

Downward and Outward
II Corinthians on Walking in the Way of Jesus
Part Two: 2.14-16: Conquered by the victory of Jesus

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This is the second sermon in our fall sermon series called Downward and Outward, about what II Corinthians teaches us about walking in the way of Jesus.

As we shared last Sunday, the reason we picked this book is because of the way Paul so beautifully and so counterculturally leads his life.

Here is the way one historian describes ancient Corinth and the surrounding Greek and Roman culture:

Of all the cities in the Greco-Roman world, none engendered an atmosphere of self-centeredness more striking than Corinth.

Everybody yearned for an admiring public. The pursuit of upward mobility turned into a quest for applause . . . esteem . . . power and glory.

Status was an obsession . . . and arrogance and haughtiness were commonplace. (Tim Savage, *Power Through Weakness*, 23, 41, 78)

By following the way Jesus mapped out for us by his own sacrificial life, Paul walks in the opposite direction and lives by a dramatically different set of values from the surrounding culture, which was confusing and off-putting to a world caught up in the values of success and power and glory.

Unfortunately, more than any other church he ministered to, the Corinthian church was infected by the same values and perspective of the culture around them.

Within the church we see evidence of pride and self-centeredness, a preoccupation with achievement and success, and a posture of strength, self-sufficiency and self-promotion, and they see God as the way to get the life of success that they want.

So, of course, they look at Paul's ministry on the basis of the surrounding culture's up-and-to-the-right, bigger-is-better standard of success, and they find him wanting. They see him as a failure.

In this letter Paul says that his life doesn't conform to secular standards of success at all. There's only one point of reference that means anything to him when it comes to evaluating his life and ministry, and that is the life and ministry of Jesus.

In the passage we are looking at today Paul brings us straight to the heart of what makes his life and ministry so distasteful to these proud Corinthians, and so honoring and pleasing to God, and so confusing to the surrounding world, attractive to some, and horribly off-putting to others.

His is a life ruled over by Jesus, It is a downward life of self-emptying humility, not an upward life of self-seeking ambition. And it is an outward life; rather than being bent in upon himself, his is a life poured outwards in love.

Listen to these words at the heart of chapter two.

II Corinthians 2.14-16

But thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives in Christ's triumphal procession and uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are an aroma that brings death; to the other, an aroma that brings life. And who is equal to such a task?

When Paul speaks here about a *triumphal procession*, he has in mind a very specific sort of victory celebration that stood at the heart of Roman culture.

Think ticker-tape parade – our country's most illustrious honor.

Like the ticker tape parade, the Roman Triumph, began as a spontaneous celebration, but soon evolved into an elaborate ritual as the city of Rome honored military victors with spectacular parades through the heart of the city.

Roman culture was predicated upon the pursuit of glory and honor. Every Roman citizen sought recognition, and there was no higher glory than the triumph. More important than a statue or arch or medallion in your honor, a triumph secured your memory forever in the heart of the people.

The titles *Imperator* and *Triumphator*, given to those honored in a triumph, dripped with glory. They were the celebrities of ancient Rome, looked upon with awe. Even their children held an exalted role in society.

To better understand what Paul intended to convey in this passage, let's join the gathered crowds and watch a procession parade by.

After a Roman general conquered a distant enemy, he turned and made for home, bringing his plunder with him. When he arrived at Rome, the triumphal procession entered the city through the Triumphal Gate. From there it made its way in a counter-clockwise spiral, like an upside down question mark, around and through the city to its very center, winding along roads lined with cheering, white-robed citizens.

It threaded the length of the Circus Maximus, the largest chariot-racing arena in the Empire, that held more than 300,000 people. It climbed up the wide Appian Boulevard beneath the arches of a three-story-high aqueduct to the Colosseum. Then it took its final turn into the very center of the city.

The Sacred Way in the Ancient Roman Forum



There, it slowly advanced along the *Via Sacra*, the Sacred Way, in the heart of the columned and temple-packed Forum, arriving eventually at the base of the Capitoline Hill.

The Capitoline was the high rocky knoll that served as the symbolic center not only of the City of Rome but of the entire Roman Empire. On top of it the majestic Temple of Jupiter Best and Greatest towered, the most important of the many temples in Rome. Here, at the base of the Temple of Jupiter, the Triumph culminated, with all eyes on the Emperor.

But it wasn't enough merely to parade the victorious general through the streets. The triumph was designed not only to present Rome with its latest hero, but also to *re-*present his military victory so that the people of Rome could experience it for themselves.

So it became an elaborate procession, and each part of the parade was meant to move the crowds to crane their heads down the line toward the coming Triumphator and to ask: "Who is this?"

The spectacle began with a troop of trumpet players and dancers. They marked the event as a unique occasion for joy and celebration, fueling a sense of expectancy.

Next in the procession came women throwing flowers. Fragrance symbolized a person's reputation, the sweet smell of flowers wafting outward just as the honor of one's name spreads ahead of him. Rose petals carpeted the Roman streets, flooding the people with rich fragrance.

After the rose petals came a recital of the Triumphator's military exploits. Sometimes this was a series of huge placards on which were listed all the conqueror's achievements.

At other times it came in the form of massive murals on which were painted each of the main stages of the successful campaign. There were even times when the Emperor's victories were recreated on a series of giant floats with three-dimensional depictions of the march, the pivotal battles, and the surrender of the enemy.

The captured riches came next, carried on men's shoulders or in carts pulled by animals. Stacks of gold, silver, gems, and coins were paraded past, as well as weapons, shields, helmets, catapults, chariots, prows of captured ships, volumes taken from the royal library, art treasures, exotic plants and animals, and tableware from the royal palace.

Relief I from the Arch of Titus in Rome



Here's a relief from the Arch of Titus in the Roman forum that shows some of the plunder being paraded in the triumphal procession after Rome conquered Jerusalem in 71AD.

Especially prized were the symbols of royal power: the throne, crown, and scepter, proof of the enemy king's downfall, as well as sacred objects taken from the nation's temples, proof that their gods were defeated as well.

In some triumphs, in addition to all the plunder, rescued Roman prisoners, men and women set free from the enemy's shackles, now walked with joy before their fellow citizens in Rome.

After the captured riches came the final and most important part of the advance procession – even more important than all the collected wealth: the enemy captives, the defeated enemy.

Sometimes these captives were treated with dignity, riding in wagons or carried on pallets. At other times, they were stripped and chained and made to walk, or thrown into an ox cart and made to kneel or bow, or even placed on a float and forced to reenact the humiliating moment in which they surrendered themselves to the Triumphator.

These captives occupied the second most important position in the triumph. They were led “before the chariot,” right in front of the Imperator himself, putting their former power and glory on display in such a way as to make the Imperator’s greater power and glory self-evident. It was this juxtaposed power – glory lost by one, glory gained by the other – that gave the captives their preeminent place in the procession.

As the fallen leaders were paraded along, the crowds savored the irony and made the most of it. They heaped shame and abuse on the captives. As they were led by, the favorite chant of the crowds was “*Duces ducti! Duces ducti!*” “The leaders are now being led!”

Being led before the chariot was considered to be the greatest possible humiliation for a foreign leader. Several rulers took their own lives rather than be subjected to this shame. Cleopatra and Mithradates both did. So did Vibius Virrius, who said before he killed himself, “I will not be bound and dragged through the city of Rome as a spectacle in a triumph.”

Only now, after all the procession of trumpeters, dancers, and flower throwers, of murals displaying the victories, of treasure brought from afar, and of captives brought low – only now does the *Triumphator* come into view, riding high up over his captives in his victor’s chariot.

Relief II on the Arch of Titus in Rome



This is the relief from the opposite side of the Arch of Titus in Rome. It shows Emperor Titus as the *Triumphator* at the end of the procession after he destroyed Jerusalem.

The Triumphator was dressed as a god, wearing a purple toga covered with stars. His face was painted red with cinnabar like the statue of Jupiter in the temple.

The Triumphator rode in a specially designed chariot used only for triumphs. It stood tall, like a high round tower, and was far more ornate than ordinary chariots, made of ivory and gold and studded with gems and pulled by four white horses.

From this moving tower the Triumphator looked down upon the world. Often he held a globe in his hand as a way of declaring that he was a world conqueror, and that the empire he served was a kingdom that made claims upon all the world.

Standing behind him in the chariot was a slave in the role of *Nike*, the Victory goddess, holding the victor's laurel crown over the Imperator's head, symbolizing that even the gods themselves celebrate this hero.

Near the Imperator were those who shared in his glory. Family members, especially the general's children, were sometimes invited to ride in the chariot with him. Behind the Triumphator walked the members of the Roman Senate who had ordered the campaign and conferred the triumph. They too basked in the Triumphator's honor.

Finally, completing the procession, came the Imperator's army, the victorious soldiers who fought with him on his campaign. Wearing sparkling new uniforms and brightly polished armor, and newly decorated with campaign medals, they sang songs celebrating the exploits of their victorious general and shouted, "*Io Triumpe!*" "Hurray to the one who triumphs!"

For the Triumphator, the day marked the beginning of a life of unparalleled honor and glory.

But what became of the captives? The prospect was bleak. Roman law prescribed that captured enemies be put to death. And, in fact, some triumphs ended with the execution of every one of the conquered enemy. But the ultimate fate of the prisoners was up to the Imperator, and sometimes their lives were preserved.

For those sentenced to a life of servitude – sent to work in the mines, or row in the galleys, or sold into slavery. But some who were given reprieve experienced a far different fate.

Central to the symbolism of the triumph was the implicit claim that all the world belonged to the Roman Empire, and all the people of the world should be its subjects. So it was not uncommon for these defeated enemies, having been led in triumphal procession, not only to be allowed to live, but to become Roman citizens.

For them, the triumph became not an end of life but an end of a way of life, a rite of passage into “Romanness.” his or her transformation into citizen and friend.

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Let me take you now from the crowning moment of triumph in the Roman Empire, as the Triumphator came into the city of Rome to enter into his glory, to the crowning moment of triumph in the Kingdom of God, when the Triumphator Jesus came into the city of Jerusalem to enter into his glory.

Matthew 21.7-8

They brought the donkey and the colt and placed their cloaks on them for Jesus to sit on. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road.

Matthew 21.9-10

The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted,
“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”

When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked,
“Who is this?”

Jesus enters into Jerusalem in an act of conquest, but he conquers not with power but with sacrificial love, and the decisive battle by which he conquers is one in which he lays down his own life rather than taking the life of another.

Paul picks up this upside-down parallel. Drawing on imagery that would have been familiar to every person in the Empire, he writes this key passage in his second letter to the Corinthians:

The New American Standard version captures the literal Greek text. It says simply

II Corinthians 2.14

But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph in Christ . . .

If Jesus is the Triumphator, then what does it mean for us to be led in triumph? Which is our place in the procession?

Some interpreters want to identify us as the children of the Triumphator riding with the conqueror and sharing his glory.

Others see followers of Christ as those soldiers behind the chariot, sharing in the Imperator’s accomplishments.

It's also been suggested we should see ourselves among those citizens who were once captives in a foreign land and now march with joy and freedom in the procession, set free and home at last.

But more and more scholars are convinced, and I certainly am, that the expression Paul uses here, being "led in triumph," is a technical term that means being led *as defeated prisoners before the chariot*.

Jesus is the victor, and we are the defeated and captured enemy, led before the chariot as conquered captives.

The NIV translation captures it perfectly:

II Corinthians 2.14

But thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives in Christ's triumphal procession . . .

* * *

If our place in the triumph is not in the place of glory, or even of shared glory, but in the place of defeat, what does that mean for us? What are the implications?

Well let's just glance at the whole passage again.

II Corinthians 2.14-16

But thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives in Christ's triumphal procession and uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are an aroma that brings death; to the other, an aroma that brings life. And who is equal to such a task?

Paul says that there is a way that our being not just recognized as ones who *belong* to Jesus, but our being recognized as ones who are *conquered* by Jesus, is the very thing that God will use to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere we go.

So first, what does it mean to be conquered by Jesus?

Well, a conquered person no longer just thinks about himself or herself. Now their thoughts are filled with the desires and interests of the one to whom they belong.

And a person who is defeated gives over control of their life and their possessions to someone else. They're not in charge anymore. They relinquish their freedom. The person who has conquered them now has the final say.

Those are the kinds of things that someone might expect to see in someone who had been conquered.

Think back to the triumphal procession, when the captives walked just in front of the Triumphator: the greater the defeat of the captive, the greater the glory of the captor.

The greater the evidence in our lives of our defeat – in other words, the greater the *relinquished* power, the greater the *yielded* glory, the greater the *submitted* will, the deeper the *humility*, the greater the concern for others instead of ourselves – the greater is the glory that will return to Jesus our King.

This is God's intended outcome as he captures us and brings us into Jesus' triumphal procession: that glory goes to *Jesus* and not us; that *his* reputation and not ours increases in the eyes of those we encounter; that *he* increases while we decrease.

That fits with the imagery of an aroma or fragrance spreading from us wherever we go, an aroma that to some smells of life and to others smells of death. What does Paul have in mind here? What aroma is that exactly?

The first thing that comes to mind when we think of an aroma is a sweet fragrance, like the fragrance of those rose petals that were thrown on the street at the start of the triumph.

But I'm convinced Paul has a different aroma in mind. Paul was a Pharisee. He knew the Old Testament inside out. Again and again in the Old Testament, whenever sacrifices were offered, the result of those sacrifices was described as "an aroma pleasing to God." (Numbers 15.3 for example)

Jews weren't the only ones who would have heard the word that way. Paul lives and ministers in the Greco-Roman world, where every city was dotted throughout with temples and street corner altars and religious shrines in homes, and sacrifices were offered not only in worship services but in every market place and at every meal in every home.

When Paul speaks of an aroma that spreads the knowledge of God, an aroma that is life to some and death to others, Paul is speaking of the aroma that rises up from a sacrifice.

The sacrifice is us – living sacrifices, given over to God, holy and pleasing to Him, as Paul says in Romans 12.1 – as Jesus conquers us, leading us through a death to self in order that we might live our lives to him.

CS Lewis wrote: "Every story of conversion is the story of a blessed defeat."

For Jesus to receive the glory and honor that he deserves as our conquering king, we must live and love and serve in a way that reveals his having defeated us.

And Oswald Chambers says, “We are here to exhibit one thing – the absolute captivity of our lives to Jesus Christ.”

How does your life reflect his conquest, his victory over your rebellious will, his having brought your life under his loving rule, the absolute captivity of your life to him?

The more people see in us evidence of his having brought us into submission under his kingship – qualities such as:

- a willingness for our life’s path to be redirected without our demanding that it go the way we think it should go
- a steady faithfulness in our calling.
- A life in which we are not the ones who occupy the center.
- time, talent, and treasure spent for the pleasure of others than myself.
- a life of love.
- unrushed time for others.
- possessions held loosely.
- living a generous life

The more people see in us those kinds of evidence of our lives having been brought into submission under his kingly rule, the more his reputation will increase in the eyes of those God places around us.

Living in such a way that people look at us, and then look behind us and saying, “Who is this who explains you, who has transformed your life in this way?”

That is how the fragrance of the knowledge of him is spread through us to the people God has placed around us, the neighbors we are called to love.

So we surrender to Jesus, and invite him to rule over us, to conquer us and make us his own. In his poem “The Temper,” George Herbert prays that God’s throne and His rule would be firmly established in his heart, inviting God to “keep a standing Majesty in me.”

Admittedly to some, our surrendered lives will seem like nonsense, and will be offensive. I still remember the unmasked disdain and condescension I received from a neighbor in Colorado Springs when he found out I was a follower of Christ.

But to others that same yielded life will be attractive and compelling, the fragrance of life. Like one of my neighbors here.

I greatly enjoyed building a relationship over the years with my delightful down-the-street neighbor, Suresh. Unfortunately, he and his wife moved several years ago.

He was one of the most gracious people I've ever met. Though he is an atheist from a Hindu background we often talked over the years about the Christian faith, and we drew close enough over the years that he was able to gain at least a glimpse of what made me tick.

One day Suresh was walking past our house and he stopped to chat. As we were talking, he told me that he wanted me to speak at his funeral.

"I hope you don't have plans anytime soon!" I said.

He grinned his mischievous grin and shook his head. "No, but you never know."

I was humbled by his request. "Why?" I asked. "Why would you ask me?"

"Because you're a good man."

"No, Suresh, really. I'm not." I said. "But I follow a good Master."

"That's what I mean. I see you living out your allegiance to Jesus. That's why."

I was floored. Somehow in the midst of my too-busy, too-much-about-me life, Suresh saw a glimpse of my "blessed defeat" – a glimpse of the dominion of King Jesus over my interior, of his standing majesty within, and that was compelling to him.

I share that story, obviously, not as a reflection of my own virtue, but of God's conquering work in me, as He lays claim to the whole of my life, and makes it more and more about him.

* * *

Here are two questions of us to prayerfully ponder as his followers:

First, to what extent have I let, to what extent am I letting, Jesus master me? As we've pointed out, this isn't our work. Jesus' mastery over my interior isn't something that I can muster up in myself. But this is his work with which I cooperate: opening up my life to his sanctifying Spirit, inviting his transforming touch, saying "yes" whenever I hear his invitation. How well am I cooperating with his goal of inner mastery?

And second, to what extent do I let others see evidence of my surrender to him, of his "standing majesty" in me . . . and thereby allow the fragrance of the knowledge of Him shine through me? How well am I getting out of the way so that others see Him more than me?

Closing Hymn**I Surrender All**

All to Jesus I surrender
All to Him I freely give
I will ever love and trust Him
In His presence daily live
All to Jesus I surrender
Humbly at His feet I bow

Worldly pleasures all forsaken
Take me, Jesus, take me now
I surrender all
I surrender all
All to Thee my blessed Savior
I surrender all