

The Life-giving Fragrance of Christ

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[0 : 0 0] I'll turn back to that passage that we read together in 2nd Corinthians chapter 2. We're looking at these verses 14 to 16 there.

I'll just reread those verses. 2 Corinthians 2, 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.

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.

It is good to burst into thanksgiving to God for the wonders of what he has done for us, the wonders of what he continues to do for us, and even more than that, what he continues to do through us.

And bursting into thanksgiving is precisely what Paul is doing here in these verses. They almost come out of the blue, just this bursting into thanksgiving.

[1 : 1 8] When you're reading through 2 Corinthians, if you start at chapter 1 there, you read of Paul talking about some of the sufferings, some of the afflictions that he has suffered and that others have suffered, in places like Asia.

Then he goes on to give some direction about his travel arrangements, direction then about someone who had been excommunicated. And then when you get to chapter 2, verse 13 there, he picks up this idea of trying to trace Titus, and he's for whatever reason not able to trace Titus, then all of a sudden, all of a sudden, he just bursts into thanksgiving.

He bursts into thanksgiving from verse 14. And you can almost imagine the passion and the zeal in Paul's heart as he writes or as he speaks the words that we find in these verses here.

And I felt it appropriate, as I begin my placement with you, that we should gather together around a text like this, a text that speaks of the majesty and the wonder, and indeed the beauty of the gospel message, a message that is a beautiful, life-transforming fragrance to some, and yet a message that is a dreadful and deadly fragrance to others.

And I want to look at three points in this passage from verses 14 to 16. The fragrance of Christ in the triumphal procession, and then the two effects of that fragrance.

[3 : 0 2] A fragrance from death to death, and a fragrance from life to life. Now, just by way of context here, I made it out as though Paul just randomly came out with this spontaneous outburst of thanksgiving.

But, of course, there is nothing random in the word of God, and there was a reason, very much a reason, for Paul spontaneously going into this outburst of thanksgiving.

And you'll see that by looking at the mention of Titus in verse 13. He mentions wanting to see Titus. Now, the reason Paul wanted to see Titus was he wanted to know how things were with the church in Corinth.

He had a love, a great passion for this church in Corinth. He loved them, and he wanted to see how things were with them, especially because he'd previously written them quite a harsh letter.

When you read 1 Corinthians, it's quite a harsh letter, is it not? And he wanted to know how things were with them. What did they think about these things? And then, when you get to chapter 7, Paul actually picks up on this point again, because he mentions in chapter 7, verse 6 to 7, that he did finally catch up with Titus.

[4 : 26] So initially, he couldn't get a hold of him, but he finally catches up with Titus, and Titus brings him good news concerning the Corinthians. Titus tells him, Paul, they're longing for you.

They're zealous for you. And that would have been a great comfort to Paul. He would have been wondering, wondering how the news went down of his letter, wondering how things were with them. And then this word comes from Titus, and it's a great comfort to Paul.

He had met with considerable opposition when he was there last time. And that was the reason for having to write that difficult letter of 1 Corinthians. And as well as that, there was also many false teachers in Corinth at that time.

False teachers that Paul would later call super-apostles. Now, they're not called super-apostles because they're so great, much greater than the apostles.

They're called super-apostles because they're basically elevating themselves above the likes of Paul and the other apostles. These were people who were corrupting the gospel.

[5 : 36] They were gaining many followers with their words of human wisdom as they corrupted and twisted the gospel to try and get followers to follow them.

They elevated themselves above the likes of Paul with his relatively frail speech and his frailty of stature. A man who suffered many things.

Are these super-apostles? They were much more attractive. They were much more likely, from a human point of view, to gather lots of people to them.

But Titus tells Paul, no, the Corinthians, they long for you. They long for you, Paul. They are zealous for you. And that was a great comfort to him.

They weren't turned off him by his previous letter. They weren't led away by these super-apostles. They longed for Paul. And that is the context of this outburst.

[6 : 34] This outburst of triumphal thanksgiving that we read here from verse 14. Now, I'm not really going to touch on verse 17, other than just to highlight to you this idea that Paul is up against these false teachers who are peddling the word of God, corrupting it and twisting it for their own ends, not preaching it in sincerity, not allowing the fragrance of Christ just to flow and to outwork itself.

So, first of all, our first point is the fragrance of Christ in the triumphal procession. See that in verse 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.

Now, the imagery that Paul seems to be using here is the imagery of Roman public victory processions.

These would go on in the Roman Empire after a successful military campaign. As a sign of triumph, the procession would make its way through the streets and the chief general, if you like, would be leading this procession and all the lieutenants and everybody else that were involved in this victory would follow in behind and they would all share in this great glory of victory, in this triumphal procession.

It was a great spectacle, a great visual sign of victory. But interestingly, these military processions, they weren't just audible and visual displays of victory.

[8 : 21] They were also a fragrant display of victory. Because what would happen, these military processions, as they would go down the streets, they would be burning incense. And as they would burn incense and make their way down the street, that aroma, that fragrance of victory would spread far and wide so that everybody would know that they had had this victory, so that everybody would know the glory of this victory.

And that seems to be the image that Paul is borrowing from here in this verse. We follow, if you like, in the wake of the victory of the Lord Jesus Christ, his victory over the last enemy, death itself.

And as this picture of this procession that you have here, this triumphal procession, you get the sense that no obstacle, no attempt from the devil, no attempt from the world, nothing is going to prevent this triumphal procession making its way through the streets, through our towns, our villages, our cities, our nation, indeed, the whole world.

It's a picture of an unstoppable procession of triumph led by our Lord and our Savior. And the triumph, of course, is not ours.

This is not Paul saying, look at my triumph. Look at the triumph that I have achieved. This is nothing to do with anything, any kind of success that Paul has orchestrated himself.

[10 : 08] Not at all. The procession, this procession that Paul walks in is the procession of the finished work of Christ.

That is what he is sharing in. That is the triumph that he is sharing in. And that is the triumph that we share in as we follow Christ in this triumphal procession.

And what is the purpose of this procession? Well, the purpose of it is to spread the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ.

That's the purpose of it. As the Roman procession, as that made its way down its street, and as they burned their incense, and as that fragrance of victory, as that spread far and wide so that everybody could smell it and everybody would know about it, so we, so we, follow in this triumphal procession, spreading that aroma, that fragrance of the Lord Jesus Christ, and we spread it as far and as wide as we can.

Is that not what we seek to do? Is that not what we want to do? to spread this wonderful fragrance of Christ? Well, I should point out that this text is, considering the context, I mentioned at the beginning, the context was very much speaking against these super apostles and these false teachers, and because of that, the text is primarily concerned with speaking about the leaders of the church.

[11 : 55] That is the primary lesson here. But nevertheless, surely this is an element of truth, this is true of all of us who seek to spread the message of the gospel, all of us who seek to spread that wonderful fragrance of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Surely we are all knit together in this work as one body, fighting the good fight, following in this triumphal procession, playing our part, and diffusing that aroma of Christ.

So, yes, it is primarily about the leaders and the preachers of the word, but surely we can see that this is applied more widely than that. We can apply this to ourselves, each one of us, as a body, as we seek to work out this great commission and we seek to spread the fragrance of Christ.

Christ. And is it not amazing to think that we're not passive in God's great work of redeeming his people? The work is his, absolutely.

The work is his, but we're not passive in it. We're not passive. Notice, it is through us that he spreads the fragrance of his knowledge. Is that not incredible?

[13 : 14] Brothers and sisters in Christ here tonight, is that not incredible? It is through us that he spreads that fragrance of the Lord Jesus Christ.

You see, when he saves us, when he saves us, he breathes new life into us. And he brings us to himself, he encompasses us with that wonderful fragrance of Christ, and our job is to follow him.

Follow him in this triumphal procession, spreading the aroma, spreading it wherever he leads us. And notice, he is the one leading.

It's not Paul that's leading this procession. Paul's not deciding, I'll go this way or I'll go that way. Christ, God in Christ, is the one who leads this procession.

Earlier in chapter one, Paul was making plans of going where he was going to travel to preach the word, but as quite often happens with Paul, his plans changed.

[14 : 19] Quite often the places where he wanted to go, he ended up not going, and the places maybe where he didn't want to go, he ended up going, because God wasn't working according to Paul's plans, God was working according to God's plans.

God is the one who opens the door. God in Christ is the one who leads this procession. You notice that even in verse 12 there, in chapter two, Paul mentions God opening doors.

It is God that opens the doors. It is God that leads through Christ. I wonder if we are guilty of deciding for ourselves where we are going to go with this fragrance.

Deciding for ourselves who we're going to share this fragrance with. Keeping the fragrance, if you like, in a flask and opening the lid now and again to certain people or maybe certain types of people.

Friends, that ought never to be the case. If we have taken in that wonderful life-giving fragrance of Christ, if we smell that beautiful fragrance, do we honestly want to keep it in a flask to ourselves and now and again open it up to others?

[15 : 38] That ought not, that ought never be the case. Or we should break open that flask if you like and walk in this triumphal procession allowing this fragrance to spread to wherever and to whoever God leads us towards.

Verse 15 interestingly changes the metaphor a wee bit. You notice it says that we are the aroma of Christ. In the previous verse, the knowledge of Christ was the fragrance.

Now all of a sudden, we are the aroma of Christ. What's Paul doing there? Well, it's really the same thing he's saying, isn't it? Because the aroma, the fragrance that we give off, it's not ourselves.

We don't give off the fragrance of ourselves, we give off the fragrance of Christ. It is one and the same thing. But that is a solemn aroma of Christ.

Can we say that? Can you say that tonight? I am the aroma of Christ? Well, perhaps you're saying to yourself, I'm not sure I can say that, and I completely understand where you're coming from.

[17 : 00] But we should be. We should be the aroma of Christ. how can we make sure that we're surrounded by that aroma? Well, I would suggest that we should be like the priests in the tabernacle.

Priests who went about their duty in the tabernacle, went about their duty in the holy of holies, and as they left that place, they would have left with that fragrance of the burnt incense still on them.

And as they went about, and as they left the tabernacle and went about the people, they would have recognized, oh yes, that person has been in the tabernacle, that person has been in the presence of almighty God, that fragrance would have been quite distinctive.

And so it should be with us. We must enter the holy of holies ourselves. Where is that? It's the presence of Christ.

Surely we must be rushing into his presence in prayer, in fellowship, doing all we can to be surrounded by him.

[18 : 10] Because if that is where we spend our time, if we spend our time in the presence of Christ, we cannot but be surrounded by that fragrance.

And you don't do it for your own glory, you don't do it to make yourself out to be better than someone else, you do it for the glory of God, for the furtherance of his kingdom, as you walk in this triumphal procession.

Oh, friends, let us find ourselves in the presence of Christ, because there's nothing stopping us from getting there now. There's no curtain there.

Now, the priests, only the priests could go in in the Old Testament. The other people might have smelt that fragrance, but they couldn't go in themselves. We can. enter the presence of Christ.

There is nothing preventing us, and there we are filled with the fragrance of him, so that when we go on in this triumphal procession, we don't spread the fragrance of ourselves, or at least I hope we don't.

[19 : 17] We don't spread the fragrance of the world, we spread his fragrance. fragrance. We spread the fragrance of Christ.

You see, we don't point to ourselves. We don't glory in ourselves. As you think of this image of this triumphal procession, and God's workers, if you like, following Christ, don't think of it as people walking proudly behind Christ, pointing at ourselves and thinking we are so great.

That's not how it is. We point at the one who leads this procession. We walk in this procession with our heads bowed, pointing to the one who is the source of that fragrance, pointing to the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is a wonderful image as we picture that procession, God's children following Jesus. It's a wonderful picture. God's children following Jesus in triumphal procession.

spreading that wonderful aroma of Christ. But what is the effect of that? What's the effect of this aroma?

[20 : 32] It has two effects, and only two effects. There is no, if you like, neutral response to this aroma. It has these two effects.

In verse 16, to one, a fragrance from death to death, to the other, a fragrance from life to life. No neutralizing spray available here.

It is one, one fragrance, or the other. Even tonight, as the word is preached, and as Christ is proclaimed, that flask, if you like, of ointment is lifted up, and the waft of Christ fills this place, and it is either a fragrance of death, or it is a fragrance of life.

You must ask yourself tonight, what do you sense? What fragrance do you sense as Christ is proclaimed? So the second point, a fragrance from death to death.

There is surely no smell worse than the stench of death. It has quite a distinctive smell, particularly if time has gone by and a degree of rot sets in.

[21 : 54] Perhaps you've come across rotting animal remains, or something of that kind. It is quite a repulsive smell, not just because of the smell, but because of what it means.

You associate with death, and there is something that is ugly about death, something unnatural about death. The world says death is natural, but actually it's the most unnatural thing that exists in creation, death.

Well, to some people, as Christ is preached, as he is proclaimed, and as they hear the gospel, they smell nothing but the message of death.

The very opposite of what the gospel promises. The gospel promises life, but so many people get the fragrance of death. It's incredible, that promise of life becoming a fragrance of death.

death. And I think there's differences in how people react to this fragrance of death. I think there's differences in how people respond to it. To some, the gospel is utterly repulsive.

[23 : 05] It's utterly repulsive. They see nothing in it but a message of death about a dead man. Jesus is just a dead man. A man whose dead body still causes a repulsive aroma even 2,000 years after his death.

That is what this message is to some people. To others, just as a decomposing body gets ever more repugnant with time, so to some people.

Even though they encounter this message of Christ time and time again, they get this fragrance of Christ becomes ever more repugnant to them.

And that's a solemn thought. That's a solemn thought. But for other people, and I think this is probably the more common response, maybe particularly around our culture, they just get used to the smell.

They just get used to this fragrance of death. They get so used to it that they barely smell it anymore. A few summers ago, I was working for a civil engineering company, just laboring, and we had a small job to do at the dump, and I remember pulling up there on our first day and just nearly been knocked off my feet with the stench of the place.

[24 : 38] I wasn't really quite prepared for it. I was looking around and nobody else seemed phased up by the smell other than my colleague who was with me. But I just got on with my work and a couple of days, probably just two or three days later, I remember pulling up again on the morning and jumping out of the pickup and I barely noticed the smell.

the smell hadn't gone away and it was bad. The smell hadn't gone away. I had just got used to it and I couldn't believe that a fragrance that quite literally nearly knocked me off my feet that first day after such a short space of time, how I could get used to it.

Well, spiritually speaking, there are some who are constantly surrounded by the fragrance of Christ. Maybe you are here tonight, maybe in your families or in your work places, constantly surrounded by the fragrance of Christ and yet you've just got used to it.

You've just got used to it. When you first got that fragrance if you like, it was a fragrance of death and it reminded you that you are not in a right place with God and it brought things of eternity to mind.

You thought about things of life and death but then you kept hearing it and you just stopped smelling it. It no longer impacted you and that, my friends, is incredibly solemn.

[26 : 16] To have an apathy and indifference to the fragrance of Christ when you are surrounded by it, week in, week in, or day in, day in, to be hardened by this wonderful aroma, of Christ.

The solemn thing is that it's not just that it's a fragrance of death or from death but that it leads to death, that it leads to eternal destruction for some.

You know, you might be able to avoid or ignore the fragrance itself but you cannot ignore the outcome. There is no ignoring that outcome. And I pray, friends, that that outcome would not be yours and would not be any of those connected with us.

And that leads us to the third point. A fragrance from life to life. And praise God that there is a third point. To others, the aroma is from life to life.

I'm sure there are many fragrances which cause you great joy in life. Just the other day I had the wonderful experience of coming home to Lewis and taking in that wonderful fragrance, aroma, that great fresh air of Lewis compared to the pollution of Glasgow that I've been breathing in for far too long now.

[27 : 40] It was a wonderful sense of joy to get that fragrance of my homeland and as well as that I had the wonderful joy of holding my newborn daughter just a few weeks ago and the distinct fragrance that you get from a newborn baby as new life comes into the world.

I'm sure that for you as well you will have fragrances that remind you of loved ones perhaps or fragrances that remind you of certain places or certain things that cause you great joy.

But friends there is nothing like the fragrance of the Lord Jesus Christ because this fragrance it doesn't just lead to joy.

Oh it does lead to joy but it doesn't just lead to joy. It leads to life. This fragrance gives us life. What other fragrance in the world could do that?

Give you life itself. Christian friend I wonder if you remember when that fragrance first impacted you. Was it in the preaching of the word perhaps or maybe it was from godly men or women who you had fellowship with when you took in that fragrance and did it not just transform your life?

[29 : 04] Did it not just transform your senses? Transform your very soul? Remember when we got our first whiff of the fragrance of Christ?

When we started to take in that fragrance and did we not do all we could to surround ourselves with it? Rushing if you like into the secret place rushing into prayer rushing to the word flicking the pages our hearts burning within us as we take in more and more of that wonderful aroma eager for fellowship.

We loved fellowship and we wanted to be in fellowship to be with others who were powerfully diffusing that life giving aroma of Christ and it doesn't matter when or where or even what time it was we wanted to be taking in that fragrance with the people of God.

Did we not come to God's house then and eagerly anticipate the preaching of his word? The preaching of Christ was like an ointment, like a bottle of ointment and as the minister opened it up it was as though he was literally opening up that perfume and it wafted through the pews or wherever we were sitting and we were just taking it in and we thought how is everybody else not taking this in?

How can everybody else not smell what I am smelling? Well I hope that that is not just memories. I hope that that is not just distant memories of when you were first converted.

[30 : 40] Oh friends, I hope that you continue to breathe in that sweet aroma of Christ because this fragrance, it's not just for our conversion. It's not just for our conversion, it's for our nourishment.

It's a continual source of life for us. as we press forward to glory itself. It's not just a source of life to those who are dead.

It is that, but it's not just that. It's a source of life to those who are living. And as we follow Christ in this triumphal procession, we do so not just emitting and radiating, if you like, this fragrance, we breathe it in ourselves.

ourselves. We breathe it in ourselves and we need to breathe it in ourselves. Of course, we have an enemy who's walking alongside this procession.

A whole host of enemies actually. And they are doing all they can to displace that aroma, led by the devil himself. They want to get rid of this aroma, displace it, get rid of it.

[31 : 55] They want to take our minds off it. They want to take our minds off of the gospel that we depend on. And they are good at our jobs. We know our frailties.

We know our weaknesses. I mentioned earlier that we are the aroma of Christ. We find it hard to say that. We are the aroma of Christ.

But friends, we are. Believe that tonight. If you're in Christ tonight, believe that we are the aroma of Christ. Not because of our strength.

Not because of our weakness. But because of the one who is the source of that fragrance. Because of Christ. Believe that. And be emboldened to believe that as you go out with this wonderful aroma.

Friends, we give thanks. Like Paul, we burst out with thanksgiving for this gospel. This wonderful fragrance of Christ. We rejoice in it.

[33 : 00] You see, the world, the world, to them, this makes no sense whatsoever. How on earth, they'll say, how on earth, how on earth can a man who died 2,000 years ago, how can that be a fragrance of life to you?

That makes no sense whatsoever. but we correct them and we say, the fragrance of life is not from a man who died 2,000 years ago.

That fragrance of life is from a man who rose again 2,000 years ago. A man who ever lives at the very right hand of God, making intercession for us, praying for us.

As he leads us in this procession, he's praying for us. He is not dead. He is alive. And that is how and that is why this is the fragrance of life to us.

And I was thinking about this text this week as I considered this idea of the fragrance of Christ as being that of death to some and of life to others.

[34 : 15] My mind went to the centurion at the cross. That centurion who we read sat there watching, guarding the Lord Jesus Christ as he was being crucified on that tree.

Now, that man would have been well used to the smell of death. You do not become a Roman centurion without being well experienced with death, with the fragrance of death, with even causing death.

And he was probably the closest man to Jesus when he was dying on the cross. Could have been a few others, but he was at least one of the closest to Jesus. And I wonder, as that Roman centurion sat there keeping watch over Christ, I wonder what fragrance he sensed.

I wonder, did he sense the fragrance of the blood of Christ as it poured down from his head, down his body, and onto the very ground? Perhaps.

Did he sense the fragrance of that expensive ointment that was poured out on Jesus just a few hours previously? Perhaps.

[35 : 39] But one thing we know for sure, as this man sat there before the cross, he experienced the fragrance of death.

Death spiritual. So he sat there and he saw Christ hanging on that cross, he just saw a common criminal, a man hanging on a cross.

and as Christ's life ebbed away from him and as he gave himself over to death, something quite dramatic happened to this man.

Because in that place that was surrounded by the stench of death, by that man who was used to the stench of death, all of a sudden, he breathes in the aroma of life.

He smells the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ. What was that knowledge? Oh, he gets up and he says, surely this was the Son of God.

[36 : 49] Surely this was the Son of God. Oh, friends, I pray that as we gather here tonight, that we don't see in the gospel a dead man.

that we don't see in the gospel a fragrance of death, but that we see in it a fragrance of life, so that you too, like that centurion, would be able to say, oh, that is the Son of God.

That is the Son of God and in whom I will trust. Oh, Christian friend, let's take encouragement from these verses, let's take encouragement from what we have thought about tonight.

We are very easily cast down and discouraged. We look around and we see these things as a day of small things, don't we? But remember, we are in triumphal procession with Christ leading us, as that fragrance of Christ, that fragrance of our Savior, spreads far and wide.

And you know what the wonderful thing is? It doesn't just go far and wide, it also ascends up. That fragrance ascends into the very throne room of God, and it is well pleasing to him.

[38 : 11] Even if it is a fragrance of death to many around us, it is always well pleasing to him. Or should that alone not be an encouragement to spread this fragrance?

That it may ascend to God himself and please God. Who is sufficient for these things?

The sufficiency isn't ours. The sufficiency is God's and God's alone. Is there anything as sweet-smelling as Christ?

Friends, I pray tonight that he would be a fragrance of life to you and that you would continue to follow that fragrance all the way to glory itself.

Amen. We pray for God's blessing on these thoughts. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you for that wonderful triumphal procession.

[39 : 23] We thank you, O Lord, that the triumph is not ours, the triumph is not in anything we have done, but that the triumph is all in Christ. And as we breathe that wonderful fragrance of that sweet rose of Sharon, may we do so seeking to share that fragrance with others.

May it be a constant source of life to those in here who are believers and for those in here who have yet to put their trust in Christ, those in here who sense this fragrance as a fragrance of death.

O may you work in their hearts and their souls, and may you enable them to breathe in a very different savour. May you enable them to breathe in life itself.

O go before us and help us to continue to meditate on these thoughts. Cleanse us, Lord, from all our sins. Forgive anything said amiss, and all we ask is in Jesus' name.

Amen.