

The Triumphal Procession of Christ

Let's turn in our bibles to 2 Cor. 2. I want to thank Ron for a great message last week.

As we continue our series, Messy Grace, let's briefly recap where we are: Paul left Corinth after a painful visit, he then wrote a strongly worded letter to Corinth. Paul's stated intention was to go to Macedonia and then return to Corinth and stay a while.

When after visiting Macedonia Paul didn't return to Corinth as he had planned to, there was a group of people in Corinth who saw this as an opportunity to promote their own ministry by undermining Paul's, so they accused him of being fickle, untrustworthy, a man who didn't keep his word.

Paul defends himself, and we've looked at that in past weeks, but in verse 12 he picks up the story by opening up and sharing what was going on in his heart during this time. Let's read vv. 12-17.

¹² When I came to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ, even though a door was opened for me in the Lord, ¹³ 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.

¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, ¹⁶ to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? 2 Cor. 2:12-16

Paul was an apostle and a missionary, and his life calling was going from city to city preaching Christ with the goal of seeing people come to faith in Christ. Sometimes a city would embrace his message and many would receive Christ as their Lord and Savior. Sometimes he'd enter a city and encounter vicious opposition and abusive treatment.

The city of Troas embraced the gospel wholeheartedly. Paul writes, *a door was opened for me in the Lord*. The door was opened for Paul, Paul didn't open the door, God opened the door. In other words, God was doing great things in Troas and people were getting gloriously saved through the preaching of the gospel.

This kind of fruitful ministry is what Paul lives for...but he finds his heart just isn't into it. He's got something else on his mind. He says, *my spirit was not at rest*. The guy who wrote, be anxious for nothing was anxious for something. That's what he means when he says his spirit wasn't at rest. He was troubled, burdened, anxious. All because he expected Titus to be there in Troas and Titus wasn't.

And we're left wondering, what does Titus have to do with anything? I couldn't rest because Titus wasn't there seems pretty random. But the Corinthians would have known exactly what Paul was talking about. They know Titus is a key player in the relational mess between Paul and them.

Admittedly my mind travels down strange paths sometimes, but this reminds me of Belle in Beauty and the Beast, when she takes a book out of the library and as she flips through it she sings,

*Oh, isn't this amazing?
It's my favorite part because you'll see
Here's where she meets Prince Charming
But she won't discover that it's him 'til chapter three!*

Here in chapter 2 is where we meet the bearer of good news for Paul, but we won't discover that it's him til chapter 7!

What does Titus have to do with anything? Titus was the messenger who brought Paul's severe letter to the Corinthians, and Paul can't rest until he hears from Titus how they responded to his letter.

So because Titus isn't in Troas, Paul's spirit has no rest and he leaves this open door of ministry the Lord has opened up for him and he travels to Macedonia, hoping to find Titus there.

And that story will be continued...but not yet. Because Paul, probably thinking ahead to the good news of chapter 7, interrupts his story with spontaneous thanksgiving to God.

Let's read it again, starting in verse 14:

¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, ¹⁶ to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things?

I like the fact that Paul breaks into praise when the story of their relational mess is still at a low point. The story will get better, but thanksgiving towards God isn't just for the high points in life. We can and should give thanks to God when things are going great, when things are going horribly, and everything in between.

Because yes, our lives have happy chapters and sad chapters, easy chapters and hard chapters, blessed chapters and not-so-blessed chapters, fruitful chapters and barren chapters, surrounded by close friendships chapters and lonely chapters. But the metanarrative God has written over our lives isn't up and down, it's up in Christ. It's all things working for good in Christ. We may lose some battles, but God has given us triumph in Christ.

And to convey this, Paul uses Roman military imagery. When a Roman general conquered a city they would often return with a parade or what Paul calls a triumphal procession. In the procession would be soldiers and government leaders, followed by those who dispersed incense into the air, and bringing up the end of the line would be the conquered, paraded through town in chains, knowing they would soon be put to death.

There is some debate over what exactly Paul means by this illustration. Are we conquerors with Christ, or are we the captives being led? Those who believe we are the captives being led refer to 1 Cor. 4:9

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. 1 Cor. 4:9

It does seem as though Paul has this Roman procession in mind in 1 Cor 4, and he puts the apostles at the end of the procession, as those condemned to die. Would that put us in the same place in 2 Cor. 2?

Over the years that I've preached, there have been times when I've used the same illustration to make different points, and I think Paul is doing that here. In 1 Cor. the church is full of themselves, pointing to worldly benchmarks of success to say they've made it, they're mature, they're spiritual. We have a lot of money, we have a lot of people, we are accepted and respected by everyone in polite society.

Paul says, good for you. I wish I was there with you, but it feels like we apostles are at the end of the line. Humiliated, rejected, doing without, experiencing hardships, condemned to die. He's addressing a worldly sense of spiritual success.

But here, I think he's using this imagery to say that no matter what is happening in our lives, Christ is leading us in triumphal procession. Christ, our General, has triumphed over sin and death, over Satan and the world, and his victory is our victory.

The gospel is not a defeatist message, it's a triumphant message! And as we share the good news of Jesus Christ, God spreads the fragrance of that triumph and the knowledge of the risen Christ everywhere we go.

This metaphor of fragrance, or aroma, becomes a big part of Paul's illustration.

- Through us God spreads the *fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere*
- *We are the aroma of Christ to God*
- *To one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life*

Fragrance has a powerful effect on us. Did you know that the sense of smell of all our senses has the most powerful connection to our memories and our emotions? When I was 15 I went with some friends to a massive Jesus festival, and it was an awesome three days of great music, teaching, and fellowship. Every night the smell of campfires burning all around etched itself into my memory so that to this day when I smell wood burning outside, it stirs the memories and feelings of that awesome time, even though it was decades ago.

As Christians, we are to leave a fragrance of Christ behind us. People should smell the love, kindness, grace, mercy, righteousness, wisdom, integrity of Jesus. That's what Paul is saying: as God leads us in Christ through life, in triumph, He wants to spread through us the fragrance of Christ everywhere. Not our fragrance, Christ's fragrance. People should smell Christ on us.

When I read this passage, one person I think of is my father in law, Janice's dad. Bob Lehman was a man who exuded the triumph of Christ through his life. Dad was a Lutheran pastor most of his life, and his relationship with Jesus was both deep and simple. He didn't love debating Christian doctrine as much as my brother in law Bill and I did. When Bill and I got into heated debates we also spread an aroma

everywhere and it could clear the room. Dad didn't love to debate or argue, but he loved Jesus and like few people I've met, exuded a constant sense of triumph in Christ.

- To Dad, obstacles were opportunities for Christ to help him overcome
- Trials were testimonies of Christ's victory in the making
- Financial needs were the springboard for Christ's abundant provision
- Dad experienced some heartbreak in his life, like when Janice's mom lost her memory to Alzheimer's, but he never lost sight of the ultimate victory that awaited both Ingrid and himself in Christ.

There was always a smell of triumph in Christ surrounding my father in law. During worship, Dad would often whistle a kind of trumpet blast and to me it always sounded like triumph. Through Bob's life many were led to believe in Christ's triumph too. We miss him. But he's probably whistling trumpet blasts in the presence of Jesus right now!

We are the aroma of Christ to everyone, but that aroma doesn't smell the same to everyone.

As the Roman procession paraded through town, it would have been sensory overload for everyone, but in very different ways. For the victors, it would have been an amazingly happy time. For the conquered, their senses would have been overwhelmed with defeat, humiliation, and despair.

For the victors it was the smell of triumph leading to more triumph. For the conquered it was the smell of death leading to more death.

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. Vv. 15-16

How can the same smell be different to different people? It's talking about spiritual senses but we see a physical example in nature. God created mankind such that the smell of death and decay repulses us. But God created other creatures, like vultures, to be attracted to the smell of death. They don't even notice that delicious carcass until it starts to rot and decay. That gets me thinking - rotting flesh must smell different to them than it does to us. Our yuck is their yum!

To those who are spiritually dead, Christ smells like death. Following Jesus seems like a dead end, a missing out on life proposition. Living for the things the world can give feels like living, like life. The Bible says in Eph. 2 that we were all dead in sin. In that state of spiritual deadness we wanted nothing to do with Jesus or the things of God and those who do follow Jesus looked and smelled like fools to us.

But God...Eph. 2:4 says *But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ Eph. 2:4-5*

Paul asks, *who is sufficient for these things?* The answer is, no one but God. Getting someone to go from death to death to life to life isn't something we can do by being eloquent or persuasive. It takes the power of God making a spiritually dead person alive in Christ.

As Christians, our part isn't to save souls, it's to spread the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ everywhere we can, and then ask God who is rich in mercy to make the dead alive.

Messy Grace
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Oct. 25, 2020

Our part isn't to be perfect people – we are sinners saved by grace – but to be humble examples of flawed but genuine people being led in triumphal procession by our victorious General, Jesus Christ. We do want to be careful that our lives don't get so connected to some lesser cause or passion that when people think of us, they think of that lesser thing, rather than Christ.

And then, our part is to pray and ask God to use our lives to help others join the triumphal procession, led by Jesus Christ from life to ever-increasing life. May the Lord make it so.