

6 Triumphal Parade

Many Bible publishers list the heading to the account of Jesus riding the colt into Jerusalem as "The Triumphal Entry." Over what had He triumphed? He hadn't been to the cross yet, so whom had He defeated? He had not died and been resurrected yet, so what was He celebrating?

Triumphal Entry

The people gathered along the streets of Jerusalem believed that one day a Messiah would come to deliver them from the oppression of the Roman government and restore their Jewish nationality. Their hopes were high that Jesus might be their man. They had observed Him doing miracles before, and during the past week they heard about Him raising Lazarus from the dead after he had been in the tomb for four days. They were now designing a plan to make Him their king—one who would rule on their behalf and provide them with the lifestyle they felt they deserved. With enthusiasm, they paved the streets with palm branches and cloaks as Jesus rode through town on a colt. We catch the intent of their actions by the word they cried out: *Hosanna. Hosanna*—which means, "Save now!" They weren't thinking about their souls but about the conditions in which they lived. So what could possibly be "triumphal" about Jesus' entry into Jerusalem that day?

It would seem that He captured the moment to fulfill the prophecy: *Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold your King is coming to you; he is just and having salvation; lowly, and riding on a donkey, a colt, the foal of a donkey.*" This was also the divine moment for Jesus to let them know that He was indeed the Messiah, the Son of David. The people of Jerusalem were familiar with the great triumphal parades of mighty warriors who came back from battle and were paraded in grandeur through the streets. This was no wealthy spectacle of a procession. The One who claimed to be King was riding on a colt—something the town leaders must have looked on as a pitiful circus rather than a triumph. Nevertheless, the crowds were bursting with emotion as they called out to Jesus: *Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!* Within a few short days their words of adoration turned to words of hate as they bellowed out: *Crucify Him! Crucify Him!* Same people. Different situation. Opposite response.

Roman triumphal procession

Big parades honoring returning champions were familiar to the people who participated in the Palm Sunday Hosannas. James M. Freeman, in *Manners and Customs of the Bible* describes the Roman military triumphal procession as one of the grandest spectacles of ancient times. Such a parade was given in honor of a conqueror only when certain conditions had been fully met.

Among these conditions, it was required that the victory be complete and decisive; that it should be over a foreign enemy; that at least five thousand of the enemy should be slain in a single battle; that the conquest should extend the boundaries of the state; and, that it should put an end to the war.

When the Roman Senate decided that all the required conditions had been met, a day was appointed, and all the necessary arrangements were made for a magnificent parade. The people crowded the streets, and filled every place from which they could catch a good view of the procession. The temples were all open and decorated with flowers, while incense smoked from every altar. Fragrant odors from burning spices were scattered generously through the temples and along the streets, loading the air with their perfume. The senate and chief citizens of the state honored the conqueror by participating in the parade. Everything they had confiscated from the enemy, such as gold, silver, weapons of every description, standards, rare and costly works of art, and other things deemed valuable, were paraded in open view of the crowded city. The prisoners of war were also required to march in the procession.

The winning General, in whose honor the triumph was held, rode in a chariot drawn by four horses. His robe was embroidered with gold, and his tunic with flowers. In his right hand was a laurel bough, and in his left a scepter; while on his brow there was a wreath of Delphic laurel. Amid the shouts of the soldiers and the applause of the people the conqueror was driven through the streets to the temple of Jupiter, where sacrifices were offered, after which there was a public feast in the temple.

The Apostle Paul also alludes to this major historic and public event when he says, *And having spoiled principalities and powers he made a show of them openly, triumphing over them in it.* Here Christ is referred to as the Great Conqueror, making public exhibition of the spoils of war. In the opening scripture reference, it is also Christ who is Conqueror, Paul being merely an instrument used by Him for the accomplishment of His work. Thus, wherever Paul preached, Christ triumphed; and as in the Roman triumphs, odors (perfumes, incense) were profusely scattered around, so the knowledge of Christ was spread everywhere when proclaimed by the apostles.

To keep the conqueror humble amidst these great honors, a slave stood at his back, calling out incessant railings and reproaches, and carefully enumerating all his vices, wrongdoings, and weaknesses. Sound like the accuser of the brethren? At the very moment of our joyous victories, he taps people to bring up our past sins and throw them in our face—or merely has the enemy whisper them to us enough to get us frazzled and confused. But

when the fragrance of Jesus is present, we hear the Savior say, *Where are your accusers?* And our answer is, *there are none!* All of this happens in the midst of our declaration of victory!

In the Roman Triumph the fragrance which filled the air was inhaled both by the war prisoners who were doomed to death, and by the people who were saved from death because their side had won. In the same way, the Gospel is preached to all, but with different results: to the believer, the results are salvation; to him who rejects the message, the results are eternal death. So Paul says: *For we are unto God a sweet fragrance of Christ, in them that are saved, and in them that perish: to the one we are the fragrance of death unto death, and to the other the fragrance of life unto life.* It was the same fragrance but to one was agreeable and good, while to another it was nasty and repulsive.

The Apostle related spiritual things to the natural to help people understand them. Paul says he has fulfilled God's will in faithfully proclaiming the Gospel and fighting against sin, knowing God has determined that *those who believe shall be saved, and those who believe not shall perish.*

True believers have constant cause of triumph in Christ. *We are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.* How can we be more than conquerors? Many wars are won as a result of shedding blood, and Jesus won our war by shedding His blood for us. We may have many battles in our daily lives, but when we give our hearts and lives to Jesus, we know He's there to help us fight them. Better yet, we know the end result—the war is already won. What we lose in our battles will be the rough edges of our personalities and our character. Even if we die for our faith, we are only losing an earthly body that will return to dust. Second, the rewards are exceedingly rich: glory, honor, peace, and a crown of righteousness. Whether with much or little suffering, as followers of Christ we have triumphed. We are more than conquerors: those who live without Christ will still die and receive eternal damnation, but those who have eternal life in Jesus Christ will not taste of death. Disciples of Jesus Christ triumph on earth as well as inheriting a heavenly home for eternity.

Thus, the gospel puts forth a fragrance which is received differently by different people. Some hear it and receive it with joy and thanksgiving. Their outlook on life is changed. Their priorities are rearranged. Nevertheless, others hearing the same gospel of forgiveness and mercy choose to reject it and thereby give themselves a sentence of death. For some it is a fragrance of death unto death; those who are willingly ignorant, and willfully obstinate, dislike the gospel, as men dislike a bad smell, and therefore, they are blinded and hardened by it; it stirs up their corruptions, and exasperates

their spirits. They reject the gospel, to their ruin, even to spiritual and eternal death. Like my husband with the Brussels sprouts or me with the sardines, these have decided they don't like the smell of the gospel, and therefore, refuse to partake of it. Unto others, the gospel is a fragrance of life unto life. To humble and receptive souls the preaching of the word is most delightful and profitable.

We are not like many which corrupt the word of God; but as of sincerity, but as of God, in the sight of God speak we in Christ. We are, if faithful unto God, a sweet fragrance of Christ. Disciples of the Lord will be accepted and recompensed not according to their success but according to their faithfulness. Paul did not mix his own ideas with the doctrines and institutions of Christ. He dared not add to, nor diminish, the Word of God. He was faithful in preaching the gospel as he received it from the Lord and had no desire to please anyone else. His aim was to be faithful to God, remembering that His eye was always upon him. He spoke and acted with an awareness that God saw him, heard him, and loved him.

An eternal fragrance

We are all putting forth an odor from our life. Is it a sweet fragrance that gives forth the love of Christ? Or is it a putrid smell revealing death? If our life has been hidden with God in Christ Jesus, we are a new creation full of the fragrance of Christ. We are a precious trophy carried by our conqueror, Jesus Christ, for all to see. He conquered us, then freed us. Now the Lord has put up His banner over us symbolizing His love for us. Those who desire life will love the fragrance. Those who despise the Lord will command us to take our banner out and bury it in the snow so they can't see or smell it to remind them of how much they dislike it. No worry. He washed us as white as that snow. They can't make us rid ourselves of the fragrance of Jesus in our life; we have everything to win! We will allow the fragrance of our Christian life to be smelled by all regardless of their reaction. It's an eternal fragrance. One day, when their final battle is fought in life, those who rejected the gospel will wish they wore His fragrance. Meanwhile, we will be rejoicing in our triumphal entry into heaven with our Savior. Ah, the fragrance of victory.

⁴⁹ Zechariah 9:9

⁵⁰ *Manners and Customs of the Bible*, p. 460-461.

⁵¹ Colossians 2: 15

⁵² John 8: 1-11

⁵³ 2 Corinthians 14: 15-16

⁵⁴ Romans 8:37

⁵⁵ 2 Corinthians 2:17