The triumph of Christ crucified

The triumph of Christ crucified

by Brian Johnston

Introduction

This booklet aims to explore the Bible's use of the imagery of a Roman triumph. The New Testament twice employs the Greek word '*thriambeuo*' - meaning 'to lead in a triumphal procession'.

We'd like to view the big picture of the progress of Christianity in strategic terms as a triumphal procession through the world, and across the pages of history. Of course, this view of things contrasts sharply with the marginalisation of Christianity today in much of the western world; and, wherever we live, it may also contrast with our personal struggles as Christians trying to live true to Christ's teaching in a hostile world.

So, we're thinking about a Roman triumph. What was one of those, you may ask? Well, it was the victory parade of a military hero. If his achievement had been significant enough, he was given this great honour when he returned to Rome. The honour consisted of a procession from the banks of the River Tiber into the heart of the city of Rome, into the Forum, to the very Capitoline Hill itself and so to the altar of Jupiter. Along the way the temples stood open and their altars smoked with fragrant incense. At the head of the procession were the captive leaders and soldiers, usually walking in chains. Their captured weapons and treasures were carted along behind them. Next in line, and all on foot, came Rome's senators and magistrates and civil servants; then the general – the celebrated hero of the hour - in his four-horse chariot. A favoured companion might share the chariot with him, or sometimes his children. His officers and soldiers followed. Somewhere in the procession, two flawless white oxen, garland-decked and with gilded horns, were led for sacrifice to the Roman god, Jupiter. Finally, bringing up the rear of the procession were the lowest of the low – the captive slaves. And all of this, went to the accompaniment of music, clouds of incense and the strewing of flowers.

Without a doubt, this was one of the most extravagant displays of Roman supremacy. The general was celebrated as god-like in his ability to channel divine favour in support of the cause of Roman imperial expansion and in the subordination of all its foes. This was a wonderful piece of ancient street theatre – which, above all,

projected the vision of Rome as the greatest show of power on earth.

Such was the profile of this kind of event in those days, it's no surprise to us that the Apostle Paul should develop it as an analogy for the all-conquering Christ: he being the one who would made a spectacle of the apostles; who leads believers in triumph; who's already led captivity captive; and this same analogy of a Roman triumph, when applied to the crucified Christ, even features a public subordinating of angelic authorities. But more on these things later in the booklet …

1. Condemned to death

As we begin, may I ask: how do you view your Christian progress? Perhaps different possible views can be related to this background picture which we've painted. Let's take one of them, to get us going, our first snapshot of a Roman triumph as it might relate to our experience of Christianity. The snapshot we're going to zoom in on comes from a particular moment in the life and work of the Apostle Paul, as he records it in First Corinthians 4. Allow me to set the scene for you – because Paul is writing this Bible letter to the Church of God at Corinth. At the time, he was based across the sea at Ephesus, where there was also a Church of God to be found – that is, a company of Christian disciples carefully following the apostles' teaching.

The apostle Paul was based at Ephesus for about 3 years during his 3rd missionary journey. Like Antioch before it, Ephesus became his second base in his overall, God-given, life mission – which was to evangelize the Gentile world. Ephesus became the gateway for opening up the Roman Province of Asia. From there he wrote his Bible letters to Corinth. The church at Corinth had been planted during the return leg of Paul's second missionary journey – one on which he'd stopped by Ephesus, but only very briefly. Now on his next missionary journey, Paul returns to Ephesus by taking the high road through Galatia.

The start of his time spent at Ephesus was encouraging enough. Paul soon found a nucleus of 12 disciples for church-planting at Ephesus. These were busy, dramatic times for Paul when the Spirit of God was moving mightily in these parts. But the Adversary, who always opposes the purposes of God, was soon to get busy also. Indeed he'd never stopped attacking, and Paul was no stranger to troubles of many kinds, but here at Ephesus matters would come to a head very soon.

You see, it was from here Paul wrestled with a major problem then existing in the Church of God at Corinth – which was directly across the Aegean Sea from Ephesus. Sometimes, with a newly planted church, there's impressive growth and many good things to report, but then the church comes under the influence of strong personalities who blow it off course. Paul

learned at Corinth what it was to become weak in Christ. Opponents there challenged Paul's apostolic authority in what was possibly a misguided attempt by some to impose the authority of 'the mother church' at Jerusalem over the (Gentile) Christian world. Let's listen in as Paul tackles the contentious Corinthians head-on, as we might say:

Let a man regard us in this manner, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. In this case, moreover, it is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy. But to me it is a very small thing that I may be examined by you, or by any human court; in fact, I do not even examine myself. For I am conscious of nothing against myself, yet I am not by this acquitted; but the one who examines me is the Lord. Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God. Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively applied to myself and Apollos for your sakes, so that in us you may learn not to exceed what is written, so that no one of you will become arrogant in behalf of one against the other. For who regards you as superior? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it? You are already filled, you have already become rich, you have become kings without us; and indeed, I wish that you had become kings so that we also might reign with you. For, I think, God has exhibited us apostles last of all, as men condemned to death; because we have become a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men. We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are prudent in Christ; we are weak, but you are strong; you are distinguished, but we are without honor. To this present hour we are both hungry and thirsty, and are poorly clothed, and are roughly treated, and are homeless; and we toil, working with our own hands; when we are reviled, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure; when we are slandered, we try to conciliate; we have become as the scum of the world, the dregs of all things, even until now. I do not write these things to shame you, but to admonish you as my beloved children. (1 Corinthians 4:1-14)

So the snapshot developed for us here in our Bible reading has captured the apostle embroiled in an insider power struggle within the Church of God at Corinth. There were some there

who were arrogant, and felt themselves superior even to Paul, and so they challenged his apostolic authority. Clearly, life in a church of God wasn't always easy or pleasurable for Paul. At times he struggled against opposition from within – as well as suffering persecution from external forces. While coping with all this, Paul invokes, for himself and his fellow-apostles, what seems at first rather like defeatist imagery: it's the picture of tail-enders in one of those Roman victory processions described in the Introduction. He identifies himself with the lowest of the low in such a spectacle when he writes that God exhibited the apostles last of all … *as a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men*. Wow! This is Paul, expressing how he felt, evoking the imagery of captives trudging along in chains.

Have you ever had to remind yourself that your faith has overcome the world at some time when it feels more like you're walking through treacle and things are getting you down? This resonates with Paul's mood as captured here amid the very real struggles of Christian life. If that should also be you right now, then the message here to you is: lift up the heads that hang down and glimpse again the bigger picture – the picture of all the aspects of the triumph of Christianity, of which we as believers are a part!

There are so many facets to this overall victorious picture – the one we're considering in this booklet concerning a Roman triumphal procession. At times, as we'll see in the following chapters, Paul also sees himself as like an incense-bearer; at yet another like one of Christ's trophies; there again he sees his co-workers as good soldiers; and even believers as family and friends honoured in the general's chariot. His view of it all embraces good as well as bad angels; and the saved as well as unsaved of humanity – all following God's script as we march through history to our destiny.

Whatever hardships we endure now which are truly for the sake of Christ, will all be compensated for in answering glory in a day to come. The cross with all its shame has become the victor's chariot. For us, to be triumphed over by Christ now is to share his triumph for ever! This realisation, graphically captured for us in biblical triumphal imagery, transforms our struggle with difficulties into veritable shouts of victory! All hail to the triumphant, crucified Christ! Life may, at times, be hard – but we're on the winning side because the war was won for us at the cross. Let's say it again, by being triumphed over by

Christ, we find our triumph –
that is, our share in his triumph!

2. Led in triumph

We now move on to think about how believers are led in triumph in Christ. These words are found in 2 Corinthians 2:

Now when I came to Troas for the gospel of Christ and when a door was opened for me in the Lord, I had no rest for my spirit, not finding Titus my brother; but taking my leave of them, I went on to Macedonia. But thanks be to God, who always ***leads us in triumph in Christ****, and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place. For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life. And who is adequate for these things? For we are not like many, peddling the word of God, but as from sincerity, but as from God, we speak in Christ in the sight of God.* (2 Corinthians 2:12-17)

In the previous chapter, we briefly considered some of the disappointments faced in a life of service by the Apostle Paul. Those hard times recalled to his mind, under the Spirit's divine guidance, a scene taken from a Roman general's victory parade. He spoke of himself as if he were one of the lowest grade captives – those who were effectively chained to the general's chariot wheels. But there were also 'highs' in Paul's mission work, of course. And what highs they were too! Doors of evangelical opportunity had swung open for him, new vistas of missionary expansion were opening up elsewhere. Reliving the ground-breaking thrill of leading souls to Christ and planting churches in virgin soil, in the chapter we read from a moment ago – 2 Corinthians 2 – Paul now sees himself as if for a moment among the incense-bearers on one of these triumphal processions.

You'll remember we said these victory parades were always very aromatic experiences: in other words, there was a lot of fragrance in the air coming from the burning of incense in the pagan temples which lined the route of the triumphal procession. For the victorious allies, this was, of course, the sweet smell of success; whereas,

in stark contrast, for the captives – vanquished but with unconquered hearts, that same fragrance heralded a very different fate – the smell of the death that awaited them at the journey's end.

The progress of the Gospel always makes for uplifting news – but even more importantly - it's spreading further the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ. When our local brethren on one of the world's great continents first visited a new area with the preaching of the Gospel of Christ, there was great opposition to the preaching of Christ. In that particular place, the national cult had as much grip on the hearts and minds of the residents as had the even more traditional false religion of worship of ancestral and nature spirits. In one way or another, these were people bound and blinded by the Evil One, and living in deep spiritual darkness. There were threats, and our witnessing brothers were warned it may be best for them to leave. But God visited, and the whole scene was transformed, as the main ring-leader who'd been fomenting the opposition was himself gloriously converted. He experienced a Damascus road-type turn-around. Now he gathers as many as he can, and is passionate for the truth which he so recently and vehemently had set himself against. Recently, they hired a jeep for 30 of their number and travelled all day to observe the Breaking of the Bread at our nearest Church of God location to this distant place. How often those who come from deepest darkness are the most zealous for truth! We've assisted them to build a meeting-shack where some 2 dozen were recently formed as a church of God and so able to break bread biblically.

But there are times when we witness, and follow it up carefully, and yet the response is strongly negative. I can recall just as vividly working in another land and asking people at their doors if they had any personal hope. The response was bleak: a shake of the head, a shrug of the shoulders or a blank expression or a mind blinded by some very unorthodox spiritual views. They all had one thing in common – which was no desire for, or slightest bit of interest in, the Good News which the Bible had to offer. According to Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 2, this also – solemn thought – is an outcome that spreads the fragrance of Christ. God savours our evangelistic efforts even when the results are not positive nor even tangible to us.

Overall, Paul here is saying to us: never give up on gospel preaching or personal witnessing. It's fragrant to God – always – because what we are spreading

is the fragrance of Christ regardless of the response we receive.

Our efforts in presenting the true knowledge of this divine Christ to others may seem odious to them, but let's be assured it's fragrant to God!

Overall, in the Bible's use of the analogy of a Roman triumph, we see Christ as the universal conqueror marching in triumph down through the corridors of time and over all of this vanquished world until all creation owns his sway - though for some that acknowledgement will come too late to save them.

3. Leading a host of captives

In this chapter we would like to pick up on the idea of 'taking captivity captive'. Now what might the Apostle Paul have had in mind by that? Here's where read of it, in Ephesians 4 …

Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all. But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it says, "When He ascended on high, ***He led captive a host of captives****, and He gave gifts to men." (Now this expression, "He ascended," what does it mean except that He also had descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is Himself also He who ascended far above all the heavens, so that He might fill all things.) And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.* (Ephesians 4:1-13)

So, there we find the words which tell us that Christ led captivity captive and gave gifts to humanity. Now, I know some have linked this with the emptying of ('Upper') Sheol … but let's examine the context!

First of all, the captives are closely linked together with the gifts which are also spoken about here. The Apostle Paul was certainly one of God's gifts to his people. When Christ ascended and led captivity captive – just like a triumphant Roman general – he gave back captives who are here referred to as gifts for the building up of 'the body of Christ'. Judging by the fact this

language in Ephesians 4 is lifted from Psalm 68, it appears that Paul is blending in a second analogy – not from the then contemporary Roman world, but from Israel's historic Old Testament experience. Let's check it out …

Let God arise, let His enemies be scattered,

And let those who hate Him flee before Him…

Sing to God, sing praises to His name;

Lift up a song for Him who rides through the deserts,

Whose name is the LORD, and exult before Him.

… He leads out the prisoners into prosperity,

Only the rebellious dwell in a parched land.

O God, when You went forth before Your people,

When You marched through the wilderness, Selah.

The earth quaked;

The heavens also dropped rain at the presence of God;

Sinai itself quaked at the presence of God, the God of Israel…

A mountain of God is the mountain of Bashan;

A mountain of many peaks is the mountain of Bashan.

Why do you look with envy,O mountains with many peaks, At the mountain which God has desired for His abode?

Surely the LORD will dwell there forever.

The chariots of God are myriads, thousands upon thousands;

The Lord is among them as at Sinai, in holiness.

You have ascended on high,

You have led captive Your captives;

You have received gifts among men,

Even among the rebellious also, that the LORD God may dwell there…

They have seen Your procession, O God,

The procession of my God, my King, into the sanctuary…

Ascribe strength to God; His majesty is over Israel

And His strength is in the skies.

O God, You are awesome from Your sanctuary.

The God of Israel Himself gives strength and power to the people.

Blessed be God!
(Psalm 68:1-35)

That psalm 68 is a majestic psalm which traces God's journey with his people from Egypt and then from Mount Sinai, all the way through the desert, before ascending up Mount Zion where the ark of the

covenant, which symbolised his presence, was finally placed into Solomon's temple. The original reference to captives and gifts would appear in the context of this historical setting to relate to the Levites whom God took for himself and gave (back) to assist the priests. That's because this is all about God's procession and ascension to his rightful place among a people committed to serving him in his temple. In Numbers 18 we read …

So the LORD said to Aaron, "You and your sons and your father's household with you shall bear the guilt in connection with the sanctuary, and you and your sons with you shall bear the guilt in connection with your priesthood. But bring with you also your brothers, the tribe of Levi, the tribe of your father, that they may be joined with you and serve you, while you and your sons with you are before the tent of the testimony. And they shall thus attend to your obligation and the obligation of all the tent, but they shall not come near to the furnishings of the sanctuary and the altar, or both they and you will die. They shall be joined with you and attend to the obligations of the tent of meeting, for all the service of the tent; but an outsider may not come near you. So you shall attend to the obligations of the sanctuary and the obligations of the altar, so that there will no longer be wrath on the sons of Israel. Behold, I Myself have taken your fellow Levites from among the sons of Israel; they are a gift to you, dedicated to the LORD, to perform the service for the tent of meeting. But you and your sons with you shall attend to your priesthood for everything concerning the altar and inside the veil, and you are to perform service. I am giving you the priesthood as a bestowed service, but the outsider who comes near shall be put to death." (Numbers 18:1-7)

This idea, about who the captives are, agrees better with the New Testament idea of evangelists and teachers – replacing the Old Testament Levites – and being given now by Christ for the equipping of 'the body'. So just to clarify: it seems that just as God gave the Levites to assist the priests in the Old Testament; when we come to the New Testament, the ascended Lord now gives evangelists and teachers to assist the Body of Christ. The evangelists and teachers now, like the Levites before them, are the captives who have become the gifts given for the help of others. Certainly, Paul was one of those so gifted and given, and he prized highly the stewardship given to him to proclaim God's grace to Gentiles. So, the message for us here is: let's not give up on speaking

doctrinal truth lovingly to fellow-believers as we aim to equip each other for service and aspiring towards unity in it.

There are so many facets to this overall victorious picture – the one we're considering in this study on Roman triumphal processions. At times, as we are seeing, Paul views himself as Christ's captive; at another like an incense-bearer; at yet another like one of Christ's trophies; there again he sees his co-workers as good soldiers; and even believers as family and friends honoured in the general's chariot. His view of it all embraces good as well as bad angels; and the saved as well as unsaved of humanity. But does it all hang together? Images of degraded captives as well as those victoriously raised and seated with the victor? Yes, it's worth repeating, that the reconciling viewpoint is the realisation that to be triumphed over by Christ is to share his triumph!

4. Triumphing over angels

This analogy of a Roman triumph when it's applied to the crucified Christ even features the subordination of angelic authorities – which is the final aspect we want to pick up, from Paul's letter to the Church of God at Colosse. It's a fascinating insight that we're given there – a dimension of Christ's work on the cross that we seldom think about – but let Paul take up the description in Colossians chapter 2 where he write:

When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. ***When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him****.* (Colossians 2:13-15)

When the text says 'triumphed over', that's one of the two times when the Bible uses directly the word that relates to a Roman triumphal procession such as we've been describing. Now, a careful reading of our text, shows that it is God who's said to be acting here, in other words, God the Father, not the Lord Jesus. It's God who's said to be disarming the angelic rulers and authorities, making a public display of them, and triumphing over them through Christ and his cross-work.

At the cross, we're told, God put off from himself the angels. What does that mean? Well, as we try to unpack it: first of all, there's nothing in the context to suggest we're dealing with fallen angels. In other words, in the cross of Christ, God showed his power by a bold stroke without using angels. Previously, angels had been called upon to assist at the giving of the Law. Stephen tells us in Acts 7:38 & 53 that the Jews received the Law as ordained by angels. In fact, let's read an extract from his last speech before he was martyred. Facing his accusers, he said:

"You men who … are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did. Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become; you who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it." (Acts 7:51-53)

Paul confirms the same in Galatians 3:19 when he asks:

Why the Law then? It was added because of transgressions, having been ordained through angels by the agency of a mediator, until the seed would come to whom the promise had been made.

and finally – in support of this truth – the writer to the Hebrews referred to the Law as the steadfast word spoken through angels when he said:

For this reason we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it. For if the word spoken through angels proved unalterable, and every transgression and disobedience received a just penalty, how will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard, God also testifying with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will. (Hebrews 2:1-4)

So, angels had been called upon to assist at the giving of the Law. The Jews, of course, were aware of this – all too aware, it seems, and part of the heresy of the Gnostic teachers who were even then closing in on Colosse was that they paid far too much respect to this angelic involvement – even going so far as to worship angelic beings. Which is why Paul invokes the imagery of the Roman triumph again, making a big point of God's action at the cross being in Christ alone – which implied the subordination of angelic powers by their non-selection. They had once had the role mentioned in the giving of the Law; but they could never have any role in the giving of salvation through the Son. They might have been involved in giving the Law; but the removing of its guilt was the work of Christ alone – removing its guilt in the sense that the Law which accused us, and which had become in effect a handwritten certificate showing our indebtedness to God – exactly like a criminal's charge-sheet – that guilt was removed from us and nailed to the cross. And all without any contribution by any angel - it was solely the work of the Son. The message here is: we're debtors purely to God's

grace, and with Christ none can compare. Like a mighty general, he fought and won the greatest campaign.

It's recorded that Napoleon Bonaparte once said to one of his associates that he, Napoleon, had inspired multitudes with such an enthusiastic devotion that they'd have died for him. But he said to do that it'd been necessary for him to be visibly present with the electric influence of his looks, words and voice. Napoleon went on to say that Christ alone had succeeded in so raising the mind of man toward the unseen that it became insensible to the barrier of time and space. Across a chasm of 1800 years, he said, Jesus Christ makes a demand which is beyond all others difficult to satisfy ... [Jesus] asks for the human heart. He demands it unconditionally and forthwith his demand is granted. Wonderful! In defiance of time and space, the spirit of man with all its powers and faculties becomes an annexation to the empire of Christ. All who sincerely believe, experience that supernatural love towards him. Napoleon said this was an unaccountable phenomenon – apart from seeing it as proof positive of the divinity of Christ.

Christ - and he alone - is the universal conqueror marching in triumph down through the corridors of time and over all of this vanquished world until all creation owns his sway.

Search for Truth Radio Broadcasts

International Schedule

Europe

Sunday, 08.00 British Time on TWR

41m band SW (7400 kHz.); 49m band SW (6105 kHz.)

Listen online at www.twr.org.uk/live.htm

SKY Digital Channel 0138 (11.390 GHz, ID 53555) and Freesat channel 790 in the **UK** Saturday at 09.00 and Sunday at 08.15.

Malawi

Sunday on TWR Malawi FM Network at 06.45 UTC+2 (89.1 - 106.5 FM)

South East Asia on Reach Beyond – Australia

Monday to South East Asia at 13.15 UTC, 25m band SW (15540 kHz.)

India

Tuesday and Friday on TWR Guam at 14.07, 31m band SW (15200 kHz.)

Thailand

Wednesday on TWR Guam at 08.50, 19m band SW (15170kHz.)

Jamaica

Sunday on MegaJamz at 09.00, 98.7 FM

If you miss any of the original radio broadcasts (from which these transcripts books are drawn), or wish to listen again, we have a library of podcasts which you can locate at: searchfortruth.podbean.com/

Kindle

Some titles of Search for Truth booklets are available at Amazon.co.uk/Kindle-ebooks.

Type 'Search for truth series' into the search box and you'll find a growing list of transcript books from previous programmes.



Search for Truth,

Church of God, Leicester, LE5 6LN England

P.O. Box 748, Ringwood, Victoria 3134, Australia

P.O.Box 70115, Chilomoni, Blantyre, Malawi

Web site: www.searchfortruth.org.uk

Email: sft@churchesofgod.info