

Aromatic Confidence

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[0 : 00] Well, good evening, folks. Nice to see you. If you're joining with us for the first time, welcome. We're in 2 Corinthians. We've just began this series. Paul is writing to a church that he planted a few years before, and in his absence, the church has been poisoned. It's probably a good description. It's been poisoned by these outside religious teachers who have come in, and they've corrupted the gospel, basically. And one of their strategies for getting traction in this church is they undermine Paul's authority. And so what Paul has to do is he has to defend his leadership because the gospel is at stake, and this is what he's doing here. But he does that in such a way that he commends the basic sort of Christian life, the basic principles of Christianity. So let's get into it. Now I have three very, very simple points to make, okay? God leads us. God uses us. God empowers us. That's what, those are the three things I think the passage says. God leads us. God uses us. God empowers us.

First, God leads us. Have a look at verse 14 there. 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. It sounds great. Doesn't that sound just fantastic, right? Love it. I love it. Don't you want that? God leads us in triumphal procession. Brilliant.

And perhaps you're feeling, if you've been with us for a few weeks now, you might be thinking, finally, after all Paul's talk about weakness and misery and suffering, finally he's saying something that's a bit more rah-rah. You know, it's a little bit more positive, a bit more kind of I'm winning at life kind of sort of thing here, right? Let me ask you this. When Paul makes this remark about the triumphal procession and you bring to mind a picture of what he's talking about, because, you know, it's describing a scene. What does that scene look like in your mind?

The triumphal procession. Where do you put yourself in that scene? Perhaps you're thinking, okay, Christ leads us in triumphal procession. It's a massive parade and there's Christ on a big float and we're his soldiers and we're there and we're celebrating with him. I mean, that sounds really good, doesn't it? Folks, this is not exactly what Paul was talking about. Sometimes when we place ourselves in the Bible story, our imagination leads us astray from the author's intent and that's what's happening here. A corollary example of that would be when we think about the story of David and Goliath.

I mean, we love that story. It's brilliant. Where do we put ourselves in that story? Is our takeaway, yes, I can be like David. I can fight and defeat the giants in my life, the giants of, I don't know, whatever, financial crisis, relationship problems, self-esteem, I don't know, whatever they are, disease. I mean, that's not a terrible way to interpret that story. But David is not the person we're meant to identify with in the story of David and Goliath. The point of that story is not we can be like David in the story. Do you know who you are in the story of David and Goliath? Who you're supposed to be? We are the terrified soldiers.

[3 : 23] That's who we are in that story. We're the terrified soldiers, the soldiers on the sideline who have no hope in the face of an enormous enemy. And we are a people that need someone to fight on our behalf.

We are a people who need a Messiah. That's the point of that story. Now it's the same here with this one here, right? Okay, back to the passage at hand. Christ leads us in triumphal procession. Folks, we are not parting with Jesus in a big parade. That is not what this means.

To understand our place in this procession, we've got to understand culturally a little bit about these processions. So after a big military victory in ancient Rome, the victorious general would have a parade. And it was a lavish thing. And the whole city would come to watch it. It was a huge citywide celebration, like St. Pat's Day in Chicago, perhaps. So he would lead this parade. The victorious general he'd be on a massive chariot. There's lots of people have written about this and explained

it, right? So there's a bit of detail here. He'd wear a purple tunic, big gold scepter with a massive sort of gold eagle on the top. And his face would be tinted purple in honor of the Roman god Jupiter. There'd be wagons of his spoils from the war. You know, big wagons full of gold and stuff. Musicians. There'd be priests burning incense. And at the back, chained up, being dragged behind, would be the defeated generals, the leaders, perhaps the royal family of the state, nation that was just defeated. And the parade would often end up in the temple where the more important prisoners were burnt, sacrificed, or if they're lucky, they'd live a life of slavery. So back to the question. When the passage says Christ leads us in trial for procession here, who are we supposed to identify with in that scenario? Who is Paul? Where is Paul placing us? Folks, I probably already guessed this.

[5 : 23] We're the prisoners. We're the prisoners going to our death. Or best case scenario, life of slavery. So this is, I mean, this is Paul describing his life, really. I mean, Paul was an enemy of God.

And God, you know, conquered him on the road to Damascus when he had an experience of Jesus and was now leading him to his death, a daily death, a daily sacrifice, a life of slavery, of long service to him, so that Paul might reveal the power and glory of God.

So Paul is not a celebrating soldier in a parade. He's a conquered subject. He's saying we are conquered subjects. Now, I don't know where many of you are in your faith journeys or what you think the Christian life is about.

But here, the Apostle Paul explains it really well, I think, in this picture. And if I could summarize it, just using sort of plain speech, I'd say this.

There is a natural order of things. There is a God. You are not him. There is a God. There is a God. We are meant to enjoy him as his created beings forever.

[6 : 41] But our hearts, our hearts want to rule and we want to decide what's right and wrong. And that causes a lot of problems. That causes problems, clearly.

Now, for the natural order to be returned, our hearts need to be defeated. They need to be defeated at the cross. And we need to be led as prisoners to our death daily.

We need to daily bring our hearts to the cross and make sure that they are under the submission of Christ.

I mean, this is not a new Christian idea, obviously. This is what Jesus was talking about when he told his disciples to take up their cross daily. Now, this is, of course, very challenging stuff.

Especially when we think about, you know what, I just say the topic of God's leading in our life, right? God's leading.

[7 : 39] What does that mean to you? What does that mean? Okay. You may think, perhaps, that God's leading is this isolated thing. It's like, it's all about God saying to us, you know, turn left here.

Marry this person. Take this job. Do this. Don't do that. I mean, those are important things to bring to God. We should. We should ask God these particular questions of him.

But being led by God, being led by Christ, is much more than that. Folks, it is about dying to yourself. It is about Christ leading you to your death.

And that means we don't get to decide what's right and wrong. It means life is no longer about us maximizing our pleasure.

And whatever that looks like. And whatever that looks like in your life. Here's the thing that the passage tells us. If we do that, if we do that, if we are led as defeated people in triumphal procession, if we do that, God will use us.

[8 : 53] If you are that smelly, stinky, captured prisoner at the back of the parade. If you are that, you, with that life, will make Christ known.

Because God uses our daily death to reveal himself. Which leads us to the next section. So point one, God leads us. Point two, God uses us.

You see those words, fragrance and aroma, in the first bit of our reading? Look at verse 14 again there. Through us, this, the us is the stinky prisoners of war marching in chains, right?

Through us, he spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. God uses us. If we're a defeated people taking up our cross daily, he uses us. He will make us part of his plan to reveal himself to other people.

I love this smell. I love this image of smell wafting, right? I went to London Drugs last week to buy bus tickets. And I walked past the Cologne section. And there was a tester there for an aftershave called dark, dark, I mean dark, dark rebel.

[10:05] And I thought, if there are two words in the English language that best describe me, it must be dark rebel. So I got very aggressive with this aftershave.

Shook off the excess. It turned out to be a poor decision. It was very strong. And everywhere I went, there was this cloud of dark rebellions around me.

And anyone in my vicinity was impacted by it. It was a true story. It just happened a couple of days ago. So this picture of smell, I think, is a great one that Paul uses as we die to ourselves.

We give off a smell. It's an influence. An impact. And see two things there. Verse 15. Number one, the aroma, it goes up to God. And number two, that smell affects other people.

So one, the smell, it's pleasing to God. Why? This is very interesting here, I think. Verse 15. It says that we are the aroma of what? Of Christ.

[11:18] Isn't that interesting? So, and this is going to sound like a very odd sentence, but as we live for Christ, a defeated people in chains following Christ, right?

As we do that, our actions smell like Christ to God. And that's an odd concept. But our sacrificial actions please God.

He delights in what we do because it smells like His Son. Because that's how His Son lived. And we stand up for Christ in those conversations that we'd rather not have. You know, someone brings up Christians and maybe it's not like a fair assessment of Christianity and they say Christians are anti-intellectual or something like that.

Or someone is having a really difficult time and they're kind of talking to you about it. And in your head you're thinking, right, I could just listen to this and walk away.

I could stand back. Or I could say something here. And I could risk looking foolish. But I could say something here.

[12:21] I could make a stand for Jesus. Folks, when we do that, God delights in that. It pleases God. I think that is a remarkable idea.

I remember being on a plane. This is an example of potentially looking really foolish.

But it kind of worked out okay. I remember being on a plane. Sitting next to a woman who had a PhD in forensic science. She was so interesting. We were chatting away about that. I mean, it was like CSI kind of stuff.

She dealt with decaying bodies. So we talked about that for a while. But I noticed in the conversation, it was a long flight, that she talked about money a lot. A lot. Just kept coming up. Money, money, money. And she was telling me her life story. And she said at one point that she had spent time living on the streets when she was young. I thought, wow. And I said to her, that's a remarkable turnaround.

[13:17] And it's at that point I got this Holy Spirit kind of nudge. And I felt like, okay, Roberts, you're going to have to say something here. Say something. Say something. And I blurted out something that could have made me feel very foolish.

But it was a, I thought, you know what? I might not see this woman again. This is a dying to yourself kind of moment. So I'm just going to do this. And I said, you know what? Jesus saved you from the streets.

And you have given your heart to money. You need to give your life back to Jesus. I know. Like it was, as I said it, I thought, what are you doing?

Jesus saved you from the streets. But you have given your heart to money. You need to give it back to Jesus. Anyway, she started weeping. We had this fantastic conversation. Folks, those moments. And they'll look like crazy moments like that.

Kind of quite wild one. And they'll look like small moments. They'll look like acts of kindness as well. And they'll look like small light touches where you spread the aroma of Christianity in certain circumstances. But those moments like that big and small, they please God.

[14:23] They delight God. They move God's heart. And I think that's wonderful. But they don't just please God. When we live a life of dying to ourselves, it affects other people's eternal destiny.

Look at verse 15 and 16 there. 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. So it's saying here, your aroma, your words, your life, they're going to be life for some people.

That's going to really positively impact somebody's life. The Holy Spirit will use that and change somebody's eternal destiny. How you live and what you'll say will make God known and they will be

happy to hear it.

But not everyone. Because it says here for some it's going to be death to death. I remember watching Fijian rugby sevens play once. And that's sevens rugby is just like, rugby is normally 15 a side.

[15:27] This is seven a side. It's a really fast moving game. Fijians are fantastic at it. So I'm watching it. And on the back of their rugby jerseys, they have the words Philippians 4.13. So I'm sitting next to this girl watching this game.

And I say to her, again I just sort of felt like I should just tell her what that means. And I said, you know that's a Bible verse on the back of their rugby jerseys. And it means I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

And she responded very snappily. And she says, what do I care? So what? I don't care. It was really, there was real genuine anger in her voice that I said that to her.

And I was surprised how angry she was. Folks, our aroma, how we live, what we say, it's going to smell like life to some people. Like this woman on the plane.

To others, it will smell like death. Like the girl at the rugby match. Now Paul gives us an example of his aroma, his fragrance, and how it changed people.

[16:28] How his daily dying impacted people through the Holy Spirit in verse 17 here. So read verse 17 and then skip to verse chapter 3, 1 and 2.

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. Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation from you? But you yourselves are a letter of recommendation. Written on our hearts. To be known and read by all. Okay, what's going on there? Okay, so remember these false teachers came into the church. Paul is comparing the false teachers in Corinth to peddlers. To street vendors in a marketplace. And that is not a compliment. Back in the days, these marketplace vendors were a little bit dodged.

And they're like watered down the wine they sold or used false weights. And Paul is saying, he's not like that. He does everything in the sight of God. It's all above board. And then he says in verses 1 and 3, he goes, don't get me wrong.

[17:30] I'm not trying to talk myself up here. I'm not like some of you guys that need letters of recommendation to gain some credibility. Okay, again, a bit of an attack on these false teachers in Corinth.

One of the ways the false teachers in Corinth tried to undermine Paul's authority is they said, where are your letters of reference? Because they would come with all these letters like, you know, Jordan Smith, you know, he's a great guy.

He's a good teacher. And he's, you know, he's cool. And you should let him do some stuff in your church. Now, there's nothing wrong with letters of recommendation. I've written lots of them.

Paul had written them. Like the book of Philemon reads like a letter of recommendation. Paul is saying, he's saying this, I don't need letters of reference to commend myself to the church.

I started. My recommendation, my letter of reference is you, is changed people. You yourselves were changed through this ministry.

[18:30] That's my letter of recommendation. That's the proof that I should be the leader, that God has been working in my life through you. I mean, he had a massive impact on these folks' lives.

How did he have that impact? Mostly through his suffering. That's what we've been talking about for the last couple of weeks, his daily dying. That's how God made himself known to these people.

That's how the Holy Spirit used the ministry of Paul. A ministry that from the outside, from the perspective of the false teachers, it was a weak ministry. Because Paul wasn't a particularly impressive communicator.

And he wasn't physically very impressive. And he had none of these letters of recommendation. It was a ministry that looked weak. But in fact, it was incredibly strong.

It was strong. And it was effective. Because Christ is strong. When Paul was weak. This leads us to point three here.

[19:28] God empowers you. Point one, God leads us. Point two, God uses us. Point three, God empowers us. And quickly here. Folks, the Holy Spirit wants to use you to impact the lives of other people.

Look, you guys might be, I know this is the case. The only Christian in your workplace. The only Christian in your family. The only Christian in your class.

And if you feel the weight of that. You feel a great responsibility. You're keeping pretty good company here.

And Paul says the same thing in verse 16. He says, To one is a fragrance from death to death. The other a fragrance from life to life. Who's sufficient for these things? When your job is to spread the aroma of Christ in these places.

Who's sufficient? Now, interestingly, in English it reads as a rhetorical question with the answer being no. But in Greek, the actual expected answer is yes.

[20 : 35] Who's sufficient in these things? We are, is the actually expected response. And he answers his question in verses 5 and 6. Not that we are sufficient in ourselves, he says in verse 5.

To claim anything is coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God. Who made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant. Not of the letterer, but of the spirit. For the letter kills, but the spirit gives life.

Goodness, there's so much to say there. But I'll just say just a couple of things before we finish. The big thing is, God makes us sufficient. Who is sufficient? Sufficient we are.

Because the sufficiency does not come from inside of us. It comes from outside of us in. It is the Holy Spirit. And that sufficiency can look like miraculously wise words to a friend.

I went to a wedding last night. And I'm sitting around this table. And Jordan officiated the wedding. And I had played a small part in the wedding as well.

[21 : 33] And so they knew, I guess they knew I was the minister. So I'm sitting at this table.

There's some Christians there. And then a group of people that aren't Christians. So about five minutes into the meal, I said, Right! Who wants to talk about Jesus? And I know.

It was like one of those moments. And there was a silence. I said, Do you have any questions? I would love to hear your questions. And then no one said anything. And then one guy said a few things. And then we had like a 40 minute discussion. And I don't know where these answers were coming from.

But they were pretty good. Folks, it was last night. I had a great experience of the sufficiency in Christ. And talking to this guy that is incredibly philosophical.

And I don't have any background in philosophy. Sometimes the sufficiency of Christ will look like miraculously wise words to a friend. Incredibly wise words to a really hurting friend.

[22 : 34] Or a very inquiring friend. Sometimes the sufficiency will look like this though. It will look like just barely hanging on to Jesus in the midst of acute crisis in your life.

Sometimes sufficiency will look like just barely hanging on in the midst of depression or anxiety. Or great pain. But either way, God is sufficient when you are weak.

And through your weakness, God will make a proclamation of Christ. In both those situations, you are saying Christ is worthy.

Christ is worthy. Let me finish up with this. Folks, if you read the Bible, you will see that God does have a habit of using nobodies to get his work done. And he does that because of their unusual dependence on him.

You see, Paul helps us to see this here. He's been talking for two or three chapters now about this. It's inadequate people, not self-sufficient people that God is looking for.

[23 : 42] He's looking for a conquered people. He's looking for people to take prisoner. To be slaves to him for life. That he will lead in triumphal procession and bring him glory.

So when a call comes, and it comes every day to stand up for Jesus, to serve him in some way, if God is calling you, you don't get to hide behind your weakness and say, I can't do that.

That's not me. It's actually weakness that Christ wants. It's actually weakness that he can use. So bring your weakness to Jesus and accept his sufficiency.

And you do that, you could be the means by which an individual or a community discovers Jesus. Amen.