SPREADING THE AROMA OF CHRIST

2 Corinthians 2:12–3:6

Key Verse: 2:14

“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.”

How do you see the suffering in your life? Sometimes when we suffer we feel like we’re being punished. Suffering can make us feel like a failure, or very sorrowful, or meaningless. When others are suffering, we also can begin to see them in negative ways, as if they’ve done something wrong or are somehow less. In the world, power and success are highly valued, and suffering and loss are seen as things to be avoided. In today’s passage Apostle Paul shares how he saw his own sufferings. Because he was in Christ, he could see that God was using his suffering in amazing ways. In today’s passage we want to think about what it really means to be spreading the aroma of Christ, and how God wants to use us in the same way today. May God open our hearts and speak to us personally through his living words today.

Throughout this letter Paul frequently defends himself and his ministry (1:12–24; 2:1–4,17; 3:1–6; 4:1,2,5; 5:11–13; 6:3; 7:2,3; 8:20,21; 10:1–18; 11:1–12,16,31; 12:6,11,12,16–19; 13:3,6,8). He also frequently mentions his sufferings (1:4–10; 2:4; 4:8–11,16,17; 5:4; 6:4–10; 7:5; 11:23–29; 12:7–10). Why was he spending so much time on this? It was because in their hearts the Corinthians had become critical of Paul. On one level it was because they didn’t like him correcting and rebuking them. But on another level, they thought he was too weak. In this letter Paul uses the word weak, in some form, 13 times (11:21, 29,30; 12:5,9,10; 13:3,4,9). It’s to show that spiritually speaking, weakness is real strength. In our first lesson, 1:1–2:11, Paul explained how God was using his sufferings to make him a source of comfort; he also humbly explained his change in travel plans. Now in this second lesson he explains how else God was using his sufferings, and why he should be trusted as a servant of God.

Read 2:12,13. Paul is again explaining his changing travel plans. God was using him in the city of Troas to preach the gospel. But unusually, Paul couldn’t keep doing it. He says he had no peace of mind because he couldn’t find his brother Titus. Titus was a young Greek convert to Christianity whom Paul was developing to be a pastor. Paul had sent Titus to Corinth to see how they had received his severe letter. Evidently Paul had planned to meet Titus afterwards in Troas. But Paul had to say goodbye to the new converts in Troas and go on to Macedonia to keep looking for Titus. It was a missed opportunity. These details show how much Paul was concerned for the Corinthians. Because he had not come and spent time with them, they thought he had forgotten them or thought they were unimportant. It was a great misunderstanding. In fact, the Corinthians were so much in Paul’s heart that, to our great surprise, even *he* was finding it difficult to focus on preaching the gospel.

Read verse 14. From a human point of view, Paul’s life might seem sad, going from place to place with no security, being misunderstood, so uncertain about what was happening, so concerned about others. But here he suddenly writes, “But thanks be to God…” Why is he thankful? He says that God “always leads us as captives in Christ’s triumphal procession.” He was thankful for being a *captive*? And what *is* this “triumphal procession”? In ancient Rome, generals would lead a victory parade into a city after winning a war. In that parade they would bring many captives with them, to show the glory of their victory. At the end of the parade, the captives would all be killed. People would also scatter flowers and burn incense to celebrate the victory, so the victory parade would have a distinctive aroma. In this case Paul says Christ is the source of triumph or victory. What triumph or victory is Paul talking about? Christ won the victory over sin and death and Satan through his own death and resurrection. Christ’s death and resurrection brought us an eternal victory. It’s the victory that enables us to cross over from death to life, the victory that makes our souls secure forever, the victory that overcomes the world (Jn5:24; 10:28; 16:33). God accomplished his eternal purpose through Christ (Eph3:11). All who put their faith in Jesus share in this eternal victory (1Jn5:4,5). Christ’s victory gives us “eternal encouragement and good hope” (2Th2:16). Paul mentions this eternal victory several times in this letter (4:17,18; 5:1). But we share in Christ’s glorious, eternal victory, Paul says, “if indeed we share in his sufferings” (Ro8:17).

So Paul writes here in verse 14 that he is Christ’s captive. In his letters he often refers to himself as a “servant” or “slave” of Christ. This term “captive” expresses how he was ready to die for Christ at any time. Paul was not a reluctant captive, but very willing. As Christ’s captive, all his loyalty was now for Christ his true spiritual King. Why was Paul so willing and loyal a captive? He wasn’t being threatened by force or fear or guilt. He explains later that he was compelled by Christ’s love (5:14). Because Christ willingly died for him, Paul no longer lived for himself; he lived for Christ who died for him and was raised again (5:15). The love of Christ made him such a willing captive. In view of God’s mercy, he was offering his body as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—his true and proper worship (Ro12:1). Paul had given up his freedom to live as Christ’s slave (1Pe2:16). It wasn’t just words; it affected his entire life—where he went, what he was willing to endure, what his daily priorities were. And part of being a captive was being looked down upon by all the spectators. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 4:9,10a, “For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like those condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to human beings. We are fools for Christ…” Paul’s identity as Christ’s captive went against the world’s point of view, and it still does. Paul wanted to help the Corinthians, and us, to stop thinking about our lives and others’ lives from a worldly point of view, and see that being Christ’s captives, with all the suffering involved, is the best blessing, the greatest victory.

Look at verse 14 again. He says that living out our lives as Christ’s captives is how God “uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere.” Scent is a powerful thing. A certain scent can make us water at the mouth, or feel sick to our stomach, or be soothing to our nerves, or make us run for our lives! Then what is “the aroma of Christ”? (15) It specifically refers to how he sacrificed himself on the cross. Christ’s sacrifice of himself gave off a beautiful aroma to God. It moved God’s heart because it was the just payment for all our sins. The aroma of Christ is also a very sweet scent to sinners who are struggling. Christ’s aroma convinces us of God’s mercy, that God wants to save us, even the worst of sinners. Christ’s aroma gives us the knowledge of God’s character: his compassion, his comfort, his forgiveness.

Paul also writes here that as we live as Christ’s captives, God uses even us “to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere.” We all have a physical aroma. We hope that through personal hygiene it’s not a bad one! But we also have a spiritual aroma. Some people have a sinful, worldly aroma they are not even aware of. Their presence influences others around them in an animalistic, base way, to love sinful things and the world the way they do. On the other hand, having the aroma of Christ means our lives now reflect Christ’s beautiful, self-sacrificing love. Just like an aroma, it communicates without any words. Having the aroma of Christ refers to our inner character as well as to our lifestyle. Unbelieving people around us can be won over without words by our behavior, when it is gentle and quiet and reflects the aroma of Christ (1Pe3:1,2). It’s not a fake aroma like perfume; it’s genuine, coming from both our inner life and our way of life.

They say that people come to conclusions about us very quickly, within seconds of first meeting us. Often what they’re thinking is completely wrong at first, because they’re looking only at our appearance. But over time, who we are becomes unmistakable. Paul’s concept of “the aroma of Christ” tells us how to live as Jesus’ witnesses in the real world. If, each day, we remember how Jesus, in his great love, suffered and died for me, if we clothe ourselves with Christ and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh (Ro13:14), we give off his aroma. When our daily life reveals our commitment as his captives, people begin to smell the aroma of Christ through us. It’s how we can help those who are wounded, or discouraged, or who feel empty, or who can’t trust anyone. The aroma of Christ in us helps the people around us get a whiff of the great love of God, which is so real. Having this aroma shows we’re authentic. But if we take pride in things like our appearance, possessions, achievements, abilities, knowledge or connections, we won’t have the aroma of Christ. If we’re inwardly full of ourselves, we won’t give off the aroma of Christ. The thing about aroma is that often, others can smell us, but we can’t smell ourselves! We need to ask ourselves and those close to us, honestly and soberly, “Do I have the aroma of Christ?” May God grant us a new commitment to live as Christ’s captives, that we may give off the aroma of Christ to all those around us, wherever we go.

In verses 15,16 Paul says that giving off the aroma of Christ affects different people differently. To those who are being saved, it brings life; to those who are perishing, it brings death. People who remain in unbelief, sin and worldliness find even the smell of Christians obnoxious, because it bothers their consciences. Those seeking to know the truth find the aroma of Christians life-giving. At the end of verse 16 Paul writes, “And who is equal to such a task?” What does he mean? He’s introducing the theme of being qualified as a servant of God. In this context, he’s saying, “How can we, in and of ourselves, possibly influence other people to have life in Christ?” The answer is, we can’t. People’s sin and unbelief, worldliness and stubborn rejection are way too strong for us. But what can we do? Read verse 17. We need to ask God to purify our motives. “Profit” can mean money, but it can also mean our own glory or security. We shouldn’t be teaching the Bible for our own gain in any way, but simply, before God, with no agenda but sincerity, and as those sent from God. In this way also we can have the aroma of Christ.

Read 3:1. Here the word “commend” is important. Paul repeats this word in this letter several times (4:2; 6:4; 10:12; 10:17–18). Just as in Paul’s day, many people today try to commend themselves to others. It means they try hard to win their approval and trust. But it’s not wise to try to commend ourselves with our words. We should let our lifestyle commend us. We should let our sincere repentance commend us. In this way we should let God commend us. Paul says here that he didn’t need any letter of recommendation to the Corinthians. Why? It’s because they already knew him and his way of life firsthand (cf. 1Co4:17).

But why is Paul writing this? It’s because some Jews had evidently come to Corinth to question Paul’s apostleship and ministry. They were planting doubt about Paul, and through this, planting doubt about the gospel Paul preached. Paul had a strong answer to them. Read verses 2,3. The best letter of recommendation is the changed lives of people. As our Lord Jesus said, “By their fruit you will recognize them” (Mt7:16–20). The powerful work of the Holy Spirit to change people’s hearts is the best letter of recommendation we could ever have. This is what gave Paul confidence through Christ before God (4). Read verses 5,6. Unlike people who think they are competent because of their own strength or ability or good record, our real competence comes from God. To have such competence, we have to rely totally on him. Paul also introduces here being “ministers of a new covenant.” He’s going to talk more about this later. But for now, the old covenant is “of the letter,” which “kills.” It refers to people trying to serve God and teach others with legalism. In contrast, the new covenant is “of the Spirit,” which “gives life.” When we’re serving in the new way of the Spirit, not in the old way of the written code (Ro7:6), we have the aroma of Christ.

Read 2:14 again. May God help us to believe his eternal victory through Christ’s death and resurrection, no matter how much we may be suffering. May God grant us a new gratitude, a new commitment and a new, willing heart to live as Christ’s captives, because of his great love for us. May God have mercy on us to have Christ’s aroma in our daily lives. And may God help us to see our sufferings as the way we can spread the aroma of Christ to all those around us.