

The Fragrance of the Knowledge of Christ

2 Corinthians 2:12-17

By Billy Dempsey

Let's go together to the Lord in prayer.

Father, open our hearts now to Your Word and would what You say be uppermost in our hearts and our minds. May we hear from You; may we hear Your voice and Your Word. Feed our souls, O Good Shepherd of the sheep. We make our prayer in Jesus' name and for His sake. Amen.

Let me read this evening from 2 Corinthians chapter 2. Before I read, let me note that we'll notice, I think, three things in this passage as we walk through it together tonight. We'll notice something about Paul's circumstances, and I'll talk at length about how Paul finds himself at this place and time he's recording right here for us in chapter 2 of 2 Corinthians. And we'll notice what Paul says about what God does in situations like that. Then we'll notice what the passage says about who we are as men and women that God has bought for Himself with the blood of His Son. So let's give our attention. 2 Corinthians chapter 2. I'll end the reading with the end of verse 16. I think verse 17 takes off in a different direction that we don't have time to amplify on tonight, but I'll end the reading with the end of verse 16:

When I came to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ, even though a door was opened for me I the Lord, my spirit was not at rest because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I took leave of them and went on to Macedonia.

But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things?

All men are like grass and all their glory is like the flower of the field; the grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of our God stands forever.

A Reset Focus...So What?

We've just enjoyed a fantastic Missions Conference. We've heard great preaching from David Strain and Seth Starkey and David Robertson. We've enjoyed fellowship and challenge from an outstanding faculty of missionaries. Hopefully we've had our focus reset a bit, and Clay helps us tonight with his report as well. Our focus reset a bit as we've been reminded of our church's call to mission for the purpose of God's gaining worship among the nations. I'm always struck when I hear someone say as I heard David Strain say a couple of Sundays ago, "Mission will cease but worship never will." That's hopefully what we've experienced last week as we had our focus reset again on that important truth.

But I need to ask an important question and I apologize if it sounds a bit harsh and it sounds a bit irreverent. I don't mean it to be irreverent and I don't mean it to be harsh, but after all we've heard and all we've done and all we've thought about in the last week at our Missions Conference, an important question - "So what? So what?" What will we do as a congregation with what we've heard? What will be different with us at home, at work, at school? Will we give? We always do; I hope we give again. Will we go? I hope so; we always go. Somebody always goes. I hope we have going going on again. Will we send? Will we pray? What about going? We go to Peru. Thank the Lord we go to Peru. We go to Africa. I'm delighted to see we have a group that's preparing to go to Malawi later this year. We go to the Ukraine, or I'm sorry, we go to Ukraine; they're not "the Ukraine." We go to Ukraine. We go to the United Kingdom. We go other places. We go work with church planters who need help. Those are all wonderful places and I hope we continue to go to all those places. It's good for us to go to all those places. But will we go across the street? Will we go to the next office or the office across the hall? Will we go to the other side of the cafeteria or the dining hall? Sometimes it's easier to go far away than it is to go close by.

The Background of Second Corinthians

Paul actually offers us in this passage some great words of help as he walks through his experience related to the church at Corinth that will be a great help to us as we think through that, "So what?" question. We need to take a minute though. Let's understand some of the details of this slippery chronology of Corinthian visits and correspondence. A lot of this you find toward the end of 1 Corinthians and the beginning of 2 Corinthians. You also see a bit of it in Acts. Let me walk through it quickly so you understand where Paul finds himself right here in chapter 2 verse 12. You will remember that the church is planted by Paul, the church in Corinth is planted by Paul toward the end of the first missionary journey, probably around AD 52 or something like that. He spent about eighteen months there. The letter that we know as 1 Corinthians is an answer to a letter

that the Corinthian church sends to Ephesus to have some issues resolved and some questions answered. And that is written roughly about AD 55, which is kind of close to the end of the third missionary journey. Paul gives that letter to Timothy to deliver to the saints at Corinth. He makes known to them at the end of that letter that he wants to come and visit them later in the year after Pentecost. He wants to go and visit the churches in Macedonia and perhaps, he says, he'll spend the winter there. Later on he indicates in the beginning of 2 Corinthians that he's changed his plans. He's going to start his visit with Corinth and then he'll visit the churches in Macedonia. He'll come back and visit the churches in Corinth again before sailing towards Palestine.

But later on, news of trouble reaches him, perhaps from Timothy as Timothy has come back and indicated that the letter, 1 Corinthians, did not have its desired effect and Timothy was unable to enforce the directives that Paul had laid down in that letter. And so Paul has to make an unscheduled, urgent visit. This is the painful visit he talks about in 2 Corinthians chapter 1, and it provokes a direct confrontation with the factions in Corinth, one of which is led by a man who defies Paul and the church, the supporters that Paul has in the church, don't rise to his defense. And so it's a heartbreaking, humiliating visit. And Paul leaves Corinth dejected and depressed, not having accomplished what he intended to do there and in deep concern about the future health of the church at Corinth. It's defying his authority as an apostle; how can it last as a church of Jesus while defying the authority that Jesus has given to him as an apostle?

Well Paul, on his way back to Ephesus, composed another letter, a letter that we don't have, but he refers to it in chapter 2 of 2 Corinthians, a letter out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears. Another letter. And he gives it to Titus to take to Corinth to see if that will have any greater traction, any greater effect. We probably don't have any part of this letter left at all. But immediately it's just like the kinds of things we do - you send an email or send a letter and immediately, "Oh, I wish I had thought about how to say that. I wish I had said that better." Paul immediately regrets re-sending that letter. He's worried that its severe tone may make matters worse. It has a chance to make matters better; it may actually make matters worse! And so he's terribly concerned. In it, apparently, from what we see in 2 Corinthians, he demands that the church acknowledge his apostolic authority and discipline the man that rose up in leadership against him and defied him.

Well you read in 2 Corinthians 1 how Paul is back in Asia and he's depressed. He says, "I despair even of life." And besides that, suddenly there are terrific physical dangers that Paul has to face. Those resolve but he's still, he's just still broken over what is happening in Corinth. "How are they going to receive that letter? How is Titus faring there?" Apparently he and Titus made an agreement that they would meet in Troas after Titus was done with the work in Corinth and so Paul goes there. It sounds, as we look at it here in just a moment, it's a predetermined plan and Paul is there to preach the Gospel but also to meet

Titus. He's so unsettled when Titus is not there that apparently probably once when navigation of the Aegean shuts down for the winter he makes an overland journey towards Macedonia hoping to encounter Titus along the way. He says even in Macedonia he's prey to fightings without and fears within. It's a miserable time for Paul. But he meets Titus in Macedonia with the good news that the church has responded. They've disciplined the offender, they have acknowledged Paul's leadership, and they are anxious to reconcile with him as their father in the faith. And so Paul sends a further letter - what we have as 2 Corinthians.

Anxiety, Unrest, and a Triumphal Procession

Well I take the time to point that out because it would help us understand exactly what's going on in verses 12 and 13. Let's look again at those briefly. Paul says, "I came to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ, even though a door was opened for me I the Lord, my spirit was not at rest because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I took leave of them and went on to Macedonia." So he's doing ministry. The door is open to preach the Gospel and he can't not be preoccupied. He can't not be distracted with what may be happening in Corinth. He can't do the job he's there to do. He's there to preach. "I went to Troas to preach the gospel." He can't do it because of his preoccupation; his distraction, his worry, his care, his concern. You and I, if we were with Paul, might will him and say, "Come on, Paul! Come on, Paul! Pull yourself together. The Lord will take care of the Corinthians. Look at what He's made ready for you right here in Troas! How often will you have an opportunity like this to preach? Come on, Paul! Do the job you're here to do!" We may have said Paul blew it. Paul blew it. We might have been surprised at his weakness and his preoccupation, his worry. We may even have said, "Paul, your faith is not what I thought it was." Maybe even more deeply disappointed as we watched him pack up and leave Troas, we might have said, "This man is not who I thought he was. This is not the man that I thought I knew as Paul."

If Paul was thinking it was going to get any better for him when he got to Macedonia and got kind of nearer the problem it wasn't. Remember what he says in 2 Corinthians chapter 7 when he picks up this part of the narrative again? "Even when we came to Macedonia our bodies had no rest. We were afflicted at every turn; fighting without, fear within." So maybe this is what an apostolic defeat looks like. We've been there. I've been there in ministry. You've been there as you've been walking with the Lord and you've had your hands on ministry. You've walked away from situations and you felt like, "It's ruined. It will never be right. I will never be able to make it right. I don't know what to do. I've lost it." But that's not what Paul says. I think verse 14 is incredibly important to us. Rather than talk about defeat, Paul begins to talk about triumph. Read verse 14 with me. "But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him

everywhere.” Where’s the defeat? Where’s the lost opportunity? It’s not there. Paul sees victory. Paul sees victory in what God is doing. God has led Paul, first to Corinth to be their father in the faith, then to Troas and to Macedonia, even in his sorry, distracted, defeated state of mind.

Despite his weakness, despite his crippling fear over the future of the Corinthian church, despite his anxiety, despite his broken-heartedness, listen to what Paul is saying. “Thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession.” That image of triumphal procession was common to Paul. It’s a striking image but all the scholars don’t agree with what really the best interpretation is. I think the point of the image would seem to be this - just as the victorious Roman general celebrates his victory by leading his captives through the streets of Rome to the tumult and adoration of the citizens, so God, through Christ, leads Paul and the church by extension, not as prisoners to be thrown to the lions but as the spoils, as the treasure of His great victory over sin and the devil. As the general is cheered and adored for his great generaling, so the church gives occasion for God the great conqueror to be cheered and adored for the great conquest of his mercy. The church - freed from sin, freed from the power of the devil. As the Roman streets are filled with braziers burning with incense to welcome the conqueror home with sweet fragrance, so God’s victory brings forth a sweet fragrance as well. That’s what he says. He says, “Through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of Him everywhere.” Paul could say that “God spread through us in Troas and Macedonia and Corinth the fragrance of the knowledge of God.” There’s victory. There’s triumph. There’s conquest. Unlike the vanishing smoke of an earthly glory, the knowledge of God draws men to Him.

The Aroma of Christ to God

How? Well that’s what he gets us into in verses 15 and 16. Who are we? I haven’t coughed as much all day as I’m coughing right now. Y’all forgive me. Who are we? Verses 15 and 16 - “For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life.” Let me ask you, as an old English teacher, to follow the prepositions to grab what Paul’s point is. He’s saying we are the aroma of Christ to God. Let’s think about that. What is the aroma of Christ? Let me say this first. He’s changed his word. He’s changed his word, if you haven’t noticed, from fragrance to aroma, and that word change is important because the word for “aroma” is really a technical term for a sacrifice that’s acceptable to God. The sacrifice to God burning on the altar is raising our aroma to heaven. And so he shifts. And so the image shifts a bit from the conquering general now to the sacrificial altar consuming the sacrifice and that aroma wafting towards heaven - a sacrifice acceptable to God.

What is the aroma of Christ? It’s the aroma of Christ’s acceptable sacrifice, Christ

the Lamb without spot, the Lamb without blemish, the Lamb unbroken, the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world. The acceptable sacrifice - Christ as the Lamb of God, righteous and blameless, doing His Father's will. Remember as He says in John 4, "My food, My meat and drink is to do My Father's will" trusting His Father, "Not My will but Thine be done." That's not only obedience but trust. Pursing His Father, spending whole nights in prayer, humbling Himself even to the point of death, even death on a cross. There's the aroma of Christ. There's the blamelessness, the righteousness of Christ facing sin, facing the temptation to sin and not succumbing to it as our representative, as the spotless, blameless Lamb of God. There's the aroma of Christ.

That helps us understand even better the point that Paul's making in Romans chapter 12. He says, "Therefore offer your bodies as living sacrifices, acceptable to God which is your spiritual service of worship." We are that aroma of Christ to God. We smell like, we smell like, as we offer obedient lives as we, as Paul says, live with minds renewed and not conformed, but renewed and testing and proving what God's perfect will is. As we are living that life of obedience, that life of discipleship, we are wafting to God the aroma of Christ, the Gospel at work in us, the Gospel at work creating us as different people or rather recreating us as different people - people made in the image of Christ, people who look like Christ from the inside out. We waft to God the aroma of Christ as we put His will before our will, as we put His people and those who are not His people before ourselves, as we live as disciples of Christ. The aroma of Christ wafts heavenward and God takes pleasure in the sacrificial living, the sacrificial praise, the sacrificial worship of His people. We are the aroma of Christ to God. We smell like Christ.

The Aroma of Christ produced in Suffering

I appreciated so much Teacher Elder Felker's sermon this morning and remind us again what exactly that passage in Romans 5 is saying, how it relates right here as Paul is saying that we rejoice in our sufferings how much of our becoming like Christ is a result or does God use suffering in that process. We know that we deal with suffering every day, we deal with trials and uncertainties and battling our fears and our doubts and our misgivings every day. We use His Word, we bring His truth to bear in our lives and talk to our hearts about what God has said in His Word - we are the aroma of Christ! And as suffering does its work, suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character and character produces hope. That's the aroma of Christ wafting to God! That's the aroma of Christ rising from lives that, from our standpoint as we look at our lives they're broken and we're ruined and we struggle with sin and we lose and we struggle with sin, we struggle with patience, we struggle with trust, we struggle with fear, we struggle with our neighbor, we struggle with our spouse. And inasmuch as we are busy bringing the truth of God to bear on all those struggles, we are the aroma of Christ rising to the Father and bringing delight to Him as we

labor to bring the truth of His Word and the truth of the Gospel into reality into our lives that are broken and crooked and tired and sore. See, God is pressing us in all of these ways and using these means in conjunction with His Word as I just mentioned in worship and the sacraments conforming us to the image of Christ. And as He does so, we exude the aroma of Christ.

But, "We are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing." God's not the only one who catches that aroma. The folks that we live and work around catch that aroma as well. In the midst of the pressing God does, the fragrance of Christ arises from us. At a time when we might say with Paul, "I am fighting without and fears within," the fragrance of Christ wafts around us as we give also some expression of our trust that God is at work and God is doing His will. At a time when we would say, "I utterly despair of my life and my family, my marriage, my job, my health," the aroma of Christ is also wafting around us as we give even weak expression, as we give expression of trust and hope that God is doing a work we cannot see. Our hope is not in our body, our hope is not in our wife, our hope is not in our husband, our hope is not in our children or in our boss. Our hope is in the God who made us and the God who saved us. We give expression to that hope. The aroma of Christ wafts to those around us. Other folks are aware that there is a larger reality to life for us than what they see with us and what we can see with our own eyes. And even if they can't name it as Christ, they see something they love or they see something they hate, but they see something they respond to, they react to. Paul says, "Who is sufficient for these things?" - the end of verse 16. "Who is sufficient for these things? Who makes these things happen? Who can bring out of my sense of defeat in Troas victory? Who can bring out of my brokenness beauty? Who's sufficient?" Only God is; only God can. Any sufficiency or competency that you and I can enjoy or other people benefit from us is simply because, as Paul says later in chapter 3 of 2 Corinthians, "He has given it."

So What?: Being the Aroma of Christ Now

Well back to the harsh and important and slightly irreverent question that I started with a while ago - the "So what?" question. We find Paul here describing a time in which everything seems to be falling apart - too distracted and too worried to take advantage of a real ministry opportunity yet Paul says it's triumph, even at an admittedly difficult, awful time because in some fashion men and women have been made aware of Christ. Maybe in a weak form - and I would venture to say it's not Paul's best day in Troas - but even at his worst time, the Gospel has gone out. Even in turmoil and despair, the fragrance of the Gospel has blown around. Which makes me want to ask a further question - "Do we wait on some kind of equilibrium to settle in before we get about the business of drawing people's attention to Christ?" I think it's easy for us to wait for things to get better. We wait for our marriages to get better and then we'll get about the business of drawing

people's attention to Christ. We wait for things to kind of let up at work and get easier at work and then we'll draw people's attention to Christ. We'll wait for school to get easier somehow.

What if we were to be the aroma of Christ right now in our broken families? What if we were to set about the business of being the ones to live out the Gospel instead of waiting for somebody else to start in our families or in our places of work? What if we got about the business of being, for Jesus' sake, the servant rather than waiting to be served, whether it's home or work or in the line at Wal-Mart or at school? What if we, for Jesus' sake, set ourselves about the business of not waiting for things to get better but to now, in our brokenness, begin to see our neighbors that live all around us as people who either know Jesus or need Jesus and begin to act on the question, "What can I do to support their faith or to bring them to faith?" We're surrounded by a neighborhood, front and back - those people know Jesus or need Jesus. How can we be active in their lives in some fashion for their good, for their spiritual good? Are we waiting for kind of an equilibrium, for things to get easier or things to get less busy? Are we waiting for the right time? It was a miserable time in Troas, but at the conclusion of it Paul says, "Thanks be to God who always in Christ leads us in triumph as we spread everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of Him." What are we waiting for? Are we waiting for the right time? Paul would say even in our brokenness, even when our families are broken, even when our work is broken, even when our school is broken, even when everything is broken, even when our city is broken, now is the right time because God is the one, God is the one who carries the work forward and calls us to join Him, as in a broken world, the aroma of Christ before Him and among our neighbors, some of whom love the aroma of life, some of whom smell the condemnation of death. God calls us to be that aroma right here, right now. And so I leave us with a question. So what? Are we ready to press out the aroma as the people of God?

Let's pray.

Father, we pray for Your help. We pray for Your wisdom. We pray for hearts that are open to respond to a harsh question. Lord, hopefully a question that leads us to act on our faith right here, right now, in this day and this time. Hear us as we make our prayer in Jesus' name and go with us. Help us produce the peaceful fruit of righteousness - today, tomorrow, and in the weeks to come so that we are that aroma so pleasing to You. Amen.

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