

“FORGIVENESS AND TRIUMPH”

Now thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and through us diffuses the fragrance of His knowledge in every place. For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing.

(2 Corinthians 2:14-15 NKJV)

In ancient times and during Paul’s time, when an army returned to its home after winning important battles against their foes, there was a victory parade in their city. The military leaders led the parade riding on horses or in chariots. There were wagons heaped high with booty, the spoils of the war. There might also be droves of livestock. All the soldiers would be proudly marching in the parade. Near the end of the parade would be defeated soldiers and captives. Their eventual fate would probably be death. As the parade passed through the city, the soldiers would be showered with flowers tossed from the crowds. For the conquering army, the fragrance was the sweet smell of victory. For the prisoners and captives, the fragrance was a portent of death.

I have seen many parades and while I was in the armed forces I participated in many parades. The only victory parade that I remember was on V-E Day. Everybody in town and many people from out in the country came to uptown. There had been no parade announced. It was spontaneous. People just wanted to be together with other people who had sacrificed and lost loved ones in the War, who had sat at their radios each night to hear Lowell Thomas and Gabriel Heater tell them news from the War. Now it was over. There was victory in Europe. Victory over Japan could not be far away!

We didn’t celebrate the end of the Korean War or the end of the Vietnam War as victories. People spat on soldiers coming back from Vietnam! I remember! No one would call the Middle East wars a victory.

1.) But if anyone has caused grief, he has not grieved me, but all of you to some extent--not to be too severe. This punishment which was inflicted by the majority is sufficient for such a man, so that, on the contrary, you ought rather to forgive and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one be swallowed up with too much sorrow. Therefore I urge you to reaffirm your love to him. For to this end I also wrote, that I might put you to the test, whether you are obedient in all things. Now whom you forgive anything, I also forgive. For if indeed I have forgiven anything, I have forgiven that one for your sakes in the presence of Christ, lest Satan should take advantage of us; for we are not ignorant of his devices. (2 Corinthians 2:5-11 NKJV)

This man, whom Paul is urging the Corinthian church members to "forgive and comfort lest this man be swallowed up with too much sorrow" is the same man of whom Paul had written previously:

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and such sexual immorality as is not even named among the Gentiles--that a man has his father's wife! And you are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he who has done this deed might be taken away from among you. For I indeed, as absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged (as though I were present) him who has so done this deed. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. Your glorying is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? (1 Corinthians 5:1-6 NKJV)

Why had Paul changed his attitude toward the man? Because church discipline had produced its intended effect. It had produced in the man a godly sorrow that led to repentance and forgiveness by God. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9 NKJV)

As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions. Being forgiven by the church members is quite another story. To forgive is the gift of forgetting. God has cast our sins into the depths of the sea, but there are members of the church who will store them away in the filing cabinet or hard drive of their memory. A young woman attended a church with her two small children. Members were sharing gossip about her parents and her husband by the next Sunday.

2.) Furthermore, when I came to Troas to preach Christ's gospel, and a door was opened to me by the Lord, I had no rest in my spirit, because I did not find Titus my brother; but taking my leave of them, I departed for Macedonia.

(2 Corinthians 2:12-13 NKJV)

Wait a minute. What is going on here? Paul has been discussing with the Corinthian church how he had been so distressed with the problems in the Corinthian church that he abruptly left Ephesus to go to Corinth and face the problems head on. After dealing with the problems with discipline and rebukes, he went back to continue his visit to Ephesus intending to return to Corinth. Then he realized that a return would be a painful visit. He wrote a letter instead. He wanted to know how they had reacted to his discipline and to that letter. He would find out from Titus who was to meet him at Troas. Titus was not at Troas.

At this point in his letter to the Corinthians, Paul changes the subject. It is not until the seventh chapter that Paul returns to the subject of his relations with the Corinthian church. Acts 16 through 18 relate Paul's travels and ministry from his departure from Troas until Titus finally rejoins him in Macedonia and brings news that the Corinthian church had responded to Paul's rebukes and discipline positively and they still loved and respected him..

The reason Paul departed for Macedonia is told in Acts 16:8-10

So passing by Mysia, they came down to Troas. And a vision appeared to Paul in the night. A man of Macedonia stood and pleaded with him, saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." Now after he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go to Macedonia, concluding that the Lord had called us to preach the gospel to them. (Acts 16:8-10 NKJV)

To answer our question, "What is going on here?" These two verses are what is called in music a segue. It is a transition from one theme to another. Beginning in the next verse, Paul begins to teach about the nature of Christian ministry.

3.) Now thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and through us diffuses the fragrance of His knowledge in every place. For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing. To the one we are the aroma of death leading to death, and to the other the aroma of life leading to life. And who is sufficient for these things? For we are not, as so many, peddling the word of God; but as of sincerity, but as from God, we speak in the sight of God in Christ. (2 Corinthians 2:14-17 NKJV)

Paul was disappointed with how his labors and sacrifices in Corinth which had brought a number of people to faith in Christ had been damaged and corrupted by false teachers who claimed to be apostles but were not teaching truth and were profiting from teachings that led believers astray and deceived them into thinking their sin was all right.

Moreover, Paul was upset and concerned when Titus did not meet him as they had planned. Paul had experienced followers leaving him in the past. How would we react and how would we expect Paul to react? We would probably be discouraged and depressed and maybe want to just give up. That isn't how Paul responded to the circumstance. In the night he had a dream of a man saying "Come over to Macedonia and help us."

Paul could have said, "What's the use? I'll go up there and work myself to exhaustion and then some other false teacher will come along and spoil that work, too."

Instead, Paul was excited by this new work. He didn't think about what false teachers might do there, but he looked forward to what Christ was going to do there. He couldn't wait to be following Christ the great Commander in Chief as He would lead in triumph Paul and others whom He would call. They would face the Devil and all his legion of followers and triumph over them. They would conquer a portion of the Kingdom of Darkness and claim it for the Kingdom of God. Wherever Christ leads them the precious scent of Heaven's beauty is in the air.