

# The Triumph of the Cross

by James D. Nickel

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As you have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith, as you have been taught, abounding in it with thanksgiving. Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ. For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power. In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, *triumphing* over them in it (Colossians 2:6-15).

The purpose of this essay is to briefly investigate the background and implications of the Apostle Paul's referent to the *Triumph of the Cross*. When Paul used the word triumph (Greek: *thriambeuo*), he had in mind a Roman "parade procession" called "The Roman Triumph." By ca. 60 anno Domini, the date of Paul's epistle to the Colossians, the conquerors of Rome (Caesar and his generals) had been celebrating triumphs for more than a thousand years. It is on historical record that at least 320 triumphal processions took place from the beginning of Rome to the reign of Emperor Vespasian (69-79 anno Domini).

## The Roman Triumph

The main objective of the triumphal procession was to celebrate extraordinary deeds in service to the state and was the highest honor Rome could bestow on a hero. The triumph always commemorated a military victory. The ceremony also reflected the fortitude of Rome, its mission of conquest and domination, and the courage of her soldiers. The ceremony lasted for at least one day, during which the Roman people were presented with a vast parade celebrating the glory of the returning general. Along the route the populace greeted this procession with shouts of joy and praise and sometimes threw flowers before their feet. The conqueror rode in a golden chariot led by white horses, and the spoils of war (i.e., dazed prisoners who were the captured royal officials of the defeated country) walked in front of him. In Imperial times the conqueror was crowned with a laurel wreath and wore a purple tunic embroidered with palms under a purple toga embroidered with stars. Sometimes his children, robed in white, stood with him in the chariot, or rode behind on trace-horses. A slave stood behind the conqueror, holding a golden crown over his head, whispering in his ear a warning of the fleeting nature of glory saying, "Remember, you are but a man."

This is the image that Paul had in mind when he spoke of *The Triumph of the Cross*. Too many Christians in our age have become accustomed to think contrary to the biblical implications of this triumph. In our "evangelical" age of pious and syrupy *unbelief*, it requires resolute faith to see that 2000 years ago God

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appointed His only begotten Son, the Lord Jesus Christ (the God-man), to a throne that is above every throne and has given Him *the name* that is above every name.

## Government prior to the enthronement of Christ

In order to better understand the implications of Christ's current rule over all, we must investigate the way in which God ruled the nations in the Old Testament. Here we see that God gave the government over of nations of men to celestial beings. Each nation served gods and these gods are not to be dismissed as empty superstitions (like we view Santa Claus or Peter Pan); *they are real*. The ungodly nations of the Old Testament (e.g., Assyria, Babylon, etc.) were devoted to idolatry. The Apostle Paul equates the worship of idols with the worship of demons (I Corinthians 10:20-21). Therefore, *behind* the idol worship of Old Testament nations were *fallen angels in opposition to God*.

Let's investigate two passages of Scripture that shows us that these gods (demons) exercised control over the nations.

Then he said to me, "Do not fear, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your heart to understand, and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard; and I have come because of your words. But the prince of the kingdom of Persia withstood me twenty-one days; and behold, Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, for I had been left alone there with the kings of Persia. . . . Then he said, "Do you know why I have come to you? And now I must return to fight with the prince of Persia; and when I have gone forth, indeed the prince of Greece will come. But I will tell you what is noted in the Scripture of Truth. (No one upholds me against these, except Michael your prince . . .") (Daniel 10:12-13, 20-21).

In this passage, Michael, one of the *chief* princes (i.e., an archangel) is connected to the *nation* of Israel. Also, the *political* kingdom of Persia was connected to a *spiritual* entity behind it; i.e., the prince of the kingdom of Persia.

Moreover the word of the LORD came to me, saying, "Son of man, take up a lamentation for the king of Tyre, and say to him, "Thus says the Lord GOD: You *were* the seal of perfection, Full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. You were in Eden, the garden of God; Every precious stone *was* your covering: The sardius, topaz, and diamond, Beryl, onyx, and jasper, Sapphire, turquoise, and emerald with gold. The workmanship of your timbrels and pipes Was prepared for you on the day you were created. You *were* the anointed cherub who covers; I established you; You were on the holy mountain of God; You walked back and forth in the midst of fiery stones. You *were* perfect in your ways from the day you were created, Till iniquity was found in you. By the abundance of your trading You became filled with violence within, And you sinned; Therefore I cast you as a profane thing Out of the mountain of God; And I destroyed you, O covering cherub, From the midst of the fiery stones (Ezekiel 28:11-16).

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This passage is a lamentation spoken *to* the King of Tyre who is in Eden, the garden of God. Moreover, this personage is identified as a “cherub.” The King of Tyre was a man (not a cherub) and he was not at this juncture of history residing in Eden. This passage links this King *to a cherub that was behind the kingdom of Tyre*. This cherub had a history; i.e., he was in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 1-3). Please note that cherub in Hebrew does *not* mean a chubby or cute little baby with stubby wings; *a cherub is a horrific and frightful being*. There are godly cherubim (cf. Exodus 25:19, II Samuel 22:11; Psalm 18:10; Ezekiel 10). If we could see them, they would frighten us to silence.

In summary, Psalm 86:8-9 states:

Among the gods *there is* none like You, O Lord; Nor *are there any works* like Your works. All nations whom You have made shall come and worship before You, O Lord, And shall glorify Your name.

Note two truths in this text. First, although Scripture takes these beings (i.e., gods) seriously, they are still creatures. He is the Creator. They are His servants and they can in no sense be victorious in a war against God. Second, God is taking history to a point where all nations shall worship and glorify His Name. For this to happen, someone must come who will break the power of these demons over the nations. That someone is God in Christ.

## Government in the Messianic Age

In the Old Testament, these princes are connected to the destiny of nations while under the absolute rule of God. In this sense, these princes are mediatorial (i.e., God rules *through* them). In the New Testament, God has disposed of this world of mediatorial princes and has established and glorified *one* prince, the Messiah – the Lord Jesus Christ.

So when Peter saw it, he responded to the people: “Men of Israel, why do you marvel at this? Or why look so intently at us, as though by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk? The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified His Servant Jesus, whom you delivered up and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he was determined to let Him go. But you denied the Holy One and the Just, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and killed the Prince of life, whom God raised from the dead, of which we are witnesses” (Acts 3:12-15).

Take careful note of this passage from Hebrews:

For He has not put the world to come, of which we speak, in subjection to angels. But one testified in a certain place, saying: ‘What is man that You are mindful of him, Or the son of man that You take care of him? You have made him a little lower than the angels; You have crowned him with glory and honor, And set him over the works of Your hands. You have put all things in subjection under his feet.’ For in that He put all in subjection under him, He left nothing *that is* not put under him. But now we do not yet see all things put under him. But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, for the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, that He, by the grace of God, might taste death for everyone

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(Hebrews 2:5-9, quoting Psalm 8 which speaks about God giving dominion to man; cf. Genesis 1:26-27).

The writer to the Hebrews identifies the “world to come” as subject to man (*not* angels), but not everything is under man *yet*. He then sees Jesus, the God-man (John 1:1-14), as the One crowned with universal dominion over all things (including angels). In the Incarnation, the “world to come” was subjected (or returned) to the dominion of man *in and under the Lord Christ*.

Hebrews 2:16 states, “For indeed He does not give aid to angels, but He does give aid to the seed of Abraham.” This means that aid (i.e., salvation or redemption) is only for man, not angels. God created man to rule His creation as a steward. Because of sin, this rule became flawed and disoriented. Redemption in Christ restores man back to the holy and righteous image of God. True and godly dominion over the creation is put into force progressively (as implied by the “not yet” of Hebrews 2) by man redeemed in Christ. Note that in I Corinthians 6, God even puts the angels under the judgment-dominion of man in Christ.

God has always exercised sovereign control over everything. What the New Testament is talking about is that, in the Old Testament, God mediated His control over the world through the tutelage of angels or princes (some were fallen angels while others not; e.g., Michael). When Christ came, God established one mediator (i.e., one prince) between God and man, namely Christ. The Lord Jesus Christ, God incarnated in the flesh, i.e., the God-man, *now rules the universe*. This is what is *new* about the New Testament revelation of the sovereign rule of God. By implication, man redeemed in Christ is one with this rule (cf. Romans 5:21; Ephesians 2:6 [where the image of “sitting in the heavenlies” carries the idea of a king in rule]; Revelation 2:26-27).

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An understanding of the rule of Christ and His redeemed people as co-rulers under Him brings to the believer a sense of exultation and triumph. The sound of this “destiny of triumph” is a note sadly missing from the modern church. The modern church is impotent because she has failed to understand the *Triumph of the Cross*. Note Paul’s declaration of the power and authority of the Cross:

However, we speak wisdom among those who are mature, yet not the wisdom of this age, nor of the rulers of this age, *who are coming to nothing*. But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden *wisdom* which God ordained before the ages for our glory, *which none of the rulers of this age knew*; for had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But as it is written: ‘Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, Nor have entered into the heart of man The things which God has prepared for those who love Him.’ But God has revealed *them* to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God (I Corinthians 2:6-10).

In the era of the first century Paul proclaims that the rulers of this age are *coming to nothing*. When Paul states that “eye has not seen ...” he is not talking about heaven; he is talking about the implications of the mediatorial reign of Christ. The Christian apologist C. S. Lewis (1898-1963) once said that “the Cross is the devil’s mousetrap.” The Bible does not depict God and Satan in a perpetual “tug of war.” The Bible declares

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that the enemy and his demons *have been defeated* definitively in the Cross of Christ. Believers, as co-rulers with Christ, partake of the “mop up” operation by enforcing this triumph through the preaching and application of the Gospel to all areas of life. This enforcement of an already achieved triumph is what Paul had in mind when he told the Roman believers, “And the God of peace will crush Satan under your feet shortly” (Romans 16:20).

When the rulers of this age (i.e., Satan’s demonic horde) instigated the crucifixion of the Christ, they did not know that the Cross would become their mousetrap. They did not know that the Cross would bring them to nothing. They did not know that the Cross would glorify the saints. They did not know that through the Cross, man in Christ would replace them in positions of authority. They did not know that they were busily “sawing off the limb they were sitting on” as they motivated the crowd to yell, “Crucify Him! Crucify Him!” They did not know that God accomplished their defeat *by their own hand*. They did not know that through the Cross, the wisdom of God, they were completely and hopelessly outmaneuvered.

Now My soul is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save Me from this hour?’ But for this purpose I came to this hour. “Father, glorify Your name.” Then a voice came from heaven, *saying*, “I have both glorified *it* and will glorify *it* again.” Therefore the people who stood by and heard *it* said that it had thundered. Others said, “An angel has spoken to Him.” Jesus answered and said, “This voice did not come because of Me, but for your sake. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be cast out. And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all *peoples* to Myself.” This He said, signifying by what death He would die. The people answered Him, “We have heard from the law that the Christ remains forever; and how *can* You say, ‘The Son of Man must be lifted up?’ Who is this Son of Man?” Then Jesus said to them, “A little while longer the light is with you. Walk while you have the light, lest darkness overtake you; he who walks in darkness does not know where he is going. While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light.”

These things Jesus spoke, and departed, and was hidden from them (John 12:27-36).

Contrary to today’s end-time prophecy pundits (their books fill evangelical bookstores), Christ came to conquer all things in His first coming, not the second coming (His second coming will consummate His victory in terms of the spoils; i.e., the nations, gathered by His people through the Gospel). Christ has conquered the world, the flesh, and the devil *through the Cross*. The Apostle John said in his first letter, “For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy [render powerless] the works of the devil” (I John 3:8). If we, as believers, do not understand and apply this, then we will unwittingly aid the kingdom of darkness instead of plundering it in Christ’s triumph. Christ has conquered and He is reigning above all kingdoms and all thrones (cf. Revelation 1:4-6). Given these truths, we must reject any doctrine that places the victory of Christ *only* in the future (whether in some pipe dream millennial kingdom or the eternal state).

Unfortunately, the real and actual *Triumph of the Cross* is commonly ignored by the modern churchman. If you do not know that victory has already been won, then one’s battle tactics are skewed (and this is exactly what we see in modern evangelicalism). The *Triumph of the Cross* transforms our world. As John 12:31-32 states, the death of Jesus Christ conquered and rendered the Devil powerless (cf. I John 3:8). When Christ

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said, “If I am lifted up from the earth,” He meant His death on the Cross. In this death, (1) the ruler of the earth was cast out and (2) all nations will be drawn to Himself.

Nevertheless I tell you the truth. It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you. And when He has come, He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: of sin, because they do not believe in Me; of righteousness, because I go to My Father and you see Me no more; of judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged (John 16:7-11).

The ministry of the Holy Spirit will convict the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment and this judgment includes the truth that the ruler of this world is judged (or brought to nothing). This brings us to our initial text in Colossians 2.

And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it (Colossians 2:13-15).

Through the Cross, Christ disarmed principalities and powers (cf. Ephesians 6). Christ triumphed over principalities and powers *in the Cross*. This is the condition that the devil and his minions are in (and have been in for 2000 years). Crucifixion, in Roman times, was reserved for convicts. In Christ, *the convict's gibbet is the victor's chariot*. Our sins, as a violation of God's holy law, stand in condemnation of us and on the Cross, Christ was made sin for us (II Corinthians 5:21). When Christ was nailed to the Cross, our sins were nailed to the Cross. In Philippians 3:12, Paul confesses that “... Christ Jesus has also laid hold [seize, take possession] of me.” Paul saw himself as *a spoil of Christ's triumph, a trophy of His grace*. In and through the Cross, Christ seizes His spoils (i.e., His people and the nations).

Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage (Hebrews 2:14-15).

Note again that through the Cross (i.e., the death of Christ) Christ destroyed him who previously had the power of death. In the death of Christ, Christ abolished death and its attendant fears. In His resurrection, He brought life and immortality to light (II Timothy 1:10). The domain of fear (of the devil and of death) belongs only to those still dammed in spiritual darkness.

In Matthew 4, Satan offered Christ the kingdoms of this world. Jesus refused this offer, not because He did not want those kingdoms, but because he did not want them as a “gift” from the devil. He came to disarm the devil and take these kingdoms away from him; i.e., to *plunder* his house and his dominion over kingdoms by binding the strong man at the Cross (cf. Mark 3:23-27; Revelation 20:1-3).



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John to the seven churches which are in Asia: Grace *be* unto you, and peace, from him which is, and which was, and which is to come; and from the seven Spirits which are before his throne; And from Jesus Christ, *who is* the faithful witness, *and* the first begotten of the dead, and the prince of the kings of the earth. Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood, and hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father; to him *be* glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen (Revelation 1:4-6).

The Apostle John declares Jesus Christ as the *prince* of the kings of the earth. The devil and his minions are only “princes” of the old age or the “age of this world” – a domain dominated by the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the boastful pride of life (I John 2:15). This old age, according to the beloved disciple, was *passing away in the first century* (I John 2:17). Note also that John describes Christ’s blood bought people as kings and priests (co-rulers in and under Him).

And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. Amen” (Matthew 28:18-20).

As a result of His finished work on the Cross, Christ commanded His disciples to transform all nations on the basis of the *universal authority* (including heaven *and* earth) given to Him by His Father (cf. Daniel 7:13-14). God the Father has given all nations for the asking His Son (cf. Psalm 2). From Pentecost until now, Christ’s people have been asking in His name for these nations (cf. Acts 4). In the proclamation and application of the Gospel, Christ progressively possesses what is already His; i.e., the uttermost parts of the earth (Acts 1:8; Malachi 1:11) or as Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920) once said, “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: ‘Mine!’” In this sounding forth of the Gospel, Christ judges the nations that oppose the Truth bringing all opposition to nothing. The government of Hell cannot withstand the onslaught of the Gospel march and the building of Christ’s Church (Matthew 16:18). The conquest of the Gospel through the *Triumph of the Cross* is the background for John’s announcement in Revelation 11:

And the seventh angel sounded; and there were great voices in heaven, saying, The kingdom of this world are become *the kingdom* of our Lord, and of his Christ; and he shall reign for ever and ever. And the four and twenty elders, which sat before God on their seats, fell upon their faces, and worshipped God, saying, ‘We give thee thanks, O Lord God Almighty, which art, and wast, and art to come; because thou hast taken to thee thy great power, and hast reigned. And the nations were angry, and thy wrath is come, and the time of the dead, that they should be judged, and that thou shouldst give reward unto thy servants the prophets, and to the saints, and them that fear thy name, small and great; and shouldst destroy them which destroy the earth (Revelation 11:15-18).

When Georg Frederich Handel (1685-1759) wrote “Messiah” in 1741, he placed the singing of this text in the redemptive portion of the musical – immediately after the ascension of Christ, the sounding forth of

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the Gospel, and the judgment of God on nations that oppose His Son. Handel the musician was a better theologian than many modern day prophecy pundits. It has been reported that when the British Queen Victoria (1819-1901) first heard the “Hallelujah” Chorus, she arose in respect of the King of kings and Lord of Lords and *removed her crown*.

Christ overcame the devil by the Cross and we, as believers and co-rulers with Him, do likewise. We resist the accuser who roams about like a roaring lion (but with no teeth) by proclaiming the finished work of Christ. In so doing, he will flee from us like a scared rabbit.

Then I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, “Now salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of His Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren, who accused them before our God day and night, has been cast down. And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto the death” (Revelation 12:10-11).

Likewise you younger people, submit yourselves to *your* elders. Yes, all of *you* be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for God resists the proud, But gives grace to the humble. Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time, casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you. Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Resist [stand against, withstand, oppose] him [cf. James 5:7, “Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you”], steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world. But may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle *you*. To Him *be* the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen (I Peter 5:5-11).

## Conclusion

Another important feature of the Roman triumph is the presence of the *porta triumphalis*. The *porta triumphalis* was an entry gate to the city through which the triumphator entered with his triumphal procession. The entrance via this gate signified the continued presence of the blessing the triumphator brought into the city. The Alexandrian bishop Athanasius (ca. 296-373), in *On the Incarnation*, wrote:

For the solidarity of mankind is such that, by virtue of the Word’s indwelling in a single human body, the corruption which goes with death has lost its power over all. You know how it is when some great king enters a large city and dwells in one of its houses; because of his dwelling in that single house, the whole city is honoured, and enemies and robbers cease to molest it. Even so it is with the King of all; He has come into our country and dwelt in one body amidst the many, and in consequence the designs of the enemy against mankind have been foiled, and the corruption of death, which formerly held them in its power, has simply ceased to be. For the human race would have perished utterly had not the Lord and Saviour of all, the Son of God, come among us to put an end to death.



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In a trilogy of Psalms (22, 23, 24), the Holy Spirit connects the gate to the ascension of Christ. Psalm 22 is a psalm of the crucifixion (cf. Matthew 27:46). Psalm 23 is a psalm of the resurrection (cf. Hebrews 13:20). Psalm 24 is a psalm of the ascension.

Lift up your heads, O ye gates; and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors; and the King of glory shall come in. Who *is* this King of glory? The LORD strong and mighty, the LORD mighty in battle. Lift up your heads, O ye gates; even lift *them* up, ye everlasting doors; and the King of glory shall come in. Who is this King of glory? The LORD of hosts, he *is* the King of glory. Selah (Psalm 24:7-10).

The priests of the Old Testament blew the shophar (a trumpet) over the burnt offering. The burnt offering is a picture or type of the offering of Christ on the Cross. The shophar also sounded at the coronation of a King. In the ascension, God granted to His Son the title King of kings and Lord of lords. Whenever and wherever the Gospel sounds forth; it is the trumpet sound of the *Triumph of the Cross*.

Let us place before our eyes the chariot of God, and on that chariot Christ in triumph, crowned with thorns and wounded all over, through which His suffering and death is shown, and by which He overcame the whole world and instituted the New Creation by His glorious resurrection. Pulling the chariot are the New Testament Apostles and Prophets along with the Old Testament Patriarchs and the Prophets together with an immense multitude of men and women from the Old Testament. Standing around the chariot, like a crown, are the martyrs of the Faith. Behind the chariot follow a great multitude which no man can number – men and women of all conditions of life, Jews, Greeks, Latins, barbarians, rich as well as poor, wise, educated, uneducated, small, great, old and young – from every tribe, tongue, and nation who with all their hearts are praising Christ. In front of chariot of God we see another multitude drawn from the Old as well as the New Testament and thereafter ... dazed, dumbfounded, and chained prisoners – hordes of enemies and opponents of the Church of Christ – emperors, kings, dictators, princes, powerful men, wise men, philosophers, heretics, slaves, free men, males, females ... every principality and power, every demon and the prince of demons, bowed low in defeat ...

In the *Circus Maximus*, the invention of the Emperor Nero (54-68), the scene of his bloody and revolting slaughter of Christians (by wild beasts, by crucifixion, by fire, and by sword), stood a great stone obelisk, a silent witness to the valiant conduct of those brave saints who endured tribulation and counted all things as loss for the sake of Christ. The bestial Nero and his henchmen have long passed from the scene to their eternal reward, but this obelisk is now in the center of the great square in front of St. Peter's Basilica. Chiseled on its base are the following words in Latin, taken from the overcoming martyr's hymn of triumph:

*Christus vincit*  
*Christus regnat*  
*Christus imperat*

... meaning

*Christ is conquering, Christ is reigning, Christ rules over all.*

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Thanks be to God, for You have brought Your people out of darkness and Your light triumphs over darkness wherever the two meet.