

STUDY 15

Participants in Christ's Resurrection Life

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CHRIST'S RESURRECTION LIFE: LIKE NOTHING EVER SEEN BEFORE

Paul's heart cry was to know Christ Jesus his Lord, be continually found in Christ and experience the power of his resurrection:

More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ,⁹ and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from *the* Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which *comes* from God on the basis of faith,¹⁰ that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death;¹¹ in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead (Phil. 3:8–11).¹

Everything else that he had ever manufactured in his relationship with God he counted as rubbish. The vitality and newness of a present resurrected Christ was everything. Paul continued with what may seem to be a strange way to end such a heartfelt and triumphant cry. He wanted to share in the sufferings of Christ. The triumph of Christ's resurrection and his on-going sufferings are not mutually exclusive. They reflect the tensions of truly participating in the resurrection life of Christ.

Participation in Christ's resurrection life cannot be reduced to a matter of simply appropriating blessings such as hope at the next funeral we attend. We must not interpret participation as doing our part—bringing our sinful humanity to Christ to be encouraged and pointed in the proper direction to join the great search and battle for holiness. In this case the crisis of human sin is ignored and we remain the centre and director of our life (in our own illusions). Nothing could be further from the truth:

The cross and resurrection—the Paschal Mystery reveals the Triune God and is also the climax of his loving activity in bringing the old individual Adam to judgment and death, and renewing him, recreating him, bringing him back to life with and in the second Adam, the new man who renews

¹ Unless otherwise stated, all scripture quotations in this study are from the New American Standard Bible.

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our human nature so that it really reflects the God who made us. We are liberated from the old self-preoccupied, self-imprisoned individualism by a Person to be persons . . . In being the willing victim of our self regard he came to the loneliness of crucifixion to create a company of persons.²

The significance of Christ's resurrection for us will be according to our comprehension of the death Jesus died.

Resurrection from Annihilation

The huge crisis for humanity revealed in the cross comes to its concentrated bleakness at the point of Christ's resurrection. If, as Romans 6:1–11 reveals, the cross was the annihilation of the first Adam³ and all who existed in him, then the resurrection of Christ is God creating a new humanity in the humanity of his Son. Our 'body of sin' (v. 6) could not simply be re-worked, tinkered with, polished by the addition of a few new blessings and brought into the life of God. Nothing associated with it had any congruence with the life, love and holiness of God.

When Jesus Christ lay in the tomb the whole race in Adam lay judged, dead and buried with him there. Had Christ remained there so too would all that Adam had spawned. This annihilation was the great crisis that awaited and required nothing less than the resurrection of man. Life never before seen in a human body emerged from that tomb. The life evident in the resurrected Jesus was fully human and therefore all who rise with him discover that the transformation he experienced was appropriate and accomplished in them. Therefore we will come in the first instance to Romans 6 and ask what the resurrection meant for Jesus. From this we will discover what it means for us.

This will lead us to what Nygren calls the 'paradoxical contemporaneousness' of our present life with Christ⁴—that is, the tension of having been raised with Christ and inheriting all the newness of his humanity whilst still awaiting our final resurrection. Others have called this 'the already but not yet' aspect of a believer's life.

Newness of Life for Christ

Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life . . .¹⁰ For the death that He died, He died to sin once for all; but the life that He lives, He lives to God.¹¹ Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus (Rom. 6:4, 10–11).

Paul's intent in Romans 6 is to reveal how we have been included with and therefore participated in all that Christ did in his cross and resurrection. His inclusive logic is seen in verse 4 in the phrase 'so we too'. The 'newness of life' we now share in was first newness of life for Christ through his resurrection. Similarly, in verses 10 and 11,

² Rolland Wallis, 'The Church as a Community of Persons' in *Christ in Our Place: The Humanity of God in Christ for the Reconciliation of the World* (eds Trevor Hart and Daniel Thimell, Paternoster Press, Exeter, 1989), p. 106.

³ Karl Barth: 'Man could not be helped other than through his annihilation', quoted by James D. G. Dunn in *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1998), p. 211.

⁴ Anders Nygren, *Commentary on Romans*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1980, p. 237.

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what it means for Christ to 'live to God' is mirrored in the believer being 'alive to God'. What, then, does newness of life mean for the resurrected Christ? What does it mean for him to be alive to God? Our answer could range through the whole theology of the Church, the present session of Christ and the final resurrection of our bodies. Paul spoke of three aspects of the newness of Christ's life directly linked with his resurrection (see James D. G. Dunn⁵). Through the resurrection, Christ is identified as the:

- Last Adam or we could say the new true Man (1 Cor. 15:45);
- Incarnate Son of God in power (Rom. 1:3–4); and
- The Incarnate Christ who is Lord (Rom. 8:34).

Our participation with Christ means that his newness is interwoven in our lives. The premise here is that what is true for Christ in his resurrection is true for us in this world, through the crisis of our own death and resurrection, and for the age to come:

By this, love [the love of God] is perfected with us, so that we may have confidence in the day of judgment; because as He is, so also are we in this world (1 John 4:17).

Jesus Christ: Raised the True Man

The cataclysmic re-creation of the human race occurred on the Sunday of Christ's resurrection. Having taken up our flesh and blood; having walked as the true Man amongst the corpses of Adam's heritage; having become those corpses and embraced their deadness and death; having embraced with a free 'Amen!' the holy verdict and judgement of God on all that ravaged his being as the greatest sinner; having borne the dereliction until it could make derelict no more; having embraced the embrace of his Father as the grey land of death descended; having been awakened into the peace of a world in which sin no longer reigned, he took himself to that world, through the torn curtain and declared 'Look! The new humanity! Look what I have created in you whilst you were with me through the annihilation and the resurrection!'

In the resurrection treatise of 1 Corinthians 15, Paul links the resurrection of Jesus directly with Psalm 8:

But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep . . . ²⁷ For HE HAS PUT ALL THINGS IN SUBJECTION UNDER HIS FEET. But when He says, 'All things are put in subjection,' it is evident that He is excepted who put all things in subjection to Him (1 Cor. 15:20, 27).

Hebrews 2 picks up the same connection. Humanity was crowned with glory and honour and appointed under God to rule:

But one has testified somewhere, saying,

- 'WHAT IS MAN, THAT YOU REMEMBER HIM?
OR THE SON OF MAN, THAT YOU ARE CONCERNED ABOUT HIM?
⁷ 'YOU HAVE MADE HIM FOR A LITTLE WHILE LOWER THAN THE ANGELS;
YOU HAVE CROWNED HIM WITH GLORY AND HONOR,
AND HAVE APPOINTED HIM OVER THE WORKS OF YOUR HANDS;
⁸ YOU HAVE PUT ALL THINGS IN SUBJECTION UNDER HIS FEET.'

⁵ James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, pp. 240ff.

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For in subjecting all things to him, He left nothing that is not subject to him. But now we do not yet see all things subjected to him.⁹ But we do see Him who was made for a little while lower than the angels, *namely*, Jesus, because of the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, so that by the grace of God He might taste death for everyone (vv. 6–9).

The 'but' at the end of verse 8 exposes the reversal of being truly human—a reversal into patterns of existence that corrupt and destroy all relationships and the creation in general. Not ruling with and under God, humanity attempts to rule for itself and by itself. Thus it becomes lost, lonely and angry against God and itself in a self-made morass of dehumanising behaviour. This was the death Jesus 'tasted' on the cross in order to free his 'brethren' from it (Heb. 2:9, 10, 17). As sin had been a human thing, so the re-creation had to occur within a human being. Only as we understand that Jesus emerged from the resurrection as truly human do we begin to see what we are.

At this point some may say that we can see true humanity in Jesus before his death and resurrection. This is true but it seems from Hebrews 2:10 and Ephesians 1:10 that the fullness of true humanity can only come as the result of the cross and resurrection. So the resurrected Christ endows us with his true humanity; richer and fuller than ever before. As Isaac Watts has penned, 'In him the tribes of Adam boast, more blessings than their father lost'.

The 'but' at the beginning of Hebrews 2:9 directs us to a Man who does take up the mandate to rule. Suddenly God's purpose in creating man takes its right shape in Jesus of Nazareth. Christ's ruling over all things as a Man from the right hand of the Father covers us in that rule but also includes us as rulers:

For if by the transgression of the one, death reigned through the one, much more those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ (Rom. 5:17).

So once we were a slave of all things and now in Christ's death and resurrection we are lords over all—particularly over all those elements of sin, death, guilt, the world, the flesh and the devil, which once lorded our whole existence, but also over the creation which waits eagerly for humanity to reign over it.⁶

All this is open to us because of Christ's new humanity. If there were a minute doubt that his new humanity is not true humanity, his death and resurrection would not amount to a hill of beans for us.

Under the theme of the newness of man in Christ's resurrection it may be helpful to briefly consider the inherent immortality of the soul. For many this is an assumed reality. Humanity is seen to contain a component that is immortal, often called the soul or spirit. Plato and his students maintained that the soul was eternal, existing before the body and not able to be destroyed by human death. Allied with this was the dualistic belief that matter is essentially weak and evil, and the soul and spirit higher and nobler. Ephesians 1:10 is significant in this debate. Here the 'summing up of all

⁶ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Oxford Uni. Press, Oxford, 1968, p. 180), says:

The divine constitution under which we live in Christ is revolution against the invisible law of sin which has become visible in death; it is the rehabilitation of men and their complete freedom from the authority by which all existence is held in chains. Nothing more nor less than the world is the heritage that is promised to Abraham and to his successors (iv.13). Men shall not be enslaved to the COSMOS; rather the COSMOS shall lie, set free, at their feet'

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things', which must include humanity being brought as sons into God's final goal, occurs through the ministry of Christ not Adam. The resurrection of Christ and then subsequently our own resurrection are seen in 1 Corinthians 15 to be the order and essence of that final filling up for the eternal Kingdom. Our old man, all of him as we have said, must be destroyed in the cross. The cross did not simply put to death a part of us, leaving our immortal souls untouched. The message of Christ's resurrection into true humanity is the key signal for what must happen to us. This seems best explained not in terms of an immortal soul but a resurrected body.

Jesus Christ: Raised the Son of God in Power

In Romans, Paul's gospel of God, Christ is introduced as the Son of God born according to the flesh through David's family and then declared (appointed) the Son of God with power by his resurrection. Something new about his Sonship is present:

... concerning His Son, who was born of a descendant of David according to the flesh, ⁴ who was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead, according to the Spirit of holiness, Jesus Christ our Lord (Rom. 1:3-4).

It is clear that the resurrection was not the beginning of Christ's Sonship. The phrase 'with power' is the key. No doubt this has strong Messianic overtones and reflects the cosmic dimensions in Ephesians 1:19-21. But as John Murray says, 'we may not forget that already in verse 3 the Son of God is now viewed not simply as the eternal Son but as the eternal Son incarnate'.⁷ Now through the resurrection the eternal Son has something powerful and new to give to his brethren concerning the presence of God with humanity. Hence Paul describes his own conversion as God revealing his Son in him (Gal. 1:16). That for Paul must have been the existential moment when everything about the Son's glorious humanity brought Paul face to face with the Father, and face to face with himself and what God had made him in Christ. Paul immediately connected his conversion and apostolic calling to the appointment of Jesus as the Son of God with power:

... who was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead, according to the Spirit of holiness, Jesus Christ our Lord, ⁵ through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about *the* obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for His name's sake (Rom. 1:4-5).

Through the power of the Son ruling the nations in our flesh, Paul's heart is immediately enlarged to see the goal of God for the nations and his part in it.

Jesus had always revealed a truly filial connection with the Father. The new vocabulary of his Sonship had been expressed amid a sea of other religious images and illusions:

As the Christ, He brings the world of the Father. But we who stand in this concrete world know nothing, and are incapable of knowing anything, of that other world. The Resurrection from the dead is, however, the transformation: the establishing or *declaration* of that point from above, and the corresponding discerning of it from below.⁸

⁷ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1968, p. 10.

⁸ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 30.

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Thus the Son had been disclosed with the power of grace to create in pagan Romans a heart to cry obediently and with full and free abandon, 'Abba!' (8:15). So the life-giving spirit of sonship was not something to be observed but received in like manner to the true Son who was giving it. The incarnate Son's language and vocabulary became Paul's, the Romans' and ours, not because we know more about him but because in the new post-resurrection era the Spirit takes what is Christ's and brings it home to us.

We dare not turn the mechanics of the resurrection of Jesus into a new theological apologetic—the big gun to batter down unbelief. That would be to view Christ according to the flesh (2 Cor. 5:16). To do this is to ignore the newness of sonship into which we have been delivered in the powerful Son. Now, like the true Son, we must proclaim out of that 'new creation', for these are the things which 'are from God' (vv. 17, 18). To be confronted by so-called indisputable evidence of the resurrection of Christ simply leads to debate. The fruit of being met in power by the risen Son, bringing himself to us, earthed in our transformed humanity, is not to debate from the 'whatever' of a skeptical heart. It is to be confronted with the 'but look at this' of the Father's absolute faithfulness in embracing his sons, face-to-face and heart to heart. It is then that the 'trophies' of the resurrection—adoption, freedom, hope, trust, disciplined godliness—move from goals to aim at or morality to struggle after into joyful worship in the middle of indwelling sin and a world making mud pies in the slums while the holiday at the beach has been provided (as C. S. Lewis has said).

Many other passages refer to the incarnate Son's shared life with his brethren. See Romans 8:29, Galatians 4:6–7, Colossians 1:18, and Hebrews 2:10–17.

Jesus Christ: Raised to be Lord

Our goal has been to see our life as a participation in Christ's resurrection life without becoming contractual or simplistic. This participation has primarily been Christ's embracing of us and uniting us to himself and his ministry. Even our decision to participate was hard won and given to us while our hearts were knotted in a ball of hatred. Nothing in our experience directs us more perfectly to Christ's Lordship than his grace which seamlessly demolishes our hatred and installs his affection and joy in the Father. Little wonder that we fight like alley cats about the sovereignty of God. It is the galling eradication of our ego and all it has built from the wood, straw and plastic of sin.

The title 'Lord' is applied to Jesus over two hundred times in the New Testament. Paul saw us as participating in Christ's Lordship. However, our participation is not in any triumphalist manner but as a captured slave (2 Cor. 2:14ff.).

For Paul the resurrection was the decisive event in which Christ's Lordship emerges:

Exaltation to lordship, we might say, was the other side of the coin of the appointment to sonship 'in power' (Rom. 1:4). Thus Rom. 10:9: the confession that 'Jesus is Lord' was the public expression of belief that 'God raised him from the dead'.⁹

The confession 'Jesus is Lord' is not a credal statement but like 'Abba!' it is the evocative response to participating in all Christ is for us. One cannot cry, 'Jesus is

⁹ James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, p. 245 (see also, Rom. 14:9).

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Lord' apart from seeing, feeling and rejoicing in that Lordship. Equally, knowing the power of that Lordship in the conscience and the heart we cannot but cry, 'Jesus is Lord', and 'Abba! Father!' Through participating in Christ's resurrected life the New Testament believers could experimentally know that the 'my Lord' of Psalm 110:1 was none other than Jesus the Messiah:

The LORD says to my Lord:
'Sit at My right hand
Until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet.'

Psalm 110 is in Paul's mind in many other references to the resurrection and its blessings for us (see Rom. 8:31–39; 1 Cor. 15:25; Col. 3:1; Eph. 1:20). We open up just one of them.

Romans 8:31–39 is the centre of Paul's certainty in God's election and the love of the resurrected and ascended Jesus Christ. The Lord was accountable for all the condemnation that came Paul's way. Paul's participation in the resurrected Christ at the Father's right hand meant that none of these could lever him away from God's love—even when they came to burn him, or in the face of very earthly and human dilemmas of tribulation, distress, persecution, and so on. His Intercessor had seen, felt, embraced and extinguished them all. His presence in glory in Paul's humanity meant that had any one of these trials been permitted to kill Paul he would be sure to wake in the home of his brother and Lord. With the resurrected Christ assuring Paul that even the great enemy of death was dead, he was free to live—albeit as a fragile earthenware vessel—without fear and in great anticipatory joy. We now must examine the tensions created by having these rich blessings of Christ operating within us whilst we are yet to be resurrected, earthenware vessels.

Participating in the Lord and the Offence of Weakness

For indeed He was crucified because of weakness, yet He lives because of the power of God. For we also are weak in Him, yet we will live with Him because of the power of God *directed* toward you (2 Cor. 13:4).

There is a weakness of faith that is the product of being indifferent to the gospel of grace. The conscience, not being instructed in the freedom of Christ, remains weak and thus the heart fails to live and love freely, driven by all kinds of legal fears (see Col. 2:16f.; 1 Cor. 8:7; and compare 1 Tim. 1:5; Heb. 9:14). Then there is the weakness of being a dependent human being. We were designed for this and must not struggle to be God. But the weakness we need to examine here is the weakness of living post-conversion but pre-resurrection. We have been blessed participants in Christ's resurrection as we have seen, but as yet we still await the final victory of that resurrection. We wait to put on Christ's glorified humanity. It is life in the meantime, Nygren's 'paradoxical contemporaneousness', the 'already but not yet' that can not only be confusing but also offensive. It seems to some that having all the fruit of Christ's resurrection now we should lead a life of complete and perfect triumph above the battle. Luther's dictum, 'simultaneously sinner and saint', opens a horrific contradiction for many. For Paul it was not only the present reality for every believer this side of our resurrection, but it was marvellously used by God to show the power of his grace.

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Paul battled offence at his weakness personally and theologically at Corinth. By reading back from Paul's teaching it seems that there were those who despised Paul's obvious weaknesses, maintaining that they were a hindrance or blockage to the presentation of the glory of God. The presence of God's power they said was contradicted by a display of human weakness in Paul. Two passages from Paul will help us see Paul's freedom to be weak without denying or opposing the power of God's presence.

Earthenware Pot or Polished Crystal Vase?

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; ⁸ *we are* afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; ⁹ persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; ¹⁰ always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. ¹¹ For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. ¹² So death works in us, but life in you.

¹³ But having the same spirit of faith, according to what is written, 'I BELIEVED, THEREFORE I SPOKE,' we also believe, therefore we also speak, ¹⁴ knowing that He who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and will present us with you. ¹⁵ For all things *are* for your sakes, so that the grace which is spreading to more and more people may cause the giving of thanks to abound to the glory of God (2 Cor. 4:7-15).

To faithless (graceless) reason it appears more sense for God to show his servants off as polished crystal than earthenware pots. Surely, the logic goes, the state of the vessel speaks to the one who made it and owns it.

When Paul comes to answer these things he does not simply make an exceptional case. He lays out for us the norm for every believer. As the Lord was 'crucified because of weakness,' so the tensions of weakness are the norm for Paul and us. The Corinthians were reminded of this:

For indeed He was crucified because of weakness, yet He lives because of the power of God. For we also are weak in Him, yet we will live with Him because of the power of God *directed* toward you (2 Cor. 13:4).

The 'treasure' in Paul's earthenware existence and his experience of weakness is highlighted by the 'but' of verse 7. That 'but' will either confound, offend or liberate us. The treasure is nothing less than 'the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ'. This glory was not information learned but grace given to the heart. As surely and concretely as light shone across the formless void of creation when God commanded, so concretely and surely had the glory of God spread across Paul's sinful void when Jesus filled him. The holy treasure of the Father and his incarnate Son together in glory had broken into a derelict, bombed out 'temple' in a bombed out derelict world. Although it belonged there it didn't fit. It spilled through, over and out of Paul with a prodigality of delight. 'Wastefully' it flooded this weak man, and all the Simons of the world (Luke 7:39) clucked their tongues in disgust whilst polishing their empty crystal vases. But all the other earthenware vessels wept for joy as the grace of that glorious spillage caught them up, warts and all, into the Father's love.

Lest we spiritualise Paul's analogy of an earthenware vessel he spells out for us both what it does and doesn't mean. At every turn Paul was afflicted (hard pressed),

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perplexed (at a loss), persecuted, struck down (laid low by a weapon). Apostolic life was no rising triumphantly above these attacks. But in describing his battles and weaknesses he injects four gospel 'buts'—four 'buts' that express hope in the tension of his life. Four 'buts' which represent the huge gap between the spirit of the world in suffering and the heart of a believer. Each 'but' is followed by a word describing an extreme into which Paul was saved from entering—afflicted but not crushed; perplexed but not despairing; persecuted but not forsaken; and struck down but not destroyed. These four extremes, crushing, despair, forsakenness and destruction had been entered and destroyed by Christ for Paul. They are not the ends of New Covenant love.

Affliction, perplexity, persecution and being struck down day-by-day meant 'carrying about in his body the dying of Jesus' (2 Cor. 4:10). Paul had mentioned this suffering theme at the beginning of his letter (2 Cor. 1:5). The Messiah in popular belief would be triumphant, not humiliated by suffering. The idea was a stumbling block to the Jews (1 Cor. 1:23). By taking offence at a suffering (weak) Messiah and his suffering (weak) Apostle they missed the comfort Messiah brings.

Paul lived in the great paradox. He lived where the dying of Christ was felt and seen whilst also having the life of the risen Christ manifest in his body (the bringing out of that which had been invisible).

P. T. Forsyth puts Paul's earthenware analogy like this:

We have to tend a consuming fire . . . If it were only texts or men we had to handle! But we have to handle the Gospel. We have to lift up Christ—a Christ who is the death of natural self-confidence—a humiliating, even a crushing Christ. We have to handle a Gospel that is a new rebuke to us every step we gain in intimacy with it . . . There is no new insight into the cross which does not bring, whatever else it bring, a deeper sense of the solemn holiness of the love that meets us there. And there is no new sense of the holy God that does not arrest His name upon our unclean lips . . . We are sacramental elements, broken, often, in the Lord's hands, as He dispenses His grace through us.¹⁰

So Paul's weakness was not to be despised, spiritualised or faithed away. It was of the essence of being in Christ. Neither was it to be classified as a factor limiting ministry; quite the opposite. Paul is emphatic that his weakness, far from obliterating the glory of God, becomes the medium of it to needy sinners:

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves . . . (2 Cor. 4:7).

Paul: Triumphant in Christ

But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place.¹⁵ For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing;¹⁶ to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life. And who is adequate for these things? (2 Cor. 2:14–16).

Paul uses two strong word pictures to highlight the paradox of triumph and weakness found in participating in Christ's resurrection life.

¹⁰ P. T. Forsyth, *Revelation Old and New: Sermons and Addresses*, NCPI, Blackwood, 2001, pp. 122, 120–1.

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Taken on its own at face value it is possible to understand verse 14 in a way diametrically opposite to what Paul meant. Images of white chargers and garlands flung from adoring onlookers are treasured illusions. The context of this statement by Paul was loneliness, depression and a restless spirit. He spells it out in 7:5–7:

For even when we came into Macedonia our flesh had no rest, but we were afflicted on every side: conflicts without, fears within. ⁶ But God, who comforts the depressed, comforted us by the coming of Titus; ⁷ and not only by his coming, but also by the comfort with which he was comforted in you, as he reported to us your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me; so that I rejoiced even more.

Again we have the paradox of intense suffering and emotional battles alongside deep comfort and vital ministry. This was the tension in Paul's life when he claimed to be led in triumph in Christ. For the purist super apostles, each one of Paul's crises would have either disqualified him from Apostleship or gravely limited his proclamation. But as we see in 4:10, they were indispensable for the gospel. How often the presence of pastoral weakness provokes the accusing, non-specific accusation, 'Something is wrong!' If we do not live freely in the 'already but not yet' of the ministry, we will fly off into a thousand fears and attempted compensatory reactions.

The first image of weakness and triumph is of a Roman general after a great victory, riding in triumph ahead of the prisoners, leading them to either their death or slavery. So when Paul placed himself into such a picture he was confessing that God was the triumphant one who had defeated and captured rebel Paul. Paul then is called to be weak, to suffer and even to die in the service of this one who has conquered him. This is not a service of duty or death for Paul. He is in Christ and united in the same sufferings. Through these the true aroma of the Messiah prevails like the incense offered alongside the Roman general's victory parade.

But the paradox deepens and darkens. The same aroma of Christ becomes life to some and death to others (compare Paul's comments in 1 Cor. 1:18 where the word of the cross is foolishness to unbelievers but the power of God to those being saved).

So wherever Paul goes with Christ and in Christ's ministry, the same jarring paradox confronts him. Some hear the word as a stench and are hardened in their rebellion whilst others are saved. There can be no easy programs devised to remove this constant tension. Paul's cry, 'Who is adequate for such things?' (2 Cor. 2:16) directs us away from the illusion of a suffering-free ministry. Were we to devise such a thing it would have no community with the sufferings of Christ and therefore none of his aroma.