiah preached to the people the Lord told him his message would “Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed” (Is 6:10), something that Jesus picked up in explaining why he spoke in parables in Mark 4:10-12. Paul is telling us here that our gospel message will have that same hardening effect on some who hear it. For them, it will be a hardening fragrance whereby they will move from death in this life to eternal death in the age to come. In other words, there's no neutrality with the gospel message. If you hear it, you must either move toward bowing your knee to Christ in faith or you are hardening your heart and moving closer to eternal death and hell.

And we need to understand that. As Christ's witnesses, we will go forth spreading the gospel aroma, but its reception will be varied. In fact, Jesus told us that the way is broad that leads to death and many will follow it, as compared to the few who follow the narrow road that leads to life. And the reason it is good for us to remember this is so that we don't grow weary or discouraged in the task. In the parable of the sower, there are four different ways the seeds respond as they are tossed out, and only one of them resulted in life. But don't let this slow us down. We are blessed captives of Christ, meant to spread the aroma of his gospel to all men indiscriminately. In other words, we are called to be faithful witnesses, even when the fruit of that witness isn't always encouraging.

---

<sup>1</sup> Dane Ortlund, *2 Corinthians*, ESV Expository Commentary (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 433.

But Paul does remind us of something that *is* encouraging. He reminds us that you and I have been commissioned by God for this very task.

### **We have been commissioned by God for this very task**

At the end of verse 16 Paul asks the question, “Who is sufficient for these things?” That is to say, who is sufficient to represent Christ in his death and resurrection and spread the aroma of his gospel message? And, of course, you would expect Paul to say that no one is sufficient for this. But Paul’s answer is that he is sufficient and (by extension) so are we. And there are two reasons why we should understand Paul as saying he’s sufficient—by the grace of God—for this task.

First, remember that Paul is arguing against the claims of these false teachers who are saying that they are sufficient and Paul isn’t. Paul is arguing in this text that he’s been called and commissioned to this task, not them. Therefore, it wouldn’t necessarily strengthen his defense to say that no one is sufficient. But there’s another reason I think he’s answering this question of sufficiency affirmatively. Paul makes arguments for what qualifies him to the task of spreading the aroma of Christ in the gospel. He says, “For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God’s Word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God in the sight of God we speak in Christ” (v. 17).

In other words, Paul isn’t bearing witness to Christ because he found it a financially lucrative path to go down. He’s not a peddler of God’s Word, trying to make a buck (which is a subtle suggestion that his opponents are). Rather, he does this with sincerity as commissioned by God. Do you see? Paul has been commissioned by God, who took him captive by his grace, to be his ambassador. That’s what makes him sufficient—that God has commissioned him to do this.

And by extension, we too are sufficient for this for the very same reason. Now, we didn’t have the kind of Damascus road experience that Paul had where the risen Christ called to him from the sky, but that same risen Christ has charged his church throughout this age to go and make disciples of all the nations (Matt 28:18-20). The Lord has chosen you and me—by his grace—to be his witnesses, to spread the news of his victory, and to spread the aroma of the gospel until he returns again. So, let us be found faithful. And, finally, remembering that we labor, longing to see transformed lives.

### **We labor, longing to see transformed lives**

It’s as if in the midst of this, Paul wants to stress how odd it is that he has to commend himself to the Corinthians. He’s stressed to this point that he fits the very bill of who a follower of Christ is. He’s the blessed captive of Christ who is paraded around so that even his suffering speaks of Christ’s glory. He’s the one who speaks the gospel so that some believe and others are hardened. He’s been commissioned by Christ to do this very thing and isn’t a peddler of God’s Word. But more than all of that, the Corinthians themselves should be recommendation enough for Paul. Their lives were transformed through his ministry. He shouldn’t need letters of

recommendation for them. *They* are his recommendation. He writes in 3:1-3, “Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you, or from you? You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all. And you shall that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.”

In other words, the mere existence of the Corinthians and their transformed lives through Paul’s ministry is Paul’s recommendation. It’s as if walking around, they are living letters from Christ, delivered by Paul, to commend the gospel he preaches and ministry he labors in. He’s amazed that they might want to dismiss him because of a lack of outward impressiveness when they should see themselves as vindication of his ministry.

This is a reminder to us that in a world—very much like the world of the Corinthians—where fame and followers and prestige and riches are prized, we must not strive for any of that. Our aim is to see transformed lives. Let it be enough that you can invest in the lives of others and see the Word of God transform them.

There’s one hanging picture in my office that almost no one sees but me. If you’re sitting at my desk you can see it off to the left of the bookshelves in front of you. It’s a framed picture of the text of 2 Corinthians 3:2-3. I have it as a reminder that what I’m striving for is not for all those things the world says we have to aim to achieve. Rather, my aim is to see people’s hearts changed and lives transformed through the Word of God. On the day of judgment, I pray that I might point to you all, even as you all point to one another.

That’s one of the glorious things that the resurrection means for us. Christ is victorious. We are his blessed captives to spread his fragrance everywhere. And in as much as he uses us—even in our sufferings—to help others love Christ because they’re reminded of how good and glorious he is, we are blessed. So on this Easter Sunday, let’s refocus ourselves by remembering who we are and why we exist. We have been graciously captured by Christ so that we might be used to spread his glory to others. May we be faithful in this task. Amen.