

The Aroma of the Gospel

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[0:00] We're going to be looking at 2 Corinthians today, chapter 2, so if you'd like to get a head start and turn over there. We'll read through, we'll start in verse 12 and read through verse 13.

In these verses, Paul begins a narrative of some of his recent travels. These travels are part of his third missionary journey. So let's pick it up in 2 Corinthians 2, verse 12.

He says, Now, when I went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ and found that the Lord had opened a door for me, I still had no peace of mind because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I said goodbye to them and went on to Macedonia. Paul wasn't always able to preach the gospel everywhere he might have wanted to go.

As you recall in his second missionary journey, described in Acts 16, he and his group had wanted to go to Asia. But the Holy Spirit shut that door and turned them away, and instead they went down to Troas.

[1:09] Paul didn't get much time to do any gospel preaching in Troas on that occasion because the Spirit was showing him that he needed to move quickly over to Macedonia and preach the gospel there.

But on this third missionary journey, described here in 2 Corinthians, the second chapter, he went to Troas because God, this time, had opened a door for him to preach the gospel.

Now, I don't really know how much gospel preaching actually got done because when he got there, he had expected to find Titus. And Paul couldn't find him, so he said goodbye.

We don't know how long he was there, but it seems like he wasn't there that long because he said goodbye and then headed off to Macedonia. Then all of a sudden, Paul stops in his narrative and takes off on a major digression.

He doesn't actually pick up the story again of what happened to Titus until five chapters later. Now, in the writing world, a digression of this nature is considered bad form.

[2:16] But when you're an apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ writing under inspiration of the Holy Spirit, we let those things slide. And, of course, the main reason is because there's always something good in Paul's digressions, something that we need to hear.

And this one is no exception. This digression is actually tied to what he was just talking about, which is his travels in Troas and his heading off to Macedonia.

Because Paul is going to talk about what God does through him on these evangelistic trips and what effect the work of spreading the gospel has on those who hear it.

So let's go into this digression. It starts in verse 14. Paul says, The first thing that stands out here is Paul offering up thanks to God.

Paul does that a lot. It's a real habit with him. He uses this phrase, Thanks be to God, over in chapter 9 and verse 13, where he says, Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift, meaning Jesus Christ.

[3:35] And the expression of thanks here in 2.14 is for something that God does for us in Christ. Well, God does many things for us in Christ.

Have you ever taken time to think about and thank God, as Paul does here in this one instance, for all the things he does for us, for our eternal good in Christ?

Well, I'm going to give you a few scriptures that you can write down where Paul talks about that very thing. And they're all from the book of Romans. Romans 6.11. We are alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Romans 6.23. The gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus. Romans 8.1. There is now no condemnation for God for those who are in Christ Jesus.

And Romans 8.39. Nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus. Well, those are just a few examples from that one book of Romans of the many things God does for us in Christ Jesus and that we can meditate on and be thankful for.

[4:51] And here in 2 Corinthians 2.14, we see something else that God does for us in Christ that we can be thankful for. And that is, he always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ.

Well, what does that sort of imagery mean exactly? It no doubt refers to something that was quite common in Rome at that time. And that was the sight of a Roman general returning from war and leading his captives in triumphal procession down the streets of Rome, all to the cheers and the applause of the people who were lining the streets.

The word that's translated leads in triumphal procession is only used one other time in the New Testament, and that's over in Colossians 2.15, if you want to turn over there.

Colossians 2.15. Here Paul is talking about God, and he says, And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them.

There's that same phrase taken from the same word, triumphing over them by the cross. John Piper had this to say about those two verses, 2 Corinthians 2.14, and this one here in Colossians.

[6:10] He says, So in Colossians, Paul says God leads the devil in triumph. And in 2 Corinthians, he says that God leads Paul in triumph.

Both have been defeated in their rebellions against God. Both are being led in triumphal procession and shamed for their rebellion. But the great difference is that Paul is in Christ, and Satan is not.

Verse 14 again, In other words, still quoting John Piper here, Paul was defeated and taken captive, but he was brought to faith and forgiven and justified and made a glad and willing servant of the greatest general whoever was.

Paul was in Christ, and that makes all the difference. So Paul being led as a captive and servant of his general, the Lord Jesus Christ.

And so are we. Paul says in verse 15 that God leads us in triumphal procession. So we're caught up in that procession in which God is leading us in Christ, not as bitter captives headed into slavery and a worldly kingdom, but as willing servants joyfully following our new Lord into an eternal heavenly kingdom.

[7:37] So what happens as we follow Jesus in this triumphal procession? In the latter part of verse 14, Paul says that God through us everywhere spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him, meaning Jesus.

Well, that's certainly what Paul was commissioned to do, isn't it? To spread the knowledge of Jesus everywhere. After the Lord stopped Paul dead in his tracks on the road to Damascus, he said to Ananias that Paul was his chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel.

In other words, Paul was to preach the gospel, the good news of the knowledge of Jesus everywhere he went. And here in verse 14, we see that Paul, for Paul, this knowledge of Christ was, this gospel was a fragrance.

Now, we as Christians are not the apostle Paul, and we're not commissioned to preach the gospel everywhere we go. But we are called upon to be ready to present the gospel when we see somebody who has a need for it.

And when we do speak of the gospel to someone, it has that same effect. It releases a fragrance of the knowledge of Christ. Now, let's read on in verse 15 of 2 Corinthians 2.

[9:04] For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. So when the gospel is preached, it produces an aroma of Christ.

Now, many of you, if not all of you, have heard the gospel preached before, and you didn't smell any aroma, at least not from hearing the gospel. You didn't smell anything at all.

So what Paul is saying here is that when he preaches the gospel, it has an effect on everyone who hears it, just as if it were a fragrance that you could smell.

As the verse says, it has an effect on those who are being saved, and it has an effect on those who are perishing. But everyone who hears it smells the aroma of the gospel of Christ.

No one who hears the gospel plainly spoken can just walk away from it as though nothing has happened. Everyone is affected by it in some way. Now, the idea here is that the aroma of the knowledge of Christ is fragrant.

[10:17] It's a pleasant-smelling aroma. Now, there are lots of fragrances and aromas that we encounter every day, and the belief that any one of those aromas is fragrant or pleasant is often little more than subjective opinion.

As a kid, stewed tomatoes were like that for me. My mom obviously loved the smell of stewed tomatoes because she made an awful lot of them as we were growing up. Now, it probably wouldn't be a good idea for me to tell you what I thought stewed tomatoes smelled like.

Maybe you like stewed tomatoes, and I don't want to ruin a good thing for you if you think they're a good thing. But I was not impressed by the smell of stewed tomatoes, and eating them was a trial and still is to a certain extent.

As most of you know, I work at MSC Industrial Supply in Elkhart. I've been there about a year and a half now, and as it turns out, there are a lot of women who work in the department where I'm located.

After 25-plus years in the drywall business, where I've almost always worked exclusively around men, that's been a bit of an adjustment. It's just a totally different kind of environment.

[11:30] One example of this is the use of fragrance on the job. Now, I didn't run into much of that in my male-oriented drywall world.

But at MSC, I sometimes get these fragrances wafting about and mixing in my environment. I don't know, maybe for some of these women, it produces blissful tears of joy as they put on this fragrance.

But for me, it produces tears more closely associated with asphyxiation. But it just demonstrates my point that whether or not a particular aroma or fragrance is pleasant is quite often a subjective matter.

But as verse 14 shows, this aroma of the knowledge of Christ is always pleasant. It's a real fragrance in the truest sense of the word.

And all those who have accepted Christ and know him as your Savior and have had your sins removed and are now the recipients of eternal life know how fragrant and pleasant the gospel is.

[12:43] But is that the way it is for everyone? Well, you probably noticed in verse 15 that there are two categories of people listed, those who are being saved and those who are perishing.

In reality, those are the only two categories of people that exist in the world. Ever since Adam and Eve first sinned, that's how God has looked upon the human race. There are those who are being saved and there are those who are perishing.

There's no in-between group that God's not quite sure about yet. Now, if it wasn't for God's mercy, there would just be one group, wouldn't there? If he didn't do anything to help us and left us on our own, there'd just be the one group and we would all be in it.

We would all be in the perishing group. But because God has chosen and decided to be merciful, there are two groups, those who are being saved and those who are perishing.

And that's the way it will be right up until the day of judgment when God will place the sheep, those who are saved, on his right hand and the goats, those who will perish, on his left hand.

[13:53] So these two categories of people, those who are being saved and those who are perishing, are affected by the fragrance of the gospel. Now, how are they affected?

Well, let's continue in verse 16. To the one, we are the smell of death. To the other, the fragrance of life.

So here we see that the aroma of the gospel has two different effects depending on which of the two categories the listener is in. Again, to those who are in the perishing group, the gospel has a nasty smell to it.

The smell of death. But to those who are being saved, the gospel gives off the fragrance of life.

Now, for those who are perishing, how does the gospel put off a smell of death?

Remember, Paul's not talking about real smells. When those who are hearing the gospel, who are in the perishing group, hear the gospel, they don't actually smell something that's dead.

[15:01] What Paul is saying is that when people hear the gospel and don't believe, the effect is that they are as good as dead. Spiritually dead. To a person who is spiritually dead, the gospel is just a lot of foolish nonsense.

Paul said in his first letter to the Corinthians that the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing. To them, the gospel is just nonsense. And that is why they are perishing.

And that's why they receive the gospel as though it was putting off a fragrance of death, even though it's really a very fragrant, aromatic gospel.

But because of their hard hearts and because Satan has deceived them, the perishing group are simply unable to perceive the gospel as fragrant.

You don't have to turn there, but Paul says in 2 Corinthians 2, verses 10 through 12, that Satan deceives those who are perishing. And they perish because they refuse to love the truth and so be saved.

[16 : 10] And he goes on to say that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness. This is how the gospel produces a smell of death to those who are perishing because people are condemned when they hear it and don't believe it.

But because God is merciful to us, the gospel has another effect, its intended effect. Those who are being saved, to those who are being saved, the gospel puts off the fragrance of life.

In John chapter 3 are some words that are very familiar to most of us, especially verse 16. But in verse 15, Jesus says that he had to be crucified so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.

And then we have the famous verse, verse 16, for God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

We see even in this well-known verse that there are only two kinds of people, those who will perish and those who will have eternal life. And it all boils down to whether they believe in Jesus or don't believe in him.

[17 : 33] Jesus went on in verse 18 of John 3 to say, whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only son.

The good news of that verse is that when we do believe in him, we are not condemned. But rather, the gospel puts out a fragrance of life, eternal life.

Many of you sitting here believe on Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. And to you, the gospel always, every time you hear it, puts off a fragrant reminder of the eternal life that you have because of God's mercy toward you.

But maybe you can still remember the day when the gospel had the opposite effect. For some of you, that was a very long time ago. You came to believe in Christ at an early age and you've been smelling the fragrant effects of the gospel for so long, you can hardly remember what it was like not to love the good news of your Lord and Savior.

I know that some of you are new believers and the memory of the gospel having that smell of death is still fresh in your mind. In those days you heard it and maybe it convicted you and made you feel guilty.

[18 : 56] Then that made you mad because you liked your sin and you liked your own way and you liked your own lifestyle and you didn't want to give it up and you didn't like anything to come along and make you feel guilty about it.

Or maybe you thought the idea of Jesus dying on the cross to save us from our sins was just a lot of foolish gibberish, something religious people like to talk about, which is just irrelevant nonsense that didn't mean a whole lot to you personally.

When you thought like that about the gospel, you were in that one group of the two groups of people the Bible talks about for whom the gospel has the smell of death.

But then there came a day when God woke you up and caused you to see that all of your sins had caused you to fall far short of God's great glory and that one day you would have to stand before God and give an account and then face His judgment.

You learned that your sin has a wage that it pays, that the wages of sin is death and that you as a sinner are condemned to pay that penalty and that no amount of good works on your part could remove that penalty.

[20 : 13] You realized that your only hope was if someone else came along and paid that penalty of suffering under God's wrath for you and no one else was qualified to pay that price except the sinless Son of God, Jesus Christ.

And He did it. He paid on the cross suffering the wrath of God for you and I that we deserved. And then He rose again and you saw that He now sits at the right hand of God, the Father and is ready to forgive your sins.

So you repented and asked for that forgiveness and He granted it. And when that happened, the gospel no longer had that smell of death but for you it now held a fragrance of eternal life because your sins, because you believed that all of your sins were removed.

So how about you? That was the gospel you just heard. Did it put off a fragrance of life for you? Or was it the smell of death?

If it's the smell of death, it's because you're in the perishing group. But it doesn't have to continue that way. God takes no pleasure in seeing you perish.

[21 : 36] We all know the familiar passage back in the book of Ezekiel where God said to the nation of Israel, As surely as I live, says the sovereign Lord, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways.

Turn, turn, O Israel, why will you die, O house of Israel? And God asks that question of every person today. Why will you die?

God waits to forgive all of your sins, so cry out to him and ask for the blood of Christ to cover your sins so that the gospel no longer puts off that smell of death for you, but rather the fragrant aroma of eternal life.

our Father in heaven, we come to you this day just so grateful to you for mercy because if it wasn't for mercy, Father, we would all be in that one group, that one group perishing and for which the gospel would put off that smell of death.

But because of mercy, Lord, but because you are so kind and full of compassion, you sent your son Jesus to die on the cross and take our sins.

[22 : 58] And so, we take the gospel to our friends, our neighbors, and even to the world, Father, to put off that fragrance of eternal life.

And we pray that as we have the opportunity to take the gospel to our friends and our neighbors and our coworkers, that you are who will intervene and cause that gospel to have a fragrance of eternal life.

And even for those here who do not yet know the Lord, that they will turn and come to you that the gospel will no longer put off that smell of death, but be a fragrant aroma of eternal life.

We thank you for your mercy and we pray these things in Christ's name. Amen.