

2 Corinthians 2:12-17

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/2cor/2cor-2/2-corinthians-212-17/>

Paul was troubled in spirit over what was happening in Corinth. In following the will of God, he was able to see and know the presence of the Spirit of God. He defends his ministry again as he rebuffs any claim that he is preaching for profit. He declares that the Corinthian believers are his letter of recommendation of his ministry.

Paul now makes a shift, updating the Corinthians on where he went on his travels (rather than coming to see them, as he had planned). Earlier he said he cancelled his trip to Corinth to spare sorrow for both himself and the Corinthians. Now he adds that there was also a great door of opportunity that opened, which also appears to have played a role in his change of plans. He says, *Now when I came to Troas for the gospel of Christ and when a door was opened for me in the Lord* (v 12).

Troas was a city in the northwest part of modern Turkey, which at the time was the ancient Roman province of Asia. It was across the Aegean Sea from Greece, so it would have been one of the ports Paul might have sailed to on his journeys. Again, one of the inferred criticisms of Paul is that he changed his itinerary, breaking his commitment to visit the Corinthians (2 Corinthians 1:23).

It could be inferred that his accusers claimed he did not come to Corinth because he was too busy “peddling the word of God” for his own financial gain (2 Corinthians 2:17). This is somewhat ironic because in 1 Corinthians Paul defends the opposite claim, that he was not a true apostle because he worked to pay his own expenses (1 Corinthians 9:1-6).

So, Paul is clear to proclaim that his journeys are *for the gospel of Christ* and no other reason. He does not elaborate on how or what *door was opened* for him in Troas, but he clearly states that it was for the *gospel of Christ*. Further, this *door* that was *opened* was *in the Lord*. This was Paul following God, not the other way round.

As Paul has been extraordinarily open and vulnerable thus far in this letter to the church at Corinth, he continues to open his heart to them as he writes, *I had no rest for my spirit, not finding Titus my brother; but taking my leave of them, I went on to Macedonia* (v 13).

Paul had planned a return visit to Corinth, but as we have seen, he did not go. His reason for not going was to prevent causing more “sorrow” both for him and the Corinthian church. Rather, he sent a letter: “out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote to you with many tears” (2 Corinthians 2:4). He then sent Titus to Corinth to hear how they had received the letter. He then he traveled to Troas where he and Titus had arranged to meet.

But Paul, anxious to hear the news from Corinth, *not finding Titus my brother*, did not feel as though he could continue what apparently was a fruitful ministry there in Troas. In 1 Corinthians 16:9, Paul uses the same “door” metaphor, “for a wide door for effective service has opened to me” as he uses here in verse 12 *when a door was opened for me in the Lord*.

This anxiety, expressed as *I had no rest for my spirit*, has been referred to by some as “pastoral anxiety,” which is an experience common to many spiritual leaders. In Chapter 11, as Paul again presents a defense of his ministry and his suffering, he says “Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure on me of concern for all the churches” (2 Corinthians 11:28).

So, with such concern, love, and agony of spirit for the church at Corinth, Paul decided to leave the ministry in Troas, *taking my leave of them*. He then *went on to Macedonia*. Macedonia is north of Greece and therefore north of Corinth. ([See Map](#))

His own anguish over the situation in Corinth did not stop, for even when he arrived in Macedonia he was still carrying the heavy burden, as we see in 2 Corinthians 7:5, “For even when we came into Macedonia our flesh had no rest, but we were afflicted on every side: conflicts without, fears within.”

Scripture tells us to cast our cares on God, for He cares for us (1 Peter 5:7). Jesus said we should not worry about tomorrow (Matthew 6:25). But Paul spoke consistently about how the care of tending to the churches weighed on him. However, Paul also says he relies on God for his comfort (2 Corinthians 7:6). Paul learned to glory in his weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9-10). So Paul has cares and worries, but he actively gives them over to God, and walks in dependence upon Him, relying on God for his comfort rather than relying on circumstances.

Paul fought his doubts and fears, which were real and difficult, by placing his faith in God: *But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place* (v 14).

The word *leads* here in verse 14, as well as the phrase *in triumph*, are both translations of the Greek word “thriambeuo.” This word means “triumphal procession” and is used only here and in Colossians 2:15. This term would immediately cause Paul’s readers to have an image come to mind of a Roman “triumphal procession.” These processions were military parades in Rome which boasted of successful conquest abroad.

These “thriambeuo” parades would include not only the conquering armies, but also the spoils of their victory, including the captured enemy soldiers and leaders of their army. At many of these parades, the enemy soldiers would be executed; thus, for them, the parade was the opposite of a celebration, as they were being led to their death.

As Paul calls this image to mind, he is careful to point to *God, who always leads us in triumph in Christ*. It is not Paul leading the parade, rather he is one of the slaves or servants, even being led to death in the service of Christ. However, it is a parade of *triumph in Christ*. We are helped by his usage in Colossians, speaking of the effect of Jesus’s obedience to His Father dying on the cross for the sins of the world:

“When He [Jesus] had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him.”
(Colossians 2:15)

The phrase *having triumphed over* is the English translation of “thriambeuo” in verse 15. We see here that Jesus brings triumph through the suffering of death (Hebrews 2:9).

Paul has quickly changed the tenor of his letter from verse 13 to verse 14 as he moves from his own anguish and anxiety to his confidence in the victory of the cross: *And manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place* (v 14).

Paul's reference to the image of this "triumphal procession" in verse 14 is of believers marching steadily through life, causing those in the "gallery" watching the "parade" to smell the *sweet aroma of the knowledge of Christ* as the triumphant marchers pass by.

This triumphant march occurs in *every place* the believers go. It is not limited to Sunday mornings or church visits. The *aroma* of the *knowledge* of Jesus is sensed by everyone they come in contact with, in *every place* they go.

Paul uses the image of an *aroma* in his mental picture of the triumphal Christian march. An *aroma* is something that people sense whether they want to or not. To look and see requires paying attention. The same is true to hear a sound. Perhaps there is a band playing, but if someone desires to tune them out and instead speak with a friend, the band becomes mere background noise. This is not the case with an *aroma*. The *aroma* imposes itself and will be noticed.

Such is the case with believers who walk faithfully, exhibiting love and service in their daily engagement with others. It is something that insists on being noticed. And it brings the "fragrance" of the *knowledge of Christ* to all in the presence of the one living in faith. Thus, the "thriambeuo" or triumphal march of the believer is to walk in faith through the highs, lows, and daily routines of life. When we live in the resurrection power of Jesus, we are walking a triumphal march in Christ.

To Paul's readers, they would have been familiar with the language of worship, sacrifice, and offering. The burning of incense as an offering on an altar of sacrifice was a ritual both in Jewish and some pagan practices. As we are being led in this *triumph in Christ*, *Christ manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place* (v 14).

While the rituals of a fragrant and aromatic offering would likely take place primarily in a temple, Paul sees that in Christ, this *sweet aroma* and *fragrance of Christ* goes beyond the temple into our daily lives *in every place*. Those of us who are "in Christ" (2 Corinthians 5:17) are new creations who *manifest the fragrance of Christ to God*. We are also each a temple of God (1 Corinthians 3:16).

Through the triumph of the cross, even though our circumstances may be difficult, we can know that God continues to work His presence and purpose in and through us: *For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing* (v 15).

As the sacrificial offering is made, we become the *fragrance of Christ to God*. The burnt offerings of the Old Testament are described as a "soothing aroma to the Lord" (Leviticus 1:9). The picture Paul paints is that when we live in obedience to God we are sending a *fragrance of Christ up to God* just as a burnt offering in the Old Testament sent a "soothing aroma" to God because the people were following His instructions and petitioning Him for forgiveness.

Paul paints a similar word picture in Romans 12:1, where Paul writes:

“Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.”
(Romans 12:1)

The image here of the “holy sacrifice” is not of a slain animal that was cooked on an altar (to be a “soothing aroma” that pleases God) and is then prepared to be eaten by the people, also pleasing them. Rather it is of a believer pleasing God by living their daily life in obedience to Christ.

Believers reflect this image of being a “living sacrifice” when we carry both the death (to sin and self) and resurrection of Christ (to new life) in these “earthen vessels” that are our bodies (2 Corinthians 4:7). We live the death of Christ when we reckon ourselves dead to sin. We live the life of Christ when we live in the truth of having been raised to life. When we live in these realities we escape the slavery and condemnation that are the consequences of sin (Romans 6:7-8).

This is to be a constant and enduring approach to life, as Paul will later say that we should be “always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body” (2 Corinthians 4:10). That is how we fulfill the picture of living as a *fragrance of Christ to God*, living life as a “living sacrifice” that creates a “soothing aroma” to Him. Believers in Jesus do this by walking in the power of Christ’s resurrection, living as God instructs us to live:

For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life. And who is adequate for these things? (vv 15-16).

However, while faithful believers are a “soothing aroma” to God (*fragrance of Christ to God*), those same believers by their faithfulness are also living sacrifices and great examples *among those who are being saved* (v 15). The phrase *being saved* refers to believers who are *being saved* from the power of sin in their daily walk. When we see the word “save” in scripture it means something or someone is being delivered, so we need to look at the context to see what is being delivered from what.

The root Greek word translated *are being saved* is “sozo.” This root “sozo” is translated “I will get well” in Matthew 9:21, because in that context a woman believed that if she touched the hem of Jesus’s garment, she would be saved/delivered from sickness. Spiritual “salvation” can be viewed as having three tenses:

- PAST: Any believer has been saved/delivered from the penalty of sin once for all when he or she believes upon Jesus and is born again (John 3:3, 14-15). All who believe are fully justified in God’s sight and are accepted into His forever family. Nothing can separate His people from His love (Romans 8:38-39).
- FUTURE: All believers have the hope and promise of looking forward to being resurrected into a new body and living in God’s presence in a new earth where

righteousness dwells (2 Peter 3:13). In this hope every believer will be saved/delivered from the presence of sin.

We can see this salvation spoken of in Romans 13:11 where Paul says “for now salvation is nearer to us than when we believed.” We can see in this verse that as we get further in time from when we “first believed” we are getting closer to “salvation.” Clearly then, the “salvation” being spoken of is in the future not the past. In context, Paul is speaking of the end of the age when all will be judged and things will be set to right.

- PRESENT: Verse 15 is speaking of the process of learning to walk in the righteousness of faith, as Paul describes here *being saved*. To walk in the Spirit and put to death the flesh is an ongoing process. It is something we learn. When any believer seeking to learn and walk in faith is around someone living faithfully, that person is a *fragrance of Christ to God* to them. They see a life being well-lived and are inspired to follow.

To those who are seeking to walk by faith and are in the process of *being saved* from the power of sin, disallowing it to negatively affect their lives, the example and inspiration gained from seeing those who walk as living sacrifices unto the Lord is an *aroma from life to life*. The phrase *from life to life* would seem to refer to the example of the *life* being lived by the faithful person stirring up and inspiring the *life* in the onlooking believer being inspired.

The principle here seems to be that a life lived in faithfulness stirs up the faithfulness of others who are seeking to learn to walk in faithfulness themselves. This is arguably the primary purpose for believers to regularly assemble together, to stir one another up (Hebrews 10:24).

On the other hand, those who are not walking in faith, those who *are perishing*, the example of one living faithfully as a living sacrifice is an *aroma from death to death*. This appears to speak of those who are dead in their sins. To them, being around someone who is living faithfully makes them feel even more *death*.

They are already estranged from God, so being around the things of God makes them feel worse. They have a sense of death/separation already. When they are around someone living in faithfulness to Christ their sense of separation is heightened. It becomes an *aroma from death to death*.

Since this says the *aroma* of the faithful person is *from death* this must be speaking of the reality of the faithful person having been crucified with Christ into His death. Thus, the faithful believer who is dead to sin causes discomfort, a “stink” to the one who is living in the death of sin. The contrast of living in righteousness is to them a foul aroma.

Believers live the resurrection of Christ when we walk in His resurrection power, following the Spirit in newness of life (Romans 6:13, Galatians 6:8).

That those who are in Christ can give a different *aroma* to different people, depending on whether they believe, can be understood in the light of John 3, which asserts that anyone who does not believe is “judged already, because he has not believed” in Jesus (John 3:17-18). For the person who has not believed, the *fragrance of Christ* would smell like judgement. Those who do not believe bring condemnation upon themselves.

Paul now asks a reasonable question: *And who is adequate for these things?* (v 16). When we read about this example of someone that exudes the *fragrance of Christ* because of their faithful walk, it is reasonable to ask “And what does that look like? Who is doing that?” *Who is adequate?*

Paul will tell us that not every believer gives off this radiant aroma of Jesus. It is those who walk in the Spirit, as Paul says in the next chapter:

“...our adequacy is from God, who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.”
(2 Corinthians 3:5b-6)

This makes clear that Paul here asserts that he is in fact an example of one who emits the pleasing aroma of Christ. He is *adequate for these things*. However, his adequacy is not because he is really great at following religious rules or showing people how pious he is. That would be the “letter” of the law, and that does not bring life. The “letter kills” (2 Corinthians 3:6).

Paul asserts that his “adequacy is from God” because God made him a servant of the “new covenant” which was in His blood. It is because of “the Spirit” that Paul is *adequate for these things*.

Which begs the question: “Who is not adequate?” Paul answers: *For we are not like many, peddling the word of God* (v 17). Paul does not elaborate, but it is inferred that he was aware that the people in Corinth would understand who he was talking about. It makes logical sense that believers only throw off the pleasing *fragrance of Christ* if they are walking in the Spirit by faith, functioning as living sacrifices.

If all believers were automatically living sacrifices, it would make no sense for Paul to exhort believers to invest time and effort to renew their minds and be transformed that they might become living sacrifices (Romans 12:1-2). Similarly, if all believers automatically lived as pleasing aromas, then they would already be saved from the presence of sin, rather than be described as *being saved* (v 15) from the ongoing struggle against the negative impact of sin (1 John 1:8).

Growing up and maturing to walk by faith in Christ is like growing up as a human. It requires hard work through learned lessons. That is why Paul describes believers as those who are *being saved*, because he is referring to our need to be delivered from the negative impact of sin in this world through walking in the obedience of faith.

Paul then contrasts his own motive against those who have financial gain as their primary motivation for working in ministry: *but as from sincerity, but as from God, we speak in Christ in the sight of God* (v17).

All that he is, all that he says, and all that he does, Paul says comes from God and returns to God. On one hand this is an extremely bold statement, as Paul is asserting that when he speaks, it is *as from God*. On the other hand it is a sobering statement from Paul’s standpoint because rather than speaking this as lording over the Corinthians—as in “I speak for God so you have to do what I say”—Paul says *we speak Christ in the sight of God*.

It seems here that by highlighting that his ministry is being done *in the sight of God*, Paul is elevating a reality he highlighted in his first letter, and will emphasize again in this letter. Namely, by acknowledging that all he says is *in the sight of God*, Paul is fully accountable to God, and all he does will be judged by God.

We see this also in 1 Corinthians 3, where Paul asserts that the Corinthians should not be arguing over whether they should follow Paul or Apollos. Rather they should be concerned about how Jesus will judge their deeds at the judgement seat of Christ (1 Corinthians 3:13-15). That is what Paul himself is concerned about (1 Corinthians 3:7, 4:2-5). Later in this letter, Paul will exhort the Corinthians to live as pleasing Christ, living for the day of His judgement, saying:

“Therefore we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.”

(2 Corinthians 5:9-10)

Paul’s concern here is not to gain power over the Corinthians. It is to be a good shepherd to them, because that is his stewardship unto the Lord. Paul knows he is accountable to God to shepherd well. So he is being truthful with his children in the faith, and instructing them how to discern the difference between a good and bad example.

In the next chapter, Paul will again raise a defense against those who apparently were seeking to diminish Paul’s apostolic authority. It would make logical sense for someone who is *peddling the word of God* to try to take Paul down a notch so that they could elevate themselves and get more money from the Corinthians.

It is sad to acknowledge that people who hold themselves out to be ministers of the word of God can place monetary gain or status above their ministry. But this was the case here at the very founding of the Christian church, so we should not be surprised to see it in any other era.

However, it is interesting that while Paul desires his followers to have a sober understanding of such things, and know what example to follow, he is still happy to have God’s word preached, even if it is from the mouth of people with a twisted motivation (Philippians 1:15-18). This is likely because Paul knows the power of the scripture, that God’s word never returns void (Isaiah 55:11).

Biblical Text

¹² Now when I came to Troas for the gospel of Christ and when a door was opened for me in the Lord, ¹³ I had no rest for my spirit, not finding Titus my brother; but taking my leave of them, I went on to Macedonia. ¹⁴ But thanks be to God, who always leads in triumph in Christ, and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place. ¹⁵ For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are perishing; ¹⁶ to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life. And who is adequate for these things? ¹⁷ For we are not like many, peddling the word of God, but as from God, we speak in Christ in the sight of God.

