

## God's Conquered Enemies

II Corinthians 2:14-15

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When I was in Bible College, one of my professors told us, "The first rule of context is that context rules." He was absolutely correct. And ever since, I have been extremely uncomfortable with reading any passage or verse apart from its overall context. And I must say, I know I have been spared many dangers, toils and snares by always insisting on context. So let me tell you, regarding our subject text, we must pause and examine carefully the historic and grammatical context of one word, the understanding of which, can make all the difference for how we approach the Christian life.

All that said, what we are about to embark on here is the development of a hermeneutic, meaning a frame or paradigm through which we are to understand not only our text, but the entirety of second Corinthians, and even the entirety of all of Paul's letters and the New Testament as a whole! So, let's now read the text.

<sup>14</sup> 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. <sup>15</sup> For we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. <sup>16</sup> 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? <sup>17</sup> Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, as those sent from God.

### Captives Led in Triumphal Procession

Right out of the gate, our text presents us with a very important key word, that is, the Greek word, *thriambeuonti* (pronounced Three-am-boyoo-o), in verse 14. This word is translated using many English words, "To lead in triumph." Now this is a very delicate point. Is it as the KJV, "which always causeth us to triumph in Christ"? If that is the case, then Paul is saying that the triumph is his, in Christ. But does God always cause us to triumph in Christ? One must admit it is appealing to consider that we, like Paul, are triumphant in Christ. Much of Western

Christianity, especially in America, would be very much at home with a triumphalist faith. And so, the KJV seems straightforward enough. Hafemann points out that even John Calvin could not imagine “for theological reasons, that “Paul means something different from the common meaning of the phrase . . . ’ and so Calvin also interpreted the verb *thriambeuein* to mean ‘to cause to triumph.’”<sup>1</sup> In Calvin’s view, God is the cause of Paul’s triumphant life; it is Paul who is triumphant.

But is it proper to impose our theology upon any text? If not, then there is a problem with the way most interpreters have approached this text.

The problem is this: the ancient Greek lexicon does *not* allow for the translation as found in the KJV, for in the lexicon the word meaning “to lead in triumph” was used only to “put on display” such as in the Roman triumphal procession in which to be led in triumph could only mean to be *the captive* of the one leading. The NIV (2011) therefore translates the verb as “leads us *as captives* in Christ’s triumphal procession” (NIV, 2011, emphasis mine). The ESV also translates more accurately, “who in Christ always *leads us in triumphal procession.*” Far from being triumphant, when properly understood, it is the conquered that are *led* in triumph. So, it is not Paul who is triumphant. Then who is?

Commentator, Craig Keener, notes,

Roman conquerors would lead their shamed *captives* in a ‘triumphal procession’; in this period, only the emperor was allowed to lead triumphs. Christ had triumphed and now led believers in him *as captives* (the image is similar to that of being Christ’s servants); (emphasis mine) <sup>2</sup>

Paul is saying *not* that he is the triumphant one; rather, that he is Christ’s captive — it is not Paul, therefore, but God in Christ who is the triumphant One. This interpretation also fits much better with the entire context of II Corinthians in which Paul continually boasts in his weaknesses and in God’s power displayed in those weaknesses (see II Corinthians 12:9-10). Hafemann also writes that by the nineteenth century any attempt to understand the verb

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<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *Second Corinthians, Timothy, Titus and Philemon*, p.33 (cited in Hafemann, 1990, p. 16-17.

<sup>2</sup> Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary*, Second Edition (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), p. 503.

translated “to lead in triumph” in a factitive sense, as Calvin did, was recognized and ‘pronounced on high authority’ to be “philologically impossible.”<sup>3</sup> This means that Calvin, and nearly all other commentators since, including the revered KJV translators, are inaccurate. Victor Furnish affirms this conclusion, writing, “KJV’s ‘causeth us to triumph’ has no lexical support.”<sup>4</sup>

This is what happens when we allow our predetermined theology to determine interpretation as opposed to following the biblical text where it leads, even if it challenges our theology. The better reading therefore is that of Paul having been subdued by the conquering Christ and led as his captive, as in the NIV translation.

*Now, this is not detail for the sake of detail, so please stay with me.*

Hafemann is also careful to note, Paul’s conception of,

All Christians as ‘enemies’ before their reconciliation ‘by the death of his Son’ (Rom. 5:10) . . . his ability to picture those Jews who were rejecting the gospel as ‘enemies of God’ (Rom. 11:28), and his judgment that those who reject his example and gospel ‘live as enemies of the cross of Christ’ (Phil.3:8), it seems very natural to find this same predicate applied by Paul, by implication, to himself as he was prior to his Damascus road experience. It was as a conquered enemy, then, that Paul, as a ‘slave of Christ’ was now, to take the image in its most specific meaning, being led by God to death in order that he might display or reveal the majesty, power, and glory of his conqueror. Or as Paul puts it, ‘thanks be to God who always leads us in triumphal procession.’<sup>5</sup>

Let’s look now at our text in light of this view of the underlying Greek word.

“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” (II Corinthians 2:14). Paul, and by extension, all believers, are in the role of conquered enemies of God. It is God alone who is in triumph, by his Messiah, and believers are now led as his captives in Christ’s triumphal procession before the world. We are on display daily as those former enemies who have been conquered and are now Christ’s captives.

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<sup>3</sup> Hafemann, *Suffering and Ministry*, p. 17.

<sup>4</sup> Victor Paul Furnish, *II Corinthians* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984), p. 174.

<sup>5</sup> Hafemann, *Suffering and Ministry in the Spirit*, p. 32-33.

Now here is the central point: In ancient Roman processions, those led captive most often were executed at the end of the procession. We can add, in this sense, the old man, who was in league with the spiritual forces opposed to God, is indeed conquered and assigned to execution. The letter to the Ephesians reminds us that before regeneration, we all “followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient” (Ephesians 2:2). And the Greek verb in our text is also used by Paul at Colossians 2:15 to tell us those same spiritual forces have been disarmed at the cross: “having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, *triumphing* over them by the cross” (Colossians 2:15). This is the only other place the Greek verb defined above is used in the New Testament. So we who were once enemies of God, have been crucified with Christ (Galatians 2:20-21); we have died with Christ (II Corinthians 5:14); and the spiritual force with which we were once in league, have been disarmed and also made a public spectacle (Colossians 2:15).

And it is important to note also that while all this is true, and while the old man died with Christ at the cross, to be Christ’s captive in the procession is to receive not execution as was typical in the Roman procession, but a reprieve to newness of life in accord with his grace, and then to continue in his service. *For it is Christ who has taken our shame and execution.*

The greater context of II Corinthians affirms this status: “For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again” (II Corinthians 5:15). Christians are Christ’s conquered captives, slaves of Christ, however, with the end result not being shame and execution, but deliverance and newness of life. If Paul had written, “God always leads us as captives in triumphal procession” apart from that procession being Christ’s, we, too, would have faced execution. But we are conquered, taken captive, and put on display to show God’s great mercy and kindness toward us in Christ the one who took our shame and our just execution.

This continues Paul’s theme from his first letter to these same Corinthians, “You are not your own, you were bought at a price” (I Corinthians 6:20a). Instead of shame and execution, we have been conquered in order to be given newness of life and adoption into the household

of the triumphant One, in the Son. And it is this great truth for which we are on display to the world. And how the world responds to this display, we will take up in the next lesson.

### **Conclusion**

The reason it is important to be accurate regarding the meaning of the Greek verb in our subject text is that Paul's point here creates for us a hermeneutic, a framework through which we are to understand his apostolic ministry. For instance, what we have discovered here is the propensity to read the New Testament as a personal triumph as opposed to that of a conquered enemy of God and slave of Christ, which is the apostolic viewpoint. Now, this requires for most of us that we put on a new pair of glasses through which to read not only second Corinthians, but the entire New Testament. There is One who triumphs, and that One is God in Christ, and that by the cross. The world does not comprehend such a triumph but instead views the cross as shameful defeat, as foolishness to the wise and a stumbling block to those who trust in personal merit before God.

What does this mean for the Christian life?

It means we approach daily life as those who no longer belong to ourselves, but to the One who has conquered us and whom we now serve as slaves. But we also have been granted reprieve from the execution which we deserved, for Christ himself has taken that death, and we then have been given newness of life in him, but forever as those who belong to him, and not as autonomous agents. So we serve as conquered slaves, but slaves of the One who took our execution; indeed, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, that we might become in him the righteousness of God" (5:21). We who were once enemies of God, slaves of sin, are now slaves of righteousness (Romans 6:17-18), and children of God after the model and image Jesus Christ, the Son of God. **AMEN.**

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