



## SERMONS

### Behind the Mask: Getting Real

### We Are Victorious Captives

2 Corinthians 2:14

September 27, 2020

Rev Ellis White

### 2020: The Year of Defeat?

Imagine if you could go back and talk to yourself on New Year's Eve 2020. What would you say? Make sure you stock up on toilet paper? Switch your investments over to stock in Amazon, Netflix and Zoom? Take one final trip around the world? Read some books on racial injustice? Pull your kids out of school now and start homeschooling? What would you say to yourself?

No one could have predicted how 2020 turned out. And the toll on us is severe. In Fresno, California, suicides were 70% higher in June this year than last year.<sup>1</sup> Depression and anxiety tripled in April-June.<sup>2</sup> Those seeking divorce in the US went up 34% between March and June year-to-year, particularly among those with young children.<sup>3</sup> Opioid-related deaths in the state of Maryland went up 9%.<sup>4</sup> Unemployment reached a record high of 14.7% in the US.<sup>5</sup> Nearly half of all parents

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.adn.com/nation-world/2020/08/11/pandemics-effect-on-already-rising-suicide-rates-heightens-worry/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6932a1.htm>

<sup>3</sup> <https://legaltemplates.net/resources/personal-family/divorce-rates-covid-19/#divorces-increase-in-couples-with-children>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.delmarvanow.com/story/news/local/maryland/2020/09/22/opioid-related-deaths-rose-maryland-covid-19-pandemic-raged/5814847002/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.bls.gov/charts/employment-situation/civilian-unemployment-rate.htm>



of young children rate their stress level at or above an 8 out of 10.<sup>6</sup> Nearly 12 million acres of land, 11,000 structures and 37 lives were taken by the recent wildfires in the Western states.<sup>7</sup> And, nearly 1 million people worldwide have died after contracting Covid-19.<sup>8</sup>

You know what I would say to my past self on New Year's Eve 2020? "Prepare to feel defeated." Right? 2020 feels like the year of defeat. And yet, I'm here today, to proclaim to you, what I believe will be a message of hope. A message that says that in God's economy, wins comes through woes. That triumphs comes through trials. That victories comes through vexations. A message of hope that says that in spite of what our eyes can see, God has already won the decisive battle and the culmination of the war is within sight.

## Behind The Mask

My name is Ellis White, and I'm one of the pastors here. We're in a series called Behind the Mask, where we are seeking, metaphorically of course, to take off the masks that we hide behind and get real. Get real with God and get real with one another. And today, I want to address the issue of defeat. 2020 has been a year when, I think I can safely say, we all have felt defeated. Yet, I believe the Bible teaches us that what feels like defeat may actually be the means through which we are victorious.

One of the early church leaders, Paul, knew what it was to experience defeat. Five times he was whipped with 39 lashes, three times beaten with rods, once pelted with stones, three times shipwrecked, and he was imprisoned at least three times. And yet, Paul still believed that in spite of what from the outside looked like defeat, he was victorious in and through his relationship to Jesus. Take a look with me at 2

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2020/stress-in-america-covid.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> <https://gacc.nifc.gov/sacc/predictive/intelligence/NationalLargeIncidentYTDReport.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1093256/novel-coronavirus-2019ncov-deaths-worldwide-by-country/>

Corinthians 2:14, which is our Bible text for today, where Paul writes this: “But thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives in Christ’s triumphal procession and uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere.”

## Triumphal Procession

[SLIDE] *“On the morning of July 6, 1966, [52] prisoners at “Briarpatch” and the “Zoo,” two prisoner of war camps west of Hanoi, were rounded up ... and given shirts with numbers. In late afternoon, the gathered American prisoners, blindfolded and handcuffed in pairs, were loaded onto trucks and driven to a sports stadium in downtown Hanoi...*

*“Red-scarved guards flanked the prisoners, who were marched two-by-two into a waiting crowd... The men were ... brought down the city’s main avenue, which was lined by a mob that one soldier estimated to have 100,000 people. Before long, screaming spectators began breaking past the guards to hit, kick, and spit at the men. Bottles were thrown, and more than once the dazed prisoners were beaten to the ground. The brutal gauntlet extended for about two miles, an hour-long ordeal.”<sup>9</sup>*

This procession of POWs in 1966 is not unlike the sort of procession that Paul is referring to in this passage. When Paul writes that “God always leads us as captives in Christ’s triumphal procession,” he is actually referring to something his 1<sup>st</sup> century audience would have been very familiar with—the procession of prisoners by the conquering Romans.

[SLIDE] In the city of Rome, lies the Arch of Titus. A triumphal arch like this is something through which an emperor would enter with booty, attendants, soldiers and prisoners of war, following a conquest. On the inside of this particular arch is a relief commemorating the parade that took place along that street in 70 AD following

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/honor-hanoi-march-and-consolidation-pows/>

the Roman conquest of Jerusalem. [SLIDE] In it, you can see the lampstand and the table of showbread that were taken from the temple in Jerusalem. And as the Romans marched their captives along that street, they finished their parade, as was typical, by murdering the leader of those who had been conquered—in this case Simon, son of Giora.<sup>10</sup>

So, when Paul writes, “God always leads us as captives in Christ’s triumphal procession,” he is referring to this image that was very familiar to his readers, or a group of captives being paraded through the city streets in triumph by the winning king. Yet, what is confusing about this statement—“ God always leads us as captives in Christ’s triumphal procession”—is what is our role in the procession? It says that we are the captives in this procession, and yet it also says that God is the triumphant king. But if God is the triumphant king, and God is on our side, wouldn’t that make us the victors, rather than the captives? So, in this great procession, what are we? Captives or victors?

## Paradoxes

I’ve always loved the work of the Dutch artist M.C. Escher. One of my favorite pieces is his waterfall. [SLIDE] In this picture it appears as if he has created a perpetual motion machine where the water is continually flowing around and around the closed system, generating energy using the water wheel. The reality is that it is just an optical illusion, and not reality. Optical illusions, like this, are examples of something we refer to as paradoxes. A paradox is a statement that runs contrary to one’s expectations. Like, “If I know one thing, it’s that I know nothing.” Or, “You’ve got to spend money to make money.” It’s a statement that in and of itself is logically inconsistent, and yet it still describes reality.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/ancient-art-civilizations/roman/early-empire/v/arch-of-titus-relief>

Paul's statement in this passage is a paradox. His claim is that we are both captives and victors at the same time. In fact, you might rephrase his statement to be this: [SLIDE] We are victorious captives. And you might say, "How can that be?" How is it possible to be both a captive and a victor at the same time? Well, the truth is, just like with Escher's waterfall, it is all about perspective.

[SLIDE] When the Romans marched the captives from Jerusalem down the streets of Rome in 70 AD, there was one particular historian there recording the event, who felt torn: Flavius Josephus. He was a Jewish general who switched sides in the middle of the war, and was supported by the Roman emperor to write the history to convince the Jews to give up fighting, and to convince the Romans that not all the Jews were bad. And Josephus was standing on the streets of Rome watching this triumphal parade. And, I wonder if Josephus was thinking, which side am I on? Am I a winner or a loser? I'm a Jew, and it is my people being led captive through the streets about to be slaughtered. But I'm a servant of the emperor and so I'm on the winning side. Am I a captive or a victor?<sup>11</sup> It all matters which perspective you view it from.

## Victorious Captives

This week I was about to read my 5-year old son, Ezra, a bedtime story from the Action Bible, [SLIDE] which I'm loving right now, since it is a Bible in graphic novel format. If you have a kid or grandkid who likes comic books, get them this for Christmas. Anyway, Ezra said to me, "Can we read the one where he cuts off the nose?" I said, "Do you mean cuts off the ear?" "Yes," he said. He was referring to the night before Jesus died, when he was arrested. Peter immediately took his sword and cut off the ear of the guard who arrested Jesus. Jesus then touched the guard's ear and healed him. After this he turns to Peter and says, "Put your sword away! Do you think I can't call on God to send thousands of angels to protect me?" As I was sitting

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/ancient-art-civilizations/roman/early-empire/v/arch-of-titus-relief>

there reading this to my son, I have a revelation. In this very moment, Jesus himself becomes a victorious captive.

At that moment, Jesus entered into captivity to the authorities. He was put on trial on trumped up charges, whipped, beaten, crowned with thorns, given a cross and marched down the streets of Jerusalem by the Romans themselves in a triumphal procession. The man who had claimed to be the King of the Jews had been captured and was being led to his death in a triumphal procession.

And yet, at the very same time, this was Jesus' moment of victory. In that moment on the cross, Jesus won the decisive victory over sin and death. He took upon himself the right deserved consequences of the sin of the whole world, he faced down the great Enemy himself and won. I love how the great Christian leader and missionary to India, Lesslie Newbigin puts it: "That the cross is indeed victory and not defeat is made manifest in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. The resurrection is not the reversal of a defeat but the manifestation of a victory."<sup>12</sup> From the perspective of the world, the cross was defeat. But from Jesus' perspective it was victory. Jesus was the victorious captive.

In the very same way, in and through Jesus, we too are victorious captives. From the perspective of the world it may look like 2020 has been the year of defeat. But do you know what, for the people of God, this is the year of victory. Why? Because as Paul writes, "[God] **always** leads us as captives in Christ's triumphal procession." No matter what you may be going through this year, in and through Christ Jesus, you are victorious. You might feel like a captive, but you are not. Because it is through what looks to the world like captivity, that your victory comes. It is through trials that we get to triumph. It is through woes that we get to wins. It is through vexation that we get to

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<sup>12</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, "The Open Secret," p. 36.



victory. 2020 is not the year of defeat for the people of God, it is the year of victory, because God **always** leads us in a triumphant procession.

## Worship: The Key to Victory

So how do we live this out? How do we experience the reality of our victory, in the midst of what feels like defeat? The key is in the first few words of the verse we are looking at: "But thanks be to God." We must lift our eyes from what we see in front of us, and look to God. We must shift our perspective from the defeat that the world sees and we must choose to focus on God, giving thanks and praise to him. And the best way I know to do this is to worship. Worship is the key to shifting our perspective from defeat to victory.

When the 52 American POWs were being marched through the streets of Hanoi in 1966, there were two of them who did something totally radical. In the final 100 yards back to the Stadium, after walking through the brutal gauntlet, that resulted in almost all the men sustaining head and facial injuries... Ralph Gaither and another prisoner began to recite the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm.<sup>13</sup>

*"The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.*

*He makes me lie down in green pastures.*

*He leads me beside still waters.*

*He restores my soul.*

*He leads me in paths of righteousness*

*for his name's sake.*

*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,*

*I will fear no evil,*

*for you are with me;*

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/honor-hanoi-march-and-consolidation-pows/>



*your rod and your staff,  
they comfort me.*

*You prepare a table before me  
in the presence of my enemies;  
you anoint my head with oil;  
my cup overflows.  
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me  
all the days of my life,  
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD  
forever.”*

These men understood that if they were to see the victory of God in the midst of captivity, they needed to worship. They knew that the key to reframing our perspective was to choose to declare the truth about who God is, even in the midst of tragedy. And worship isn't just something we do on a Sunday, as these men demonstrated. You can worship any time, any place. And I want to invite you to practice it this week. When you feel that defeat coming in... choose instead to worship. Ask Alexa to play worship music. Grab your Bible and recite the Psalms. Plug in your headphones and crank up Spotify.

This week I had a moment where it all kind of caved in for me. I had one conversation that left me feeling totally defeated. It was like a tipping point for me. All my anxiety came crashing in on this one interaction. And I stewed on it. All night. I never have trouble falling asleep, but this night, I gave up trying at 1am and got back up and went downstairs. Eventually I made it back to bed and after 4 hours of sleep I felt... exactly the same, just even more tired. I knew I had to change something or nothing was going to change.





So I did what I always do in the mornings, I went for a walk round my neighborhood, well, sometimes I run, but not that day. And as I walked I knew I had to change my perspective, I knew had to make that perspective shift from defeat to victory. So I made a decision to praise God. I started declaring that he was in control, he is sovereign. I started preaching scripture to myself. I began declaring the battle belonged to the Lord. If God is for me, who can be against me. No weapon formed against me can prosper. And I began to sing (in my head, of course, I didn't want to look weird in front of my neighbors). I sang this next song we're going to close with, again and again and again. I declared the truths of it. As I did, my perspective shifted, my anxiety lifted, and my strength was renewed. I could face the day, standing firm in the victory that Christ has won for me.

Worship is the key to shifting our perspective from defeat to victory. And we're going to practice it right now. We're going to choose to worship through singing, declaring truths about God, and reframing our perspective. So, wherever you are, would you stand with me?

Whatever you might be facing right now, whatever you might be feeling about the struggles and trials of this year, whatever fears might be holding you captive, use this time to lift up your eyes to God, reframe your perspective, turn your pain into praise. Because we serve a God who always leads in a triumphant procession. And in the world's eyes, it may look like we are captives, but in truth we are victors.

The world might see trials, but I see a triumph. The world might see woes, but I see a win. The world might see vexations, but I see a victory. Would you pray with me?