

Wings

*“Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles.”
Isaiah 40:31*



November 3, 2013

Who Is Sufficient?

When we feel overwhelmed by the size of the obstacles before us, it helps to remember why we're here: We're servants of a victorious Lord, to be sacrificed for the noblest of all causes.

“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?” (2 Cor. 2:15-16).

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To any citizen of the Roman Empire, particularly a citizen of Rome itself, Paul's language here would be instantly recognizable. He is describing a Roman *triumph*, a grand procession through the streets of Rome honoring a general returning from a successful campaign. During the heyday of the Empire, such triumphs were a routine occurrence, reinforcing the image of Rome as an invincible power.

A triumph consisted of the victorious general riding at the head of his troops, followed by a long train of captives in chains. Garlands, flowers, and burning incense accompanied the whole

procession, lending a festive air to the occasion.

Paul uses this imagery to describe his own role in God's master plan. His statement that God “leads us in triumph” suggests that Paul saw himself as a conquered captive being led by a victorious God—a fitting symbol for a former enemy who met his defeat on the Damascus road. And as the fragrance of the flowers and incense conveyed a different message to the participants in the procession—some smelled the aroma of victory, others sensed their approaching death—so the gospel that Paul preached had different effects on those who encountered it. Some received it as a refreshing balm for the pains of life; others were repulsed by it as an intrusion upon their freedom.

Today, we view Paul as the fearless apostle boldly taking on the pagan world of his day. But Paul saw himself in quite different terms. His life was wholly at the mercy of the Lord who had defeated him and now owned him, body and soul. He knew that his service to God would eventually cost him his life. But unlike

Caesar's captives, Paul accepted his fate with gratitude, because he knew his sacrifice was for the noblest of all causes.

In fact, Paul saw it as an undeserved honor that God would choose him to bear this great burden. When he considered the scope of everything his commission entailed, he was overwhelmed with awe: “Who is sufficient for these things?” How could such a vain and stubborn man be entrusted with such an enormous and vital mission? Paul's service to God made him humble rather than proud.

Likewise, when we look at the task that lies before us today of representing the cause of Christ in a world that is drowning in sin and corruption, we can be overwhelmed at the enormity of the work that must be done. We are tempted to throw up our hands and plead, “who can possibly do all this?” But like Paul, that's not our decision to make. We must ignore the size of the obstacles before us, and throw ourselves into the business at hand. We are captives whose lives are being sacrificed for a greater cause, for a Lord who will ultimately win.

– David King