

# Aromatic Confidence

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[ 0 : 00 ] In our passage today, the Apostle Paul gives us two paradoxes that are almost too good to be true. Two paradoxes of the Christian life. Both of them depend on the grace of God and both of them depend on the cross of Christ.

And they're not hard to understand intellectually, but they're very difficult, I think, to take into our hearts because our heart's distrust is greater than our mind's blindness.

And the two paradoxes rise from two criticisms that have come from the Corinthian church that Paul loves so much and planted. The first criticism is that Paul's life and ministry is just so full of suffering and weakness, it was a bit of an embarrassment having him as an apostle.

Particularly in Corinth, where the focus was on what you could see outwardly. We know from lots of evidence that in Corinth, being physically healthy, being physically beautiful and financially successful was the way to be.

And a new group of teachers had come into the church between 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians saying, if you were really spiritual as a Christian, suffering and affliction would be something in the past for you.

[ 1 : 25 ] They still use the name of Jesus, but they said he died and he rose again. And we want to talk about victory and we want to talk about triumph. We don't want to talk about suffering and weakness because that's all behind us.

So the first criticism is that Paul's weak and suffers. And the second one's a little more complicated and that is it has to do with boasting, that Paul won't boast. In Corinth, remember last week, we saw that public boasting was a very important habit that we all needed to learn to cultivate.

That all the evidence is that for your own self-image, you needed to be good at public boasting. We have become skilled at being sneaky about this in Canada.

I talked about that last week and if anyone wants to know how to do that, you can get the recording of it. But the problem was that the Apostle Paul was very uncooperative. He just wouldn't boast about himself or his achievements and that puts him immediately under suspicion.

I mean, what's he trying to hide? In my experience, that if you are an arrogant person, the Apostle Paul seems arrogant to you. And if you're a humble person, the Apostle seems humble to you.

[ 2 : 41 ] But if you read this letter, Paul does not get defensive. Nowhere does he justify himself or defend himself. What he does is he brings all his life and experience and all his criticisms and the life and culture of Corinth underneath the cross of Jesus Christ, which is the central paradox of the Christian faith and the central paradox of the cosmos.

It's the point at which the greatest wickedness was worked against God, but where God is working his best salvation. It's a point of degradation, humiliation and suffering and the place of God's power and glory.

And for all of us who follow Jesus Christ and place our faith in him, the cross of Christ turns things upside down for us. And so the Christian life living in this world here in Vancouver means serving Jesus will look paradoxical.

So let's look at the two paradoxes this morning. The first one is in verses 14 to 17 of chapter 2 and I've called this triumph in weakness. We've already seen, haven't we, throughout this letter that Paul has been more honest about how painful and weak he is and is suffering than anywhere else. The first two chapters are all about this. And verses 12 and 13, just before verse 14, he gives his opponents even more ammunition. He says, look, when I got to Troas on the coast, this door opened for me for ministry, which means not only were people welcoming to him, but people were actually coming to faith in Christ.

[ 4 : 21 ] But he said, I was so anxious, I was so churned up and restless about what had happened, what the result of the other letter was in Corinth. I didn't stay. He turns his back on evangelism so that he can meet up with Titus in Macedonia.

Then comes the paradox. 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. And there are some experts who find the change in tone so alarming between verses 13 and 14. They say, oh, this comes from somewhere else.

And it is a very big trumpet blast. This phrase, thanks be to God, the apostle only uses in three places. You remember? The defeat of sin, the defeat of death, and now the triumph of God in life. The defeat of sin, Romans 7. Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord. 1 Corinthians 15.

[ 5 : 34 ] The sting of death is sin. The power of sin is the law. Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through Jesus Christ our Lord. And now here, in the daily circumstances of the Christian's life, he says, thanks be to God in the weakness that we experience.

It's a very big deal, he says, because God is now, ongoingly, the verb is in the present tense, leading us in triumphal procession. This is important.

Triumphal procession was a huge parade that happened in Rome. We've got evidence of over 350 of them. If you go to Rome today, outside the Colosseum, there's an arch called the Titus Arch. And inside, you can see carvings after the sack of Jerusalem with Roman soldiers leading Jewish slaves carrying the treasures of the temple back to Rome.

These were massive civic events. And they were usually led by the winning general to celebrate the great victory of Rome. And there was lavish theatre and the whole city was supposed to be there with sound and trumpets.

[ 6 : 49 ] And after the general in his chariot came the key soldiers in their chariot celebrating the victory. And after the soldiers came the spoils of war, the booty, usually carried by prisoners, as you can see on some of the inscriptions.

And last of all, right at the end, the picture of abject misery are the defeated enemies. The leaders and warriors who were former enemies, often in shackles, captive, enslaved, most of whom would now be executed in public.

And the purpose of the triumphal procession was to celebrate the completeness of the Roman victory, you see, by demonstrating the utter helplessness and defeat of their enemies.

The greater humiliation of those who are led in the triumphal procession, the greater the celebration. The greater the disgrace and dishonour, the greater the glory for Rome.

Here's the surprise. In the original, it's clear that the Apostle Paul does not see himself as one of the triumphal soldiers. He's not climbing up on a chariot and waving to the crowd, having a happy time.

[ 7 : 59 ] He's being led as one of the prisoners of war, a defeated and disgraced former enemy whom God is openly displaying his victory through.

And you may be asking, why does Paul say thanks be to God? Why is he happy about this? And the answer is this paradox.

So complete is the victory of God that God works his glory and power through our suffering and our weakness. His power is made perfect in our weakness and your weakness and your afflictions and your inadequacies and all the negative things in your life do not in any way lessen or damage the glory of God.

On the contrary, it shows the completeness of his victory as he leads you in that procession. Paul, remember, had been a bitter enemy of Christianity but it is in his very conqueredness that God displays his majesty and power and he's a very happy captive.

Now, it's very different, isn't it, from the way Corinth thought about things and it's very different than the way we think about things in Vancouver today. So when we suffer or are weak, one of the first things we say is, God, where are you?

[ 9 : 24 ] Why have you abandoned me? Or we may say, look, if I had enough faith, I ought to be able to avoid this difficulty. True followers of Jesus Christ should not just have health problems like our neighbours do or heartaches either.

The paradox is that if you are in Christ, it is in that very experience that God is leading you in triumph and there's more to this first paradox.

And that is, not only does God always lead us in triumphal procession, verse 14, but he spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of Jesus Christ everywhere through us.

See, if you're a Christian, you have a particular smell. You give off a particular odour. And people say the smell is much more powerful than sight or hearing and the perfume industry bears witness to it.

But all of us as Christians give off a particular fragrance. And I just point out, this is a very different view of evangelism and mission than the one we're used to.

[10:38] When he says in verse 15, you see at the beginning, for we are the aroma of Christ to God. And then he gives two different groups who have two different receptions.

He's not speaking just about we the apostles or we royal, we Paul or we the Corinthians. It's all of those who are in Christ Jesus.

We ourselves, he says, are the aroma of Christ to God. Let me point out, that's not something you choose. It's something God does. God spreads through you.

See, verse 14, God leads always, God spreads everywhere. The aroma of Christ through us. This is one of the great themes of this letter.

The grace of God isn't meant to just come to you and stop with you. It's meant to God wants to work through you and me to spread his grace elsewhere. Notice he doesn't say, you must be the aroma of Christ to God.

[11:40] Get going on it, work hard at it, get better at it. This is not just for preachers. He's saying, you are the aroma, you can't help it.

And the paradox is this, that the place God spreads the aroma of Christ through you and me is through our weakness and our suffering and our death.

Your weakness and your inability and your suffering do not disqualify you from serving God or from God using you. The opposite is true. God shows his power and his victory.

He displays and demonstrates and pushes the aroma of Christ, spreads the aroma of Christ through our weakness and inability. But not everyone enjoys the aroma of Christ and you see 15-16, there are two diametrically different reactions.

There are people in your life who love the aroma of Christ. You will be like a life giving oxygen to them. To other people you will be like a deadly cyanide because it is the aroma of Christ, the aroma of glory in death, life and weakness.

[12:56] And I think, I don't know if this is just a mild thing, we don't often notice our own aroma, do we, very much. but you can smell other Christians and to those who are perishing you are the smell of death and to those who belong to Christ you are the smell of life to life and there is no middle ground despite our desire to be liked by everyone.

It's a very serious thing to be a Christian. People cannot avoid being affected some way through contact with us and it gives those who have contact with us potential to know God.

God spreads the knowledge of Christ through us. So in your conduct, in your behaviour, attitudes, decisions, priorities, in your words, who you are at the core of being a Christian rises up as the sweetest, most delicious smell to God and he loves us.

And he loves it. So that's the first paradox, triumph in weakness. And it brings us to the second.

Because right at the end of verse 16, Paul says, who is sufficient for these things?

I mean, these are very high stakes, aren't they? They are, aren't they? I mean, we're talking about very serious things here. The destiny of those around us can depend on God spreading the aroma of Christ through us.

[14:33] Doesn't that seem way above our pay grade? The surprise in the original here is when Paul says who is sufficient, the answer he expects is not a negative one but a positive one.

He expects us to say we are. Should as Christians, should we feel confident and sufficient as Christians? Well, that brings us to the second paradox.

Let me put it this way. our personal sufficiency comes through Christ. Chapter 3, verse 1. Are we beginning to commend ourselves again?

Or do we need as some do letters of recommendation to you or from you? Now, nothing wrong with letters of recommendation. Paul wrote a few himself. There's nothing wrong with confidence either.

The only question is, where is it placed? When it comes to affecting other people with the aroma of Christ, spreading the knowledge of Christ, self-confidence, self-sufficiency is pointless and even a hindrance.

[ 15 : 39 ] And again, Paul is driving us back to the place of true boasting and our true self-sufficiency. The problem for us is we're very binary about this.

We either feel completely inadequate or very confident or we feel low self-esteem or high self-esteem or... And Paul says that believing in your self-sufficiency, your self-competence, self-commendation is merely another form of boasting.

This was the false teacher's game in Corinth and when we get to the later chapters we'll see they had a motto and it's this, I must boast. I must boast. I think it was the beginning of a paragraph. I must boast and then you fill it in after that.

If the apostle wants us to boast, he doesn't want us to stop boasting but he wants us to boast in Christ, to be confident into Christ, to know our sufficiency in Christ, otherwise everything is pride. Because the way pride works is by us comparing ourselves horizontally to each other. Because pride is essentially comparative, competitive.

[ 16 : 51 ] C.S. Lewis wrote a lovely essay on this called The Great Sin in Mere Christianity. I'm going to read you a long quote from the essay. He says, what you want to get clear is that pride is essentially competitive.

It's competitive by its very nature. While the other vices are competitive only, so to speak, by accident. pride gets no pleasure in having something, only out of having more of it than the next person.

We say that people are proud of being rich or clever or good-looking, but they're not. They are proud of being richer, cleverer, or better-looking than others.

If everyone else became equally rich or clever or good-looking, there would be nothing for us to be proud about. It's the comparison that makes you proud. It's the pleasure of being above the rest. See, greed may drive you into competition if there's not enough to go around, but the proud person, even when they have more than they can possibly want, will still try to get more to assert their power.

[ 18 : 02 ] If I'm a proud person, as long as there's one other person in the whole world, more powerful, richer, or cleverer than I am, he's my rival and my enemy. Why am I saying this?

Because all the key words in the first six verses of chapter three are words of comparison and measurement. The word sufficient, the word commend, the word recommendation, the word confidence, they're all measurement to a standard.

They all have to do with how we evaluate ourselves in comparison to others. And different cultures take different approaches to this issue. I mean, in the West, until the early 20th century, all the problems in society, violence and abuse and bullying, they were viewed as people having too much pride, too much, if you like, to a higher view of oneself, and the answer to that was punishment and stricter laws.

In the last 70 years in the West, the cultural assumption has reversed. The reason people turn to violence and to hatred and abuse, we say now, is because they have too lower view of themselves. And the solution then is to take away all the rules and do whatever you can to increase people's self-esteem. Did you know that the recent studies demonstrate that there's no difference between high self-esteem and low self-esteem in terms of its correspondence with anti-social behavior and criminality?

[ 19 : 39 ] In California, those with highest self-esteem are the gang leaders. The Apostle says, high self-esteem or low self-esteem are both an issue of pride, and they just won't work for us.

Because if I build my ego or my confidence or my sufficiency, on anything in myself, I'm always looking horizontally and comparing myself to others, and in the end that's fragile, it's insecure, it's unsatisfying, and it's empty.

If I'm living for commendation of anyone other than Jesus Christ, I'm going to be permanently insecure, fragile, and I can never know God. the Corinthian teachers, the false teachers, they brought these fancy CVs, these letters of recommendations that would make you blush, and they asked the Corinthians to add to them.

They criticized Paul because he didn't have any, and Paul points out, just looking in the wrong place, you're looking in the wrong direction. Jesus has already written the best kind of letter possible.

Look at verse 3. You, plural, show that you are a letter from Christ, delivered by us, ministered by us, written not with ink, but with the spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone, but on tablets of

human hearts.

[ 21 : 13 ] This is just brilliant. Do you know, the church in Corinth, like this church and every other church, Christian church, is a piece of heavenly graffiti written from heaven by Christ, in our hearts, not on pieces of paper or tablets of stone.

And instead of using ink or paint, the letters in our hearts are made up of the spirit of the living God, the eternal limitless source of life himself.

And when Paul delivered this letter or preached the gospel as he did, was Paul adequate or sufficient in himself? That's just irrelevant.

It's relevant to the Corinthians. And here we come to the paradox. Paul says that our personal sufficiency is through Christ.

Let me explain. Just read verses 4 to 6 with me. such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God.

[ 22 : 22 ] Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything is coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God who has made us sufficient, competent, to be servants, ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter, but of the spirit.

For the letter kills, but the spirit gives life. I think this is really difficult to take into our hearts. I find it difficult. We're so used to comparing ourselves to each other so that when God starts to use us in our lives and when we start to have an effect on other people, one of the first things we feel is, I'm just not up to this, I'm completely inadequate, I don't have the confidence, I'm not sufficient for this. And if God is using you and you're starting to feel that, that's fine. Because I can hardly think of anyone in the Bible whom God worked through who didn't feel that way.

Do you know when God first called Moses, do you remember what Moses said? He said, Lord, look, Aaron is much better at this, my brother.

He's got really good speaking, I'm not much for public speaking. Gideon did the same, Jeremiah did the same, Isaiah did the same, Ezekiel did the same.

[ 23 : 40 ] What does God say to them? Does he say, oh, I've made a terrible mistake here. He says, I am with you.

We're not sufficient in ourselves to be the aroma of Christ. you're not sufficient to think that anything should come from you. We have no power, no spiritual power in ourselves.

It's God who leads us in triumphal procession. It's God who spreads the aroma of Christ irrespective of how personally, natively sufficient or insufficient you feel or how you evaluate yourself.

Because the key audience is God. C.S. Lewis says, in God you come up against someone that is in every respect immeasurably superior to yourself.

And unless you know God as that, and therefore know yourself as nothing in comparison, you do not know God at all. As long as you are proud, you cannot know God.

[ 24 : 52 ] here Paul is saying is that our sufficiency, our competence, our adequacy is from God, it's before God, from God, through Christ.

Our personal sufficiency, he's saying, I just don't know how to say this, it is as though our true self-esteem, our true evaluation, our self-confidence is outside of us and comes to us constantly through Christ as we cling to him and know him and rely on him.

He shares all the sufficiency of God with us. I've used this illustration before, you remember the story of the two Jewish boys in Egypt on the first Passover night when the angel of death killed all the first born in each house, except those where the blood of the lamb was sprinkled on the doorposts.

Both boys were in Jewish families, both boys had blood sprinkled on the doorposts, but one boy was a worrier. And he worried and worried and worried and worried and he was terribly anxious about it and he feared that despite the blood he would die and he didn't sleep at all.

And the boy in the house next door slept very soundly believing the promise. Their subjective confidence was very different. Did it change the outcome?

[ 26 : 15 ] Nope. Was the boy who trusted God safer than the boy who was anxious? Nope. When Paul talks about this here, he's talking about the inward subjective assurance and confidence that we can have, not based on anything in ourselves.

It's just a completely new and different way of thinking. You see, arrogance, the overinflated view of self, is still self-focused, low self-esteem, always concerned about how you're coming across,

looking for others for approval, is still self-focused.

Both of them are self-focused and both of them erode intimacy and empathy. Both superiority and inferiority are ways of not really trusting God, not going through Christ.

But through Christ, God gives us a different way. And it's not trying very hard not to think of yourself, don't think about the pink elephant, don't think about yourself, it's just thinking of yourself less.

Lewis says again, the real test of being in the presence of God is that you either forget about yourself altogether or see yourself as a small dirty object. Which means before forgiveness obviously.

[ 27 : 35 ] It's better to forget about yourself altogether. He's not saying I'm going to have huge self-confidence in my worth or I'm going to have total lack of confidence.

He's talking about God confidence. And this is where the two paradoxes come together. Do you notice there are two throughs in the passage? That God spreads the fragrance of Christ through us and our confidence toward God is through Christ.

He always leads us in triumph. Everywhere spreads through us. Our confidence and sufficiency for all this comes through Christ. Christ. It's not a pep talk from the apostle saying look you can do this I believe in you get out there.

He's saying you don't have it in you but God has it in him and in the midst of your weakness and personal difficulty in the circumstances of your daily life he makes you sufficient constantly through Christ.

And I think the obvious thing for us to do is then to repent of every version of pride that swims around in the dark recesses of our hearts. We need to repent of looking for things in ourselves for sufficiency and confidence and to ask him to show us what we have in Christ and to trust him even in the midst of suffering to be our sufficiency and then to lead us in triumphal procession and through us spread the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ everywhere.

[ 29 : 12 ] Amen.