

Thanks be unto God

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[0 : 00] Will you come with me to our reading in the second epistle of Paul to the Corinthians, the second chapter. Reading again in verse 14.

Our thanks be unto God which always causes us to triumph in Christ, and make it manifest the savour of his knowledge by us in every place. For we are unto God a sweet savour of Christ, in them that are saved and in them that perish.

To the one we are the savour of death unto death, to the other the savour of life unto life. And who is sufficient for these things? For we are not as many which corrupt the word of God, but as of sincerity, but as of God in the sight of God, speak we in Christ.

Verses 14 and 15 in particular. This second epistle to the Corinthians tells a great deal about the ups and downs, the joys and the sorrows of Christian life and service.

Paul had his full share of these. And out of the fullness of his experience, as well as by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he writes this instructive epistle to the church in Corinth, which is causing him such anxiety.

[1 : 33] The cause of his anxiety was that there was backsliding in that church. That comes out again and again.

And of course it hardly surprised us because, well when you called a man a Corinthian in those days, you certainly weren't using a respectful term.

Corinthians were people of ill repute. And it says much for the power of the gospel, that the gospel did take place, it did take root among them.

And that Paul could refer to the kind of people that they had been in the past, and he gives a catalogue of their sins and offences elsewhere in the epistle, you remember.

And he says, and such were some of you. But ye are washed, ye are cleansed. The gospel had done his work among them. And he rejoiced.

[2 : 38] That a Christian church arose in such improbable surroundings. And yet, things weren't going well in Corinth.

You know how it is, as soon as the devil sees a good work going on, in any place, wherever it be, he's always there to spoil it.

Just like the man in our Lord's Parable of the Tares, who saw his neighbour's field, sowed with good seed, and who went by night and sowed tares among them.

Well, the tares were springing up in Corinth. And springing up at such a rate, that the church in Corinth was being weakened, because its witness was being dimmed.

Even the church was becoming a bit careless. Taking the line at least to assistance. Letting things slip.

[3 : 49] Things to which they ought to be giving attention, for the sake of the good of the call. And that's why Paul wrote an epistle of rebuke to them.

There were two things he might have done, or one of two things, in the situation. He might have surveyed the situation in Corinth and said, well, what are I to do?

Thought it's better not to intervene. Let things go on. Probably they'll come right. Whereas, if I rebuke them, I leave what hold I have over them.

Well, that would be a bad thing for the church. No, that wasn't the line of his calculation at all. He took no different line for himself than he enjoined upon his young companion in the faith, Timothy, where he says to him that, I preach the word the instant in season, out of season, reprove, rebuke, exalt with all young suffering and doctrine.

And that's exactly what he did himself. He rebuked with great severity as things that required a severe condemnation. And then having done it, he wondered how his epistle was going to be received.

[5 : 39] The arrangement was that Titus would meet him in Troas and Titus would come straight from Corinth and tell him just how things had gone when his epistle was read. And Paul went to Troas and Titus didn't come.

And he tells us of his frame of mind. How he wrote in heaviness and in sorrow, I had no rest in my spirit because I felt not Titus my brother but taking my leave of him I went from thence into Macedonia and there he met with Titus.

And Titus had good news. The church had taken his rebuke. The more outrageous sinners amongst them felt the thrust of the gospel as well as those who hadn't gone to such excesses.

And they had humbled themselves before him. Or there was a disaffected remnant of course. That was, you might say, inevitable. There are some to whom he says we are a savor of life unto life and to others a savor of death unto death.

That's the way that things go in the church. But by and large the church had repented and had come back to the noble standing that it had had in earlier times.

[7 : 02] And Paul in consequence breaks out into this doxology. Now thanks be unto God which always causes us to triumph in Christ and make it manifest the savor of his knowledge by us in every place.

For we are unto God a sweet savor of Christ in them that are saved and in them that perish. To the one we are a savor of death unto death and to the other a savor of life unto life. And who is efficient for these things.

Now the picture that presents itself to the mind of the apostle as he writes these words is that of the Roman conqueror returning from the battlefield where he has had a resounding victory and with evidence of the greatness of his victory in the long lines of captives that are following and in the great quantity of spoil that has been taken.

The whole thing is eloquent in victory and Paul is giving thanks that he himself is in that position with regard to the church.

Thanks be unto God which always causes us to triumph in Christ. Now I would like to think with you for a few minutes this morning first of all of the conqueror and then of the conquered and then of the captivity.

[8 : 41] First the conqueror. The questions do arise in this connection now thanks be unto God which always causes us to triumph in Christ.

and the question is was Paul did Paul think upon himself as a conqueror or as a captive?

Because in the authorized version you have this rendering cause of that all was to triumph in Christ and yet in certain other versions you have this rendering that we are led captive by Christ conqueror or captive which?

Well the answer to that question is of course both. Paul had been a captive and had he not been taken captive he would never have been a conqueror.

That's how we must look at it. Certainly he regards himself as a conqueror as a conqueror in this epistle that he writes to the penitent Corinthians but just as surely he refers to himself as a captive.

[10:10] Now by whom was he taken captive? What captivity is this that he's referring to? Well if you read the story of his conversion as it is given in the Acts of the Apostles and also his epistle to the Philippians you'll see what he's getting at.

He tells us in the Acts of the Apostles the story of his conversion and he refers to that all important event in this way in writing to the Philippians.

he's talking about progress in the Christian life. He says I have not already apprehended I've not won the victory completely but I follow after if that I may apprehend that for which I am apprehended of Christ Jesus there he refers to the captivity.

He was apprehended it's a police term a legal term if you like taken captive as a representative of the law might arrest a man suspected of a crime.

That's what happened to Jesus Paul. I was apprehended he had gone out from Jerusalem on that day when he turned his face to the church in Damascus that poor feeble church as it was then because he was going to arrest the leaders of the church and bring them back to Jerusalem.

[12:04] He went out that day feeling every inch a conqueror. He had conquered in the past he was going to conquer in Damascus he had brought many men in bonds to Jerusalem to answer for their defection from the old faith and for their heresy.

He was going to do that in Damascus. But do you recall what happened? He was suddenly smitten to the ground when a voice from heaven said Saul, Saul why persecutest thou me?

And he wanted to know who his conqueror was. Who art thou Lord? I am Jesus whom thou persecutest. I was apprehended says Paul.

It's his own choice of term as he writes to the Philippians I was apprehended taken captive arrested by Christ Jesus. and for that arrest there had been no epistle to the Philippians no epistle to the Corinthians no victories to be recorded.

but isn't he going a bit too far you might say where he claims he causes us always to triumph in Christ Jesus isn't he forgetting something?

[13:58] what about when he went to the Philippians to whom he writes about his arrest you remember how things went there he went there with the gospel he went in response to a call from a man of Macedonia whom he saw in a vision and the man said come over and help us and he went over to Macedonia and to Philippi the chief city of the Macedonians and he can't believe him that he expected victory from the very outset seeing that he was doing this thing at God's core God would surely be with him when he went out on a mission so directly given to him by God but what happened?

Macedonia needed the gospel but Macedonia didn't want it and Paul's message wasn't welcome and he was taken captive there cast into the prison you remember and treated as a very notable prisoner he and Silas confined to the as you might say condemned cell the innermost dungeon of the prison and the jailer threatened that his very life was forfeit if he let those men go that's how Macedonia received him will he say always causes us to triumph yes because you've only got part of the story yet as you well know a strange an amazing victory took place in that condemned cell that night the two men cast in there had been scourged their feet were in the stone they were smarting from their stripes they were uncomfortable from their position and it was the hour of midnight all that brick dark trying out if there's anything wrong with you anything troubling you and yet an amazing enthusiasm filled the souls of those men they simply couldn't keep silent what they were doing what were they doing complaining not a bit of it at midnight the sun praises to

God and the prisoners heard them I don't know what that brings out just as fully as perhaps adult what Luke meant in saying the prisoners heard them there was a sense of course in which the prisoners couldn't help hearing them they were singing so heartily but a more accurate translation would be and the prisoners were listening to them you can understand that can't you what could those men be singing about in such a condition in such an earth at such an earth there it was there was a victory in that cell he caused us to triumph and the victory expanded that casting into the cell gave Paul his audience the majestites were very glad to get rid of him the following day wanted as little publicity as they possibly couldn't and the girl out of whom they had cast the spirit of divination she was giving praise for her deliverance and so you might say the great church bell was ringing in Philippi and the

Philippians out of curiosity came to hear what it was all about and some of them many of them heard for their salvation and Paul assures them that the epistle that he wrote to them that the Lord who in those circumstances began so great a work in them will carry it on on to the day of Jesus Christ now yes you might say but what about this club and Derby they stoned him there and left him for dead victory triumph again we don't he wasn't dead he recovered and being the soldier that he was he went straight back to the place of conflict and presented himself before the people who had tried to take his life and this time the enthusiasm took another seeing the man there whom they took for dead they began to worship him as a god and Paul had to restrain them and tell them about the true god again a triumph yes you say but what about

Athens well Athens was a difficult place it's true it is the home of the philosophers and the Greek philosophers considered themselves very self-sufficient men they were authorities they weren't likely to be receptive to the gospel that Paul preached about the ones who triumphed by being put to death upon the cross no that was not for them always causes of the triumph yes even in Athens he made an impression and with somebody it was an immediate and saving impression and the names of some of his converts there are mentioned people of note some of the very leading

[20 : 24] Athenians and there were others who were just didn't dismiss them altogether they seem to have been impressed to the extent of saying we'll give thee a hearing in this matter some other time so follow forward wherever he goes and you'll see that he's not exaggerating one foot in what he claims in our text he always causes us to triumph in Christ and make it manifest the savour of his knowledge by us in every place yes think of Ephesus perhaps the most difficult place of all he had to spend three years there it was a place where indeed satan had his seat a great girl defectual was open there and Paul saw it was a strategic place a place where the gospel must climb if it was to get to the interland but how is it going to happen there are he says many adversaries many adversaries and he met them the gospel hit the avarice of the silversmiths of

Ephesus the gospel was damaging their means of livelihood lessening their income they'd have to oppose it there was nothing to be tolerated and you remember the story that we have in the apostles of the riot that broke out in Ephesus all to triumph in Christ Jesus well yes read the epistle to Ephesians he was sometimes he says afar off aliens to the commonwealth of Israel strangers to the covenants of promise without God without hope in the world what a bleak prospect what a sad condition but now what was there a sequel there was indeed but now he were power of are made nigh by the blood of

Christ there there was a stern battle to be fought in Ephesus yet not only a battle but a series of battles of warfare and he tells the Ephesian believers to take unto them the whole armor of God because he says we wrestle not with flesh and blood with principalities and powers with spiritual wickedness in high places the enemy is spiritual and crafty and powerful so take unto the whole armor of God nothing else will do but be steadfast as he tells these Corinthians unmovable always abounding in the work of the Lord for as much as you know that your neighbor is not in the Lord the things that happened unto me he says fell out for the furtherance of the gospel the very wrath of man was made to redound to

God's praise the very wrath of man man's opposition to the gospel was in the fraternity of God made the very means of scattering the preachers of the gospel throughout places that probably they wouldn't have gone to but for that scattering and they went into those places just like a scattering of blazing embers bringing the light and the heat of the gospel and its destructive power of evil because evil had to be destroyed if these places were to be cleansed of their iniquity well then you cannot but acknowledge the reasonableness of the claim that Paul makes here he always causes us to triumph in

Christ Jesus he was made a captive by Christ he knew what captivity was but it was a captivity of love a captivity that really set free and having been taken captive by Christ he became a conqueror as he tells us in Christ he always causes us to triumph in Christ passing on then let's think secondly of the captives as you run your eye over the captives of Caesar in the return of the conqueror from the battlefield you find points of comparison and indeed most strikingly points of contrast between them and the captives of

[26 : 24] Christ the one thing Caesar's captives came from many lands the armies of Rome as you know overrun the most of the old world so too to the armies of Jesus Christ that was his intention from the outset going into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature and we read in the book of the revelation what effect that had and was going to have in the end when John tells us of the multitude that no man could number that he saw gathered around the throne and the occupant of the throne was the lamb whose blood had redeemed them and he tells us out of every kindred and nation and people and tribe captives from many lands made one in Christ Jesus and again he tells us that they were of all ages you find that throughout the

New Testament and especially the Acts of the Apostles and indeed right through the Gospels the captives of Jesus Christ were of all ages young men and women men and women of middle life most miraculous of all old men and women and even children of all ages they tell us in old covenanting stories in Scotland of that covenant that was drawn up in Pentland by children or you might say just imitated of the grown-ups who were hearing about covenants perhaps they saw some of the covenants that had been drawn up and they were just imitating what their parents were doing no it wasn't that these children had kept the quickening touch of the

Holy Spirit upon their hearts just as her parents had done and many of them grew up to be a source of great strength to the cause to which they inhibited their signatures while they were mere children child conversion is not the real thing that we sometimes imagine it to be God can work effectively in the heart of a simple child just from God as he can in the heart of a man whose childhood is left far behind and who is now near the end of the journey there is no limiting his power but there is a contrast a tremendous contrast between the lines of Caesar's captives and the captives of

Christ the man can't imagine can you those poor wretched people taken as prisoners of war by the legion of Rome being led into the cap into the capital with smiles on their faces and places upon their lips some of them might have tried to put a brave face on it as we say but it required an effort they were captives they were destitute they were trophies of their conqueror's victory and all that they regarded as their worldly fortune was there in the hands of the enemy as come and spoil Christ's captives are very different from that you couldn't imagine any captive of Caesar speaking as Paul speaks here and he's speaking not for himself alone but for Christians everywhere and in all ages now thanks be unto God which always causes us to triumph in Christ Jesus you see the fact is that every believer has been taken captive and through his being taken captive by Christ has become a conqueror so he shares the victory of his conqueror and realizing what that means how can we do anything but sing and triumph and rejoice when we think of that perhaps we feel a little bit uncomfortable about our own mood sometimes and the face that we keep to the world are we living triumphantly as Paul and his fellow captives were do we follow our captives singing his praises as these men did that's the difference between this captivity and the captivity of sin another thing another thing by way of comparison and contrast the Roman legions were not omnipotent they had their failures and the Roman Empire the Roman Empire passed away what's left of it today it's as if the story had been written in water it is different with the victories of Christ this is an ongoing thing going into all the world preach the gospel to every creature baptizing him in the name of the Father unto the Son and the Holy Ghost teaching him all things whatsoever I have commanded you and lo I am with you the risen and ever living Christ who hath the keys of hell and of death

I am with you all the days even unto the end of the world thy kingdom hath none in at all may death of age it all remain there are times it may be when it looks as if Christ's cause is on the way and in those days we indeed need to come to the throne of grace and to say Lord increase our faith let us see things as they are and if we get that increase of faith we shall and we shall see as John Wesley saw even on his deathbed where he explained it was one of his last responses thank God we are on the winning side God is with us it could not and it cannot be otherwise because God's honour is at stake he said to his son and sending him into the world to bring many sons to glory that he would give him the heathen for his inheritance and the utmost loins of the earth for a possession and he'll keep his word now lastly the captivity the captivity which refers as I say it would be a very strange thing to hear Caesar's captives celebrating their conqueror's triumph but this strange thing is happening and it's no strange thing after all when you know the whole story in the church of Jesus Christ his victory is theirs our labour is not in vain in the Lord and what is their contribution to this the captivity this spread abroad of the gospel well there are many ways in which Christians help with the gospel and we're apt to think perhaps first and foremost of material things and the material things are very important there's no doubt there's no doubt but that's not the most important thing in a Christian life after all listen again to Paul for we are unto God a sweet savor of Christ in them that are saved and in them that perish to the one we are the savor of death unto death to the other we are the savor of life unto life and who is efficient for these things do you see what he means some of you may remember

[36 : 46] Frank J. Exley who was a very fruitful servant of the British Jewish society as it was known then and Frank Exley was a bit of a poet and he'd been reading that story about the piece of fragrant clay that somebody found somewhere they wondered what the secret of its fragrance was and they found that it was in close proximity to a very lovely rose bush and a common clay had caught the fragrance of the rose bush and F.J. Exley was moved to write they say that once a piece of common clay such fragrance breathes as from a garden flows my secret is just this they heard it say I have been near the rose and he was moved to pray so grant I pray thee Lord that by thy grace the fragrance of thy life may dwell in me that as I move about from place to place men's thoughts shall turn to thee and that's the principal thing in Christian witness after all

Christ in us Christ making manifest his presence in the Christian life we are unto God our sweet savor of Christ in them that are saved and in them that perish in them that are saved and in them that perish yes there's a dark side to it as well as a bright side Christ is going to be something to every one of us if we are not saved by him then our refusal of him or our neglect of his gospel will be our doom that's what Paul is setting before us here to the one a savor of life and to life to the other a savor of death and to death you remember the emperor Julian who made a profession of repentance repentance and an acceptance of the Christian faith and then fell away and persecuted the church with terrible ferocity to his very last moment and the legend has it that

Julian who was really trying to extinguish the Christian church by those campaigns of his the Christian church that Julian knowing that he had brought his death wound as a final gesture took some of the blood that was flowing from that wound and cast it to the very heavens and he exclaimed thou hast conquered O Galilean a great tribute above a tragic source yes the Galilean conquered what is Christ to you what is he to me he must be something we simply can't do what Pilate tried to do take water and wash our hands and say I'm innocent to the blood this just person see you too

Pilate didn't wash away his guilt in that water and there is no means which to wash away you guilt or mine if you refuse him but refuse him why should we when he's offered so freely to us even to the chief of sinners and when the gain of accepting him is so great and so lasting the Lord redeems his servant souls none perish at interest will you hand up your sword to him and will you bring forth the royal guide and yes there's a coronation of Christ that you and I must carry through in our own lives there's a realm there of which he wants to have the dominion give him the crown bring forth the royal guide and crown him Lord of all let us pray