Triumph

The Word of the Lord from Colossians 2:15: God "disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in Him." This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

God has triumphed over His enemies in Christ. We use the word “triumph” to speak of victory, but a triumph is more than that. At the time of the Roman Empire, the triumph was the march that followed a huge victory. Authorized by the Senate, the general would lead his army into Rome; and along with his army, he would also bring the spoils of war, the defeated troops as prisoners, and perhaps even the enemy ruler. All those who had supported the enemy were exposed and shamed—those who had sided with the loser had bet on the wrong horse, and now it was time to pay the debt with their wealth and their lives. The spoils were for Rome, and the prisoners faced immediate slavery or death, and the execution of the enemy king lay close at hand too. The triumph was more than just a victory parade: it was a demonstration to the citizens that their enemy was soundly defeated, his wealth confiscated and his power gutted. It was to tell them they were safe, and their enemy wouldn't rise again.

God has triumphed over His enemies in Christ. Christ came to the fight well-prepared: for far more than a man born of Mary, He was also the Son of God from eternity. Thus, the fullness of deity dwelt in Him: He was fully God and fully man in order to defeat His enemies. He remains fully God and fully man, and He remains the triumphant head of all rule and authority.

The enemies He has conquered are many. He has conquered philosophy and empty deceit. While philosophy can help us with thinking and answer a lot of questions about life, there’s always the misuse of philosophy to try to explain God—or try to explain Him away. But as soon as you can explain God, you don't have Him anymore: you've created a god so small that you can understand him, so weak that he has to operate according to your thought process. That’s not a god that can save. It can only kill because it has no life to give, no matter what promises it makes. That’s what makes such philosophy an empty deceit.

God has triumphed over human tradition—the sorts of human traditions that teach, “If you this and this and this, you will earn your way to heaven.” This is also an empty deceit, for no one can achieve it. No one can conquer sin and death. All such traditions, dressed up as one religion or another, only kill. They are enemies of life, so God has defeated them.

God has triumphed over the elemental spirits of the world. These are false teachings that are built upon basic elements of the world, such as astrology or animal worship or paganism or turning the entire planet earth into a mother that supposedly keeps us alive. People always find it easier to find religion in what they see rather than what faith would have them believe. But the elements of this world can't save anyone, because they are elements of a world that is passing away. That makes them false gods, too.

God has triumphed over rulers and authorities, disarming them and putting them to open shame. These are rulers of darkness, demons, unclean spirits and the like. See, those human traditions, basic elements and philosophy wouldn’t be near the problem were it not for the fact that people are being tempted by the devil all the time. A false god has no power in itself: a rock with a face carved on it is just a rock. But the devil tempts sinful flesh to trust in anything but Christ—that is why so many are deceived.
into buying into all sorts of false religions, gods and rationales that can’t save. Behind those empty gods are powerful demonic forces too great for you and me.

But God has triumphed over them: He hasn’t just defeated them, but He’s put them to open shame. Behold Christ the Victor’s triumphant march: it begins at an empty tomb with the stone rolled away—He is not here, He is risen. He descends into hell—not to suffer, as some have claimed. No, this is part of His triumph. He descends into hell and preaches to the spirits in prison. He doesn’t do this for them—they don’t want to hear His proclamation. No, He does it for you: He marches into hell, proclaims His victory, and marches out again. He shows you He can come and go as He pleases—the devil has no say because the devil is defeated and powerless to stop Him. That’s what Jesus demonstrates to you by His descent into hell.

It doesn’t end there. He appears to His disciples, risen from the dead and never to die again. This is part of the triumph, too. Having shown His defeat of the devil, Jesus shows His defeat of death. The grave is a terrible enemy—it doesn’t lose a battle and keeps all of its victims…until Christ comes along. Jesus is laid in a grave, but He comes back out three days later. He shows the disciples His risen body in order to show that He’s defeated death, too.

The triumph continues with His Ascension. The victorious Lord returns to the right hand of God the Father. As He does so, His people see that all that He has done has His Father’s blessing, that this victory is all of God’s for all of His people. And there, seated at the right hand of God, the victorious Son lives and reigns forever.

God has triumphed over all of His enemies in Christ. The war is won, and Jesus’ triumphant march from grave to hell to earth to heaven demonstrates His victory over all of His enemies. It’s no contest and far from undecided. The war is won. Christ has triumphed.

Now, here’s the really good news for you: you’re not among those defeated by the Son of God, paraded along as prisoners toward your destruction.

Don’t take that for granted. Once upon a time, you were. You were once a captive to these enemies, dead in sin and buying into some sort of empty deceit. Anything that is not according to Christ is work in service to the enemies of Christ. Every sin, then, is a bet on the wrong horse, another reason for you to be numbered among the prisoners, among those marched by the Victor toward judgment; and you’ve compiled quite a list of sins, quite a record of debt and transgression that is not according to Christ.

But you’re not among the prisoners marched to destruction for a simple reason: there’s no record of your debt to be found. There’s no record because the debt has been paid already—paid by Christ on the cross. This is how the battle was fought, the victory was won: our text says that God cancelled “the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This He set aside”—how? By “nailing it to the cross.” Except that it wasn’t a piece of paper that was nailed to the cross—it was His Son. On the cross, God held His Son responsible for your debt of sin. He condemned Christ for your sin, and so Jesus suffered your debt and your death.

That is how the victory was won for you. It didn’t look like victory: Jesus appeared soundly defeated on the cross—but that is only because He won the victory by taking the place of the defeated. The King suffered the judgment for the captive. The King suffered the prisoner’s sentence to set you free from the prison of sin and death.

Because He’s paid the debt on the cross, God no longer holds your sin against you. You’re no longer a captive, following your defeated masters to death in a triumph parade—instead, you’re among the grateful citizens of the city of God: by faith, you hear and see of Jesus’ triumph over sin and death,
and you rejoice that these enemies are defeated, their power gutted for now and forever. They’re not going to make a comeback.

You can be sure of this because of your baptism. That’s what our text says, that you’ve “been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised with Him through faith in the powerful working of God.” Because of your baptism, you know that your debt is cancelled—Christ has died your death and risen again, and He’s joined you to His death and resurrection.

As our text further proclaims, this has completely disarmed the rulers and authorities. The devil is the sorest of losers; and as one already defeated, he wants you to be a captive who is marched to death and destruction. So he wants to throw your sins at you, haunt you with them and say, “You’re no Christian! You’re no friend of Jesus! You’re full of sin, and that means that Jesus’ victory isn’t yours—it means that Jesus has defeated you, too, you sinner, and so you’re doomed just like me.” But the devil is disarmed: if you had any sins left that weren’t paid for, he’d have something to work with. But Christ has paid for them all—the devil has nothing to accuse you with. All he can do is lie and try to make you doubt that Jesus has really won the victory with you.

So he’ll lie—and he’s very good at lying, since he’s been doing it since the beginning of the world. He’ll try to get you to doubt that Jesus forgives you so that you’re afraid of God and think His victory over evil condemns you. Either that, or the devil will figure out which false god most appeals to you, be it the pride of human philosophy, the fanciful worship of angels, the legalistic attraction of asceticism or the pleasures that appeal to a sensuous mind. He’ll tempt you to follow anything that is not according to Christ—anything, because there is only one triumphant victor. If you follow anything besides Christ, you’re following one that will only lead you to hell.

Now, to follow another would be foolish. You know of Christ’s triumph. You know of His death, His descent, His resurrection and His ascension. You know that He’s defeated every last enemy. To turn away from Him now would be as foolish as a Roman citizen watching a captured enemy king marched through the streets of Rome to his execution and saying, “I wanna follow him! I think he’s the guy!” It’s joining the losing side long after the battle is decided.

Yet, your sinful flesh will daily do exactly that: every sin says, “I would rather follow a conquered, doomed enemy (that would doom me, too!), rather than the risen Christ who has conquered all of His enemies in order to give me life.” How fickle and weak we sinners are, daily flirting with the thought of giving up freedom in Christ and becoming a captive on the way to death and hell.

This is all the more reason to despair of self and instead rejoice in Christ. His death for your sin has paid the debt in full. Though you’re tempted to live like a slave and captive to sin, He keeps giving you the grace He first gave when you were baptized and born anew. He speaks His Word of grace to you—and that Word of grace proclaims that He has defeated sin and shares that victory with you, that His enemies are disarmed and have nothing on you. It renews the freedom He gave you in your baptism, that you’re now a child in God’s household—not a prisoner doomed to destruction. You’re a member of His body—not an enemy to be cut off. He feeds you His holy Supper—not the last meal of the condemned, but the foretaste of the feast to come.

You’re not a captive, a captured prisoner of the enemy. You’re redeemed by Christ, and His triumph is for you. Your debt is paid and His victory is yours, because you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen