

God's Captives

2 Cor. 2:14-17; 3:4-6

Jacob DeShazer was a bombardier in the famous Doolittle raid over Japan, April 18, 1942. His plane dropped incendiary bombs on an oil installation and a factory in Nagoya, but ran out of fuel before the pilot could attempt a landing at an airfield held by America's Chinese allies. The crew bailed out over Japanese-occupied territory in China and all were quickly captured.

DeShazer was starved, beaten, and tortured at prisons in Japan and China. He spent most of his time in solitary confinement, until his liberation a few days after Japan's surrender in August 1945.

Amid his misery, he had one source of solace. He begged his captors to get him a Bible, and finally in May 1944 a guard brought him the Book. As DeShazer poured over the Word, God gave him new spiritual eyes. When he looked at the enemy officers and guards who had starved and beaten him so cruelly, he discovered that his bitter hatred for them changed to loving pity. He realized that they knew nothing of the Savior and that if Christ is not in the heart, it is natural to be cruel, especially in the theatre of war which is always so dehumanizing.

DeShazer determined to spread the Gospel to his enemy. After the war, he became a missionary and returned to Japan in December 1948. Two years later in 1950, he gained a remarkable convert. Mitsuo Fuchida, the Japanese naval flier who had led the attack on Pearl Harbor and had become a rice farmer after the war, came upon one of DeShazer's tracts. "It was then that I met Jesus and accepted him as my Savior," Fuchida would later testify. Fuchida became an evangelist and even made several mission trips to the U.S.A.

Over the years, DeShazer met with Fuchida on several occasions. He saw him just before Fuchida died in 1976. He would later say, "We shared in that wonderful thing that Christ has done."

These two unlikely friends, Jacob DeShazer and Mitsuo Fuchida, remind me of Paul's statement, **"Thanks be to God, who made us his captives and leads us along in Christ's triumphal procession. Now wherever we go he uses us to tell others about the Lord and to spread the Good News like a sweet perfume"** (2 Cor. 2:14 NLT).

Who could predict that two enemies, caught up in a world war, would end up fighting side by side for the cause of Christ in the war against sin? God can predict such things. In fact, He ordains such things more than we know. If God could bring Peter and Cornelius together, thereby opening up a whole new horizon for the young and fledgling church, and if God could bring Paul and Barnabus together, creating a powerful partnership for the spreading of the Gospel, then He could surely bring Jacob DeShazer and Mitsuo Fuchida together for the cause of Christ. The transforming power of the Word of God and the Gospel is greater than any bomb or prison camp.

We must never doubt God's ability to use our witness to change the world. Nor can we afford to fail to see God's hand in the service we offer in His name. The Lord promised that he would build His church. He continues to assemble the pieces!

Jacob DeShazer wrote and distributed a tract that changed many lives. We may never write a Christian tract, but there are things we can do that may have far-reaching consequences for the Kingdom of God: a letter or a card written to someone who is lonely or sick; a simple phone call; a good deed done; an act of kindness; a need met – all in the name of Christ. Any of these could open a door for a timely word of witness.

So much for DeShazer and Fuchida. Let's focus on Paul. He introduces a very graphic metaphor, a picture of the splendor of a Roman triumphal procession. In those days, a victorious general would lead his captives and booty in a parade as a public spectacle before a large crowd of onlookers. During the parade, a cloud of incense was burned as an offering to the gods. Sweet odors from the burning of spices would fill the streets. To the victors, the aroma was sweet; but to the captives in the parade, who would often be stripped naked as a further humiliation, it was the smell of slavery and death!

When Christians preach the Gospel, or openly witness, it is good news to some and a repulsive message to others. Some recognize the life-giving fragrance of the message, and it is sweet to them. To those who refuse to believe, however, it smells foul, like death. We all used to carry the stench of death. The Bible says that we were enemies of God. Paul writes:

“But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us ... For if, when we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!” (Rom. 5:8, 10).

We have been overcome by God's boundless love and amazing grace and taken captive by Him. We are led and displayed by Him to the world, not merely on one passing occasion, but every day and everywhere. Always the redeemed sinner is on exhibition as a trophy of divine love and grace.

For Paul, the triumphal procession began on the road to Damascus, where he was converted. It then continued without cessation throughout his ever-expanding ministry and missionary journeys, right up until his martyrdom at Rome.

For Jacob DeShazer the triumphal procession began in a Japanese prison camp when Christ came to him through the written Word of God. The procession took him all the way back to Japan as a missionary.

For Mitsuo Fuchida the triumphal procession began when he picked up one of DeShazer's tracts. The procession took him throughout Japan and even to America! Where did the triumphal procession begin for you? Where has it taken you in the service of the Lord?

At this point one might well ask, “Who is up to this?” In v. 16 of our text, Paul asked, “Who is equal to such a task?” But we need to remember that the source of the whole operation is God. It is *God* who leads His servant in triumph and it is *God* who causes the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Christ. Men like Paul, DeShazer, Fuchida – and countless other witnesses for Jesus around the world – are merely vessels through whom the fragrance is released. Moreover, consider the following:

- First, it is Christ who commissions and sends us. The One who says, “*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me*” is the One who commissions and sends us out into the harvest field. (Matthew 28:18-20). We are emissaries of the King of the universe!

- Second, God has given us the Holy Spirit to enable us to speak with Christ's **power** and authority: "*But you will receive power when the Holy spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth*" (Acts 1:8).
- Third, God keeps His eye on us, to protect and strengthen us as we work for Him: "*For the eyes of the Lord range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him.*" (2 Chron. 16:9).

What great promises these are! We go forth into the world as God's exhibits – exhibits of His love and grace – and we go in His authority, His power, and His strength. This means that as we serve the Lord we need to focus on what He can do through us – not on what we can or cannot do by ourselves!

Now let's wrap up by looking at 3:4-6, which sum up Paul's thoughts. He reminds us that we must give God the credit for our accomplishments. There is no place for boasting on the part of the Lord's servant; rather the proper attitude is one of humility and thanksgiving. No one can claim to be adequate without God's power and help. No one is competent to carry out the responsibilities and duties of God's calling in his or her own strength. Without the Holy Spirit's presence and power, we can do only the works of men – not those of God.

Finally we are reminded of the futility of trying to be saved by works. Trying to keep the Old Testament laws will only end in death! Salvation is through faith in Christ alone. When our faith in Christ is kindled, the Spirit of the Living God indwells us, giving life. So everything we have is from God. He gives us life, and the power to live it victoriously in His service.

So do not ask, "What can I do for Christ?" Ask, "What does the Lord want to do through me? How does Jesus want to express Himself in my life? Who does God want to influence through me?" Armed with His promises, let us do good to others, speak boldly for Jesus, and trust God for a rich harvest. We know what the Apostle Paul said about our chances of success:

"Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain" (1 Cor. 15:58).