

Always in Triumph!

Genesis 8:13-22; 2 Corinthians 2:12-17

September 27, 1998

“Thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumph, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing.” This prayer, which spills over into a profession of faith, not only describes Paul’s ministry to the Corinthians but also articulates for us today the gospel of Jesus Christ. In so doing, it helps to tell us who we are and what we are about as the church of Jesus Christ here at Grace Covenant.

“Thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumph.” Can Paul really mean that? “God...always leads us in triumph”? Paul had written earlier “of the affliction we experienced in Asia; for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself. Why, we felt that we had received the sentence of death” (1:8b-9a). Later in this same letter he writes, “Five times I have received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I have been beaten with rods; once I was stoned. Three times I have been shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brethren; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure” (11:24-27). So how can Paul write, “Thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumph”?

Whatever it means, it cannot mean that life is easy for a minister or for any Christian. Whatever it means, it cannot mean that we will not be exposed to hardship, danger, toil, and trouble. Whatever it means, it cannot mean that we will move from one readily apparent victory to another or from one easily observable triumph to another. It cannot possibly mean any of that, for those things do not happen.

And yet, it is true. The triumph is one of the deep, abiding realities of life for which Paul gives God thanks and praise. What does it mean? I submit to you that it means, first of all, that the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ shall always triumph. The proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ shall always triumph. How do I get that? For one reason, Paul uses the word “us.” The letter is sent from “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother” (1:1), two Christian ministers, precisely in their capacity as preachers of the gospel of Jesus

Christ. That is what they do. That is what this letter is about. That is why they are writing the Corinthians. So the praise of God's victory is not about personal triumph, theirs or anybody else's, but about the triumph of the grace and mercy of God in and through their preaching and in and for the life of the church.

This is good. Personal triumph always comes to an end. Death finally takes us every one. But the grace of God is larger than personal triumph. The victory of God is eternal. And it can be trusted in, counted on, and rejoiced in, and thanks be given to God for it, even in the midst of personal loss, hardship, and defeat. In fact, given that the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ necessarily focuses upon his suffering and death upon the cross, the reality of our suffering would not only not count against the truth of the gospel, but instead would tend to confirm it and perhaps even help to communicate it. Do you see what I am saying? Paul was not triumphant because he avoided suffering. He did not. The gospel was triumphant in Paul because it was communicated to people not only despite his sufferings but actually in and through his sufferings. It was not just that his suffering proved his sincerity, as important as that was. More than that, his suffering showed that the crucified Christ was somehow in him, so that people could—as it were—see Christ in him, and they could believe in the truth and reality of what he was saying. “Thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumph.” That is, the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ shall always triumph.

Another reason for understanding this verse in this way is that Paul has been describing his journeys not only to Corinth but to Troas and to Macedonia. The point is not that he entered every city as a victorious, returning conqueror with a military procession—he did not—, but rather that every where he preached the gospel of Jesus Christ, grace abounded, sin was forgiven, people believed, the Spirit moved, lives were changed, hearers were reconciled to God and so to each other, and a congregation of the church of Jesus Christ was started. This was his victory. This was his triumph. This is the greatness of God's grace and the wonder of God's gospel for which he gave God thanks. This is the truth and the victory and the joy in which we still live today. Thanks be to God.

It is also the case that when Paul writes of triumph, he is telling us about the irresistible or invincible grace of God. When God loves you, and seeks you out, and calls you his own, and takes away your sin, and restores you to himself, guess who wins. It is hard to run away from that. When God wills that you are saved, guess what. You are saved. Some of you here or listening on the radio may be hearing this for the first time. We want you to know about the irresistible and invincible grace of God Almighty. There is a power, and a wonder, and a joy in the gospel, not only in the actual preaching of it, as halting as that may be, and not only in the actual advance of the church from one city to the next, as important as that may be, but

also in the sheer cosmic victory of good over evil, of life over death, of Christ over his foes, and of God over all who dare to stand against him. It is exciting, and awe inspiring, and gratitude evoking, to be caught up on the winning side in the great scheme of things, in the grand movements of history, in the final sweep of destiny. Someday the sun and moon will shine no more, but the word of God shall stand forever, and we shall be gathered around God, singing hymns we learn and rehearse today. “Thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumph.” Can we join Paul in that prayer? The proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ shall always triumph.

After this praise and proclamation, Paul explains that God “through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere.” Can you believe it? Not only shall the gospel of Jesus Christ always triumph, but also the gospel of Jesus Christ shall be proclaimed through mere ministers of the Word. “Through us,” write Paul and Timothy. “Through us,” points to all the ministers ever since. This is not bragging. Right away Paul asks, “Who is sufficient for these things?” The answer, of course, is no one. That is the point. That is why this human agency is noteworthy. No one is sufficient, in and of himself or herself, to proclaim the gospel, yet in the providence of God it has been ordained that the precious, life-giving gospel of Jesus Christ shall be proclaimed through mere, human ministers of the Word. What was God thinking? Could not there have been a better way? That is not ours to say. It has been determined that through the failing sermons of human preachers, the knowledge of God shall fill the earth as the waters cover the sea. Not through magic, not through medicine, not through money, but through the speaking and hearing of the word of God shall people come to know, love, believe, and obey the God and Father of our Lord, Jesus Christ. I am not making this up. Paul did not invent it. This does not depend upon a decision of the church. This is as it has been determined to be by God. You may say that you do not like it, but your argument is not with me. You may say it is old fashioned, but the church is not at liberty to change it or to abandon it. God has determined that the knowledge of God, the love of God, and the gospel of Jesus Christ shall be spread throughout the world by the preaching efforts of us mere, mortal ministers of the Word. We can like it or not, but that does not matter. The fact is, the preaching of the gospel by mere human ministers has been given to us as a means of salvation. We can be grateful and put that to good use, or we can ignore it, belittle it, or even attack and denigrate it to our own loss and detriment.

So, what are the results of this preaching? What happens when this is done? What takes place when the word of God is rightly proclaimed? Paul writes, “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.” The immediate effect of the true proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ shall be to create division. It shall be perfume to some and stench to others. Some will love it and others will hate it. Some will commend it and others will vilify it. Some shall hear it and receive it with tears and great rejoicing. Others shall refuse to hear it and shall reject it with crude pride and arrogance. Some will be drawn to it and gathered by it. Others will be repulsed by it and driven away from it. Some will turn the radio up, others will change the station. Some will draw closer, others will leave forever. Thus it has always been, thus it shall always be. We can regret this. We can be disappointed by it. But we should never be surprised by it. We should never be deceived about the reality of what is going on today when people reject the preaching of the gospel. Some think they can live without God’s gospel, without preaching, and without the church of Jesus Christ, and they will have to find out the hard way that they are wrong.

“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.” The immediate effect of the true proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ shall be to create division. We should not become discouraged by this. If this were not happening, we would have to ask whether or not the gospel were truly being preached. What Paul is saying is that in the providence of God the proclamation of the gospel summons the elect to life, and at the same time it exposes the true commitment and ultimate destiny of all others to the way of death. This is for real. This is serious. What shall it be for you? The triumph of the gospel of Jesus Christ, proclaimed by human ministers, becomes the occasion for the separation of believers from unbelievers. The preaching of the gospel provides for the formation of the church. It calls, gathers, and builds up the true church, and it simultaneously repulses, disperses, and scatters the enemies of God. Are you in, or are you out? Without the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ, there would be no hearing of the gospel of Jesus Christ, there would be no church of Jesus Christ, and there would be no saving knowledge of God. What do we want to happen here at Grace Covenant?

This is not Paul’s idea. This is not my choice. Neither is it not the church’s say so. This is the will of God. “Who is sufficient for these things?” No one. This preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ for the glory of God and the salvation of humanity far exceeds human capacity or capability. And yet, says Paul, “We are not, like so many, peddlers of God’s word.” You see, even then there were ministers who preached only for money, only for the show, only for the attention, only for the love of the crowds, and not for the love of God. Even then there were ministers who disagreed with Paul and with the gospel of Jesus Christ he preached, ministers who upset and disrupted the churches he worked so hard to build up, and

he did not mind saying that they were wrong. Was this a difference of opinion, a matter of personal preference, a difference of emphasis? Did Paul tolerate such diversity? No, Paul said they were flat out wrong. The other gospel they proclaimed was not gospel because there is no other gospel, only the one gospel of Jesus Christ crucified which he proclaimed. “As men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ.” While there is no self-sufficiency for the preaching of the gospel, the only true basis for it can be the call and the commission from God. So it is today. So it must be. Only in this way may the gospel be proclaimed. Only in this way may the church of Jesus Christ be built up. I commit myself to this with you, and I invite and urge you to commit yourself to it with me.

“Thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumph, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. 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 of death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life.”

To God be the glory, forever and ever! Amen.

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