

“But Thanks Be To God ...”

“... who always leadeth us in triumph in Christ and makes manifest through us the savor of his knowledge in every place. For we are a sweet savor of Christ unto God, in them that are saved, and in them that perish; to the one a savor from death unto death; to the other a savor from life unto life. And who is sufficient for these things? For we are not as the many, corrupting the word of God: but as of sincerity, but as of God, in the sight of God, speak we in Christ” (2 Cor. 2:14-17).

In the preceding verses Paul recounted how that when he came to Troas and a door was opened there for the word, he did not take advantage of that door because he found not Titus his brother. The opening words of v. 14, “But thanks be to God who always leadeth us in triumph in Christ,” if isolated from the rest of the verse, would seem to be an expression both of Paul’s joy and relief because he did find Titus in Macedonia. But, the balance of v. 14 will not allow that construction: it is the opening comments of a new subject with which Paul will deal in the following three chapters. The record of Paul’s emotional meeting with Titus is reserved for 7:6: “Nevertheless he that comforteth the lowly, even God, comforteth us by the coming of Titus.” In that chapter Paul resumed the discussion of what to do with the repentant fornicator in their midst.

The phrase “who always leadeth us in triumph in Christ” sounds much like the words of his first letter: “but thanks be to God who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 15:57). Yet the thoughts of the two verses are slightly different. In 1 Corinthians 15:57 the victory the apostle speaks of is that Christ gives to us, a victory over the sting of death: a personal victory. In 2 Corinthians 2:14 the allusion is to the victory marches Roman generals made when they had achieved a signal victory. The Roman general, with his attending officers, marched through Rome bearing with them the evidence of their triumph; their booty and those captured in that victory. There stands the arch of Titus in Rome today, a monument to the victory march Titus made through Rome’s street after Titus had destroyed the city of Jerusalem. In this allusion in 2 Corinthians 2:14 there are different ideas about this “triumphal march” and Paul’s personal role in it. Is he one of the captives or is he one that in the battle had been part in the victory? Some argue forcefully for the first; others consider the second to be true. It seems to me that the thought of Paul being one of the triumphant officers who marched in that procession more clearly presents his thoughts.

Whichever of the two above alternatives are true, the remainder of the passage is certainly clear: through the apostle (or apostles) was set forth the savor of God’s knowledge in every place. The apostles were commissioned to teach all nations, to go into all the world with the gospel they had heard and witnessed of Christ. Whether those who heard gladly received the word or violently rejected it, the thought is that the savor (smell) of the gospel had reached their nostrils. To those who violently rejected the message, it was a savor of death unto death; to those who received it, it was a savor from life unto life.

Thus Paul asks, “and who is sufficient for these things?” (v. 16). Chapter three gives his answer: “Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to account anything as from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God” (2 Cor. 3:5).

Paul asserts, “For we are not as the many, corrupting the word of God” (2 Cor. 2:17). There is little doubt that Paul’s words are intended for the “false apostles who fashion themselves into apostles of Christ,” so troublesome to the Corinthian work (2 Cor. 11:13). The brethren there tolerated men who took advantage of them and who sought to cut off the influence of Paul who was the church’s founder, to strengthen their own standing in the church. He declares in this second chapter that such men were corrupting the word of God. They sought to change it because the pure gospel was offensive and unacceptable to many, most of the Jews. For the sake of gain “the many” at Corinth were willing to corrupt the word because they would be accepted and recompensed when (IF) they did.

Still, Paul assured them his message was the true one. Neither he nor the other apostles were as “the many” in Corinth: men who had no scruples in corrupting God’s word for their own advantage. Paul and the other apostles spoke sincerely the word which came from Christ (2 Cor. 2:17)!

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