

THE PARADOXICAL PRIVILEGE OF LIFE IN CHRIST

2 Corinthians 2:14-17

INTRODUCTION

As we approach this passage this morning and seek to learn from the Word of God, I believe it is always helpful to pause and consider the context of these four verses as they fall in the greater context of 2 Corinthians, and even in the greater context of the New Testament and then within Scripture as a whole.

As we study the Bible, we come across words from God that speak on many topics and aspects of life. Some words focused on the unbelieving (those that do not believe in Jesus as Savior and Lord), some words are focused to the followers of Jesus. Some words to the mature followers and some to the not so mature. Some words to encourage, some to convict. Some words to consider the end, some to consider the beginning. All of these words point us to know God through Christ.

READ 2 Cor 2:12-17

In our passage today we have words from the passionate, sold out to God missionary, evangelist, church planter, and discipler Paul, the apostle of Jesus Christ. He is writing to the church in Corinth as 1:1 tells us.

Ironically, I was drawn to this passage while traveling this summer. It was a quick unplanned trip, but in God's good plan I traveled back to South Carolina for just 2 days to spend time visiting my Aunt in the hospital. Because my Aunt Brenda never married and never had children, my siblings and I were very close to her. She spoiled us like crazy. I attended college in South Carolina and one of the best parts of those four years was spending time with my Aunt. After my 2 days with her in the hospital were over, I knew when I said goodbye that this would most likely be the last time I would see my Aunt on this earth. As I sat on the airline alone, I opened my Bible to 2 Corinthians.

CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

This paragraph of Scripture comes after Paul references many trials and afflictions ; after he writes about his travel plans. He has endured many physical hardships including being beaten, persecuted, shipwrecked and thrown in prison.

The theme and subject of 2 Corinthians 1 and 2 is that God is a God of comfort. Why is this so important to Paul, the author of this letter? Because Paul was discouraged. He wrote harsh words in his first letter to the Corinthians addressing some major sins and their need for repentance. There is a sense in his writing that he is defending his apostleship because of being questioned by some of the Corinthians. They know Paul has suffered much and because of this harsh suffering they wonder whether he could really be under the blessing of God and truly have the power of God to confront them so harshly. It is this background that helps shed much light on these verses.

So, Paul's heart to the church in Corinth has already been expressed to them, he is already struggling in prayer on behalf of them and there are some who are even questioning his apostleship. Some questioned whether he had the right to rebuke them. So, we sense some discouragement, that Paul's spirit is not at rest, in these first chapters of 2 Corinthians.

Looking at this second letter to the Corinthians as it leads up to our passage for today: 2 Corinthians 1 speaks about **comfort and sorrow**.

- 1:3- **Father of mercies** or compassion and **God of all comfort**
- 1:4 -**Comfort others**
- 1:5-share in the suffering of Christ so we share comfort through Christ
- Sharing in comfort
- 1:7- hope unshaken
- 1:8 Paul does not want the believers to think everything has been all roses, but rather wants them to know of the afflictions they experienced in Asia
- 1:9- these were not small trials, but rather life and death but Paul says it made them rely on God and not self
- 1:10- **Christ the deliverer- the anchor of hope**
- 1:11- PRAY
- 1:12- behaved with simplicity and godly sincerity
- 1:15-22-God's sovereignty in even daily plans and travel (The irony of this as I made a last minute trip to see my Aunt who just 2 days after I left passed away.)
- 2:1-11- pain or joy of obedience or disobedience to God through daily living
 - **V 9 - this is why I write- to test you whether you are obedient in everything - v11- not outwitted by Satan -don't be ignorant of his designs**
- 2:12-13- God's leading in travel plans and missionary endeavors (ironic as I would fly out 6 days later with 10 others from STBC to China for a missions endeavor)

I love this passage of Scripture because it has the feel of foreign missions. Paul is the prototype missionary who travels all over passionately sharing the gospel. His life in no way holds comfort or selfish pleasures. His entire being longs for people to know Christ. As he travels he experiences trials and hardships, differing cultures which clash with the Truth. He does not back down. He does not quit. He perseveres. He shows us all this in these first two chapters and then pauses to dig deeper into the meaning and description of what it looks like to live completely surrendered to Christ in all things.

We may call this Ministry, but really it is just true Christianity.

2 Corinthians 2:14-17

SO...as Paul launches into this lengthy discussion and description of ministry, he begins with these four verses of stating the absolute privilege it is to be used by God for his good purposes! Within this passage we see...

Three Vivid Word Pictures:

1. Triumph
2. Fragrance
3. Marketing

These word pictures communicate three vital life lessons for the follower of Jesus Christ.

1. Word Picture #1 - Triumph - GOD IS TRIUMPHANT and GOD DESERVES ALL PRAISE (v 14)

2:14 - *"BUT"*

- makes the distinctions between Paul's plans and the sovereign plans of God
- the discouragement that can come through life circumstances vs the encouragement that comes through the sovereign personal God
- "THANKS be to God"
- A right perspective of Who is in charge and Who is holding our plans loosely is so important. Even in our desire to "minister" to others and be used of God, sometimes we can find ourselves getting frustrated and even angry because things do not happen as we planned in our mind. It is as if we are telling God we know better than he... We are doing it for his glory, but we want to do it our way! A little ironic, right?
- from the Greek word- *charis*- from the same word family as 'grace' - here is translated 'praise' or 'thanks' for benefits, services given (affords joy, sweetness, kindness, gift, etc)

Application: So we must first recognize that a heart that is fully surrendered to the will of God directs all praise to God.

- *"TO GOD"* is the first prepositional phrase in this passage and shows us the priority of making God the object of our praise.

- *"WHO in CHRIST always leads us in triumphal procession"*

- this is the first victorious language used in this letter.
- to this point it has mostly been centered on afflictions and trials This seems to be a very strong word to accompany a life lived IN Christ. At first this seems like it does not fit because from Paul's earthly perspective his plans were foiled many times, YET in Christ all was perfectly arranged

- *"TRIUMPHAL PROCESSION"*

- It is only through and in Christ that we can be included in this triumph whatsoever. The questions that many Bible scholars wrestle with here is what role exactly does Paul make reference to in regards to us as Christians as a part of this triumph?

Let us look at this phrase grammatically:

- this Greek word triumph (from the Greek word θριαμβεύοντι)- is used only here and in Colossians 2:15: “He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.”
- in this usage, there is an object - the rulers and the authorities - that are conquered by Christ. They are captive and His slave. So it is used to describe someone who is conquered.
- Paul uses this metaphor as he looks back at himself as an enemy of God (as Saul) who was then conquered by Christ and he sees himself as a slave and bondservant of Christ.

Let us look at this phrase historically:

- The Roman world helps us decipher the original intent of Paul in writing to the Corinthians.
- This idea of triumphant procession has a very vivid and historical connection to the ancients parading after military victories.

If your first thought is to connect this triumphing to you triumphing with God you are not alone. You are in the company of men such as John Calvin and John MacArthur! ☐

Both of these men would interpret Paul’s words as a reference to the believer as a victorious soldier with God in the parade of triumph over the enemy. Support for this interpretation comes mainly out of passages like Rom 8:28 where Paul says we are more than conquerors.

Another option that seems to fit the historical context of that day would be that Paul is referencing himself and other Christians as those that walk as the defeated enemy in the parade of the victor. We were enemies of God and have now been defeated and are paraded through the streets as trophies of the victorious warrior King.

These defeated soldiers were typically paraded for several days only to be led to their execution. Sometimes grace was shown and their lives were spared. The metaphor though difficult and not as glamorous as riding side by side with the king in triumph fits the context of Paul's writing and theology well. In Christ we suffer. We are weak so that he may be strong. The paradox of the Christian life is strong as we die that we may live.

From the New International Greek Testament Commentary - “*Paul sees himself not as the partner but as the prisoner of the Triumphator, not as an exultant soldier but as a willing and privileged captive, a trophy of the general’s victory, a on-time enemy who has been conquered.*”

Things to learn from this metaphor...

1. We were all enemies of God - Romans 5:10, 1 Cor 15:9, Gal 1:13

Romans 5:10- *“For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life”*

1 Cor 15:9 - *“For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God”*

"Captured prisoners were exhibited to exalt the might of the triumphant general and bring glory to the gods who won for him the victory. By applying this image to God, Paul asserts that the Roman ruler is not the invulnerable victor and guarantor of world order. That role belongs only to the God who is fully revealed in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and proclaimed by the apostles."

Application - We must understand that we were His enemies but we are now His joyful captives and we will live forever with Him.

2. We will suffer for God -1 Cor 4:9-13

1 Cor 4:9-13- *“For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men. We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute. To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we entreat. We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things.”*

Paul asserts through this image of being led in a triumph that God does not make Christ's followers winners, as the world defines winners, but instead captures them and leads them as prisoners in humiliation. But he would rather be God's prisoner and slave than Satan's vice regent in a promenade leading to eternal damnation.

He concedes his weakness but will not concede that he is inferior. As God takes the captive Paul in tow in the grand pageant showcasing God's power throughout the world, the knowledge of God emits a distinctive aroma that spreads everywhere.

Application - We will suffer. Christ suffered. We will suffer with Him. That is part of our ministry.

3. We are slaves of Christ

In 1 Cor 5:14, Paul says the love of Christ “constrains” me. The verb *synechō* could also mean “to take or hold captive,” but the striking combination of words makes clear that “Paul is not ‘led in triumph’ by a vengeful deity.” He has been captured by love. That love revealed to him that deliverance can only come from the defeat of the old life. God rescues us by shattering the fortified walls of our own strength, wisdom, and rectitude

and making us slaves to Christ. Paul's image therefore accords with what those captured by Christ have recognized through the ages.

Martin Luther said: *"God creates out of nothing. Therefore until a man is nothing, God can make nothing out of him."*

Application - We should be humbled as we understand our position as slaves to Christ.

Turn to 2 Cor 4:7-12- *"But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you."*

4. We give thanks for ultimate rescue and triumph.

God rescued us. We triumphed with Him. Paul's joyous thanks to God derives from his understanding of the paradox of victory in Christ.

1 Cor 15:57- *"The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."*

The image of the conquered slave exhibited as a showpiece of God's triumph matches his assertion in **12:10:** *"I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong."*

His conquest by God actually allows him to take part in God's triumphant march as one now reconciled to God.

Paul's theology is remarkable for its sense of paradox.

- He suffers with Christ in order to be glorified with him (Rom 8:17, 37).
- Victory comes in defeat; glory, in humiliation; and joy, in suffering (Col 1:24).
- The wise must become fools to become truly wise (1 Cor 3:18);
- the rich one becomes poor so that the poor might become rich (2 Cor 8:9)."

Word Picture #2 - Fragrance - IN CHRIST WE PLEASE GOD BY INFLUENCING OTHERS FOR LIFE OR DEATH

In 2 Cor 2:14, Paul uses a metaphor that pictures himself being carried around as God's display of Christ to the world.

In 2 Cor 2:15 he switches metaphors to affirm that he carries around the aroma of Christ pleasing to God.

Going back to the historical background of a Roman triumph that Paul is pulling from...

included in the victory procession—at least on occasion—were those who burned incense along the triumphal route, others who carried and displayed spices brought from the conquered regions, and yet others who scattered garlands of flowers and sprinkled perfume along the streets. As a result, pleasant fragrances filled the air and were widely diffused along the processional route.

- “THROUGH US” spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of Him everywhere”

- This comes after, not before the fact that all PRAISE goes to God, all of our steps are led by CHRIST, but yet we still have a part in this story.
- We have a role in the drama, the play of life. It is a very significant role, yet we ourselves are really not that significant!
- Our role is significant because of the One who gave us the role and who leads us in our role.

- “SPREADS THE FRAGRANCE”

- We have the role of spreading a fragrance
- We act as the next verse describes as an AROMA- a smell, something that permeates, something you can not help but notice and that requires a response of either rejection or acceptance.
- Usually aromas linger for awhile and make their smell known to all who come close.

Illustration - When I was in 4th grade, I had the great idea that I wanted to smell good. I am not sure if in 4th grade I was even wearing deodorant or not...most likely not, but I asked for a bottle of cologne for Christmas. I received my first bottle of cologne and when I returned to school that first day after Christmas break, I proudly walked into that classroom smelling like a new man...or boy! Well, I was pretty excited to show off or smell off my new treasure, but that all quickly turned for me when I heard my Mrs Mixer, my 4th grade teacher say “Who smells so bad?” At that point, I did not want to claim the smell that I thought was pretty manly! However, Mrs. Mixer, did not let it go and proceeded to approach each student in the class sniffing for the “smelly culprit.” That day, what I thought was a pleasing aroma was judged by my 4th grade teacher to be almost as bad as an aroma of death.

2:16a - “to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life”

- “AROMA” - appears some forty-six times in the Septuagint, usually in reference to the sweet smell of the burnt offering (e.g., Gen. 8:21; Exod. 29:18; Lev. 1:9). So closely was this technical expression associated with sacrifice that each term on its own could retain sacrificial connotations

Whereas in v. 14 it is the gospel that is the sweet fragrance, in v. 15 it is the apostles as they embody and proclaim that gospel.

This aroma has a vertical and horizontal effect.

Paul is saying that as faithful preachers and followers of Christ, the apostles formed a sweet savor of Christ, an “unmistakable ‘scent’ of Christ” (Phillips), that rose up to God as a pleasing aroma (cf. Num. 15:7).

Application - This is our call...to be the aroma of Christ, which is always pleasing to God. We will only be pleasing to God if we are living it out in Christ. Our aroma may be the smell of death to some, but it will be the smell of life to others. Irrespective of the human response to the gospel, its proclamation delights God’s heart, because it centers on the Son whom he loves.

The question at the end of verse 16 functions as a transition to the third and final word picture in this passage.

2:16b - “WHO IS SUFFICIENT FOR THESE THINGS?”

"Paul asks, Who is equal to it?

- The noun “equal” (hikanos) means “to be sufficient, large enough, or large in number or quantity, and also more generally to be fit, appropriate, competent, qualified, able or worthy"

The immediate negative reference in v. 17 to “the many” who were marketing the word of God for profit suggests that they were boasting to the Corinthians of their credentials to declare God’s message. In their own right, they apparently claimed, they were superbly qualified to be apostles and servants of Christ (cf. 3:5a; 11:13, 23).

Word Picture #3 - MARKETING - WE MUST LIVE WHOLESOME (THE IDEA OF SINCERITY AND INTEGRITY TO THE MESSAGE AND PERSON OF THE GOSPEL) LIVES THAT REFLECT THE WHOLE GOSPEL.

Point - SINCE GOD DESERVES THE PRAISE, NOT US, SINCE CHRIST GIVES OFF THE AROMA, NOT US, WE TRUST HIM FOR THE RESULTS AND SIMPLY LIVE AND SPEAK THE TRUE GOSPEL OUT OF SINCERITY.

2:17 - “For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God's word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ.”

Verse 17- another metaphor of peddler or marketing the gospel

"To survive in the marketplace the peddler must adapt to the market either by making sure that he has what people want to buy or by tricking them into thinking that they want to buy what the peddler has to sell."

"Structurally, this whole verse enunciates one negative reason (οὐ γάρ) and four positive reasons (v. 17b) why Paul regarded himself as qualified for the apostolic vocation of being the aroma of Christ (vv. 15–16)."

On the contrary, we act from pure motives, and, as persons sent from God, we speak in the sight of God and in the name of Christ

Application -

1. Check your Motive

- Paul's words came from right motivation- pure, sincere (see 1:12)
- transparent motives; is our heart right?

2. Check your Source

- Paul's words came from the right source-commissioned by God
- 1 Thessalonians 2:4 - *"but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts."*
- Divine commission

3. Check your Audience

- Paul's words came in front of the right audience "before God"
- 2 Corinthians 10:12 - *"Not that we dare to classify or compare ourselves with some of those who are commending themselves. But when they measure themselves by one another and compare themselves with one another, they are without understanding."*
- 1 Thessalonians 2:4 - *"but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts."*

4. Check your Power

- Paul's words came with the right power and authority - "in the name of Christ"
- 1 Corinthians 2:13 - *"And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual."*

So...who is fit to serve???

2 Corinthians 3:5 - *"Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God,"*

So...who is worthy?

Those who preach the gospel in its fullness out of an awareness of their divine commission and our accountability to God.

CONCLUSION

2 Cor 4:1-6 - *"Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Let light*

shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”

Live your life ministering in such a way that represents that you are a **celebrating captive** of God, a **pleasing perfume** of Christ, and an **authentic ambassador** to the lost unbelieving world...

Remember the context of this passage, that doing ministry in the hard times can be discouraging. That you may not always be respected by others or you may face physical and emotional trials. Remember that Paul quickly adjusted his perspective to where it should be — to God as the Triumphant General, we as His captives and His former enemies to whom He shows much grace.

When you realize you deserve little, discouragement fades and grace wins. Praise to God in Christ wins. God's perfect sovereign plan to use us as fragrance for Him wins.

Go smell. Go smell of Christ. Be stinky to some. Be sweet to others. Be pleasing to God in all.