

II Corinthians 2:12-17 "Triumph in Christ"
February 10, 2019

All right. Let's open our Bibles to II Corinthians 2 as we continue our series of study through this letter of Paul's to the Corinthian church.

We mentioned to you quite often that Paul planted this church over an 18-month period. You can read about it in Acts 18, 19, in that area. Paul arrived in Corinth completely discouraged. He had been beat up or chased out of literally every place he'd stopped. Things were not easy. He was alone, hundreds of miles away from his friends who had stayed behind to try to continue the churches that had been left behind. He had vowed not to say anything to anyone. He really showed up in this very dirty and perverse city without really a will to go on.

He went to the synagogues on the Sabbath. He didn't cause any trouble that you'd expect him to. He was very outspoken, but not until his friends came did he begin to speak at all. And yet the Lord appeared to Paul in Corinth, he was so discouraged, and said, Look, no one's going to hurt you here. I got your back. I think that's in the Bible. And preach it, man. Just tell it. I will watch over you. And for the next year and a half, God protected Paul from lots of enemies, lots of plots and plans. Protected him even through the city government that stood with him when he was accused by others.

This church had lots of problems. The problems were situated, at least in part, by fact it was an inner-city church in a bad, very corrupt city, so all of the sins of the people came into the church with them. They would eventually be cleaned up and God would prevail, but if you've read I Corinthians, you know the church was very immature, it was very shallow. There was lots of sinful behavior. There was rebellion against authority. There was drunkenness at the communion feast. The poor were being neglected. They were suing each other in front of the world. There were sinful lifestyles tolerated. There was an abuse of freedoms. There was pride about spiritual gifts. I mean, there was a lot of bad things

going on. But Paul had great hope, because like every church, God begins to work and establish His people.

The harder thing for Paul after he left was that the false teachers had come in like they had always, followed him around, the Judaizers as they're called, and they wanted to impress upon the people the law rather than grace. No longer Jesus; now it was all about works and all. And the way that they went about establishing themselves was to go after Paul, to diminish Paul in the eyes of the people, and so as a result, then the people would listen to them. And that becomes a really difficult thing for Paul. He wrote four letters to these folks, visited them once after he had been there. We have two of the letters. This is obviously the last one that he wrote, the fourth one.

Well, Paul was very anxious about how the people were doing. He loved them, and because he loved them, they hurt him. And this is probably the most personal letter that you will find Paul having written at all. But he doesn't defend himself because he cares about what people thinks about him. That really isn't Paul's issue. Paul's interested in them believing him because of the gospel that he brings. And so the letter in many ways is a defense of his integrity, his heart, his behavior; not to justify himself, but to get the people to look back into the things of God.

Paul, like I said, spent 18 months here. Several years later, maybe four or five years later, when the news came to Ephesus that things were not going well, and this communication back and forth, the last letter that Paul sent, the severe letter that we don't have, by the hands of Titus. He hoped things would get better, but he didn't know.

At about the same time things blew up in Corinth. He had been there three years. The union that supported idol making for the goddess Diana rioted in the streets. Paul's life looked like he might have been in danger. And so everywhere Paul turned, at least in the near term, was going poorly. Turmoil was everywhere. It was the hardest time in his ministry. He was so heartbroken though for this church that he felt so akin to.

This morning, however, from verses 12 through 17 Paul shares how happy he was when he got the good news that

things were changing when he and Titus got together, that he reminded himself that God's word always works. Oh, he had been fretting for months over the hurt, over the terrible things that were said, how those that were supposedly his friends believed them were being turned away. But Paul felt so good when he heard that the word of God was working. And he reminded himself often of that, and this is like the little song of triumph before he gets back to addressing some of the accusations and trying to help people to get better; because things were better, but they weren't great.

One thing for sure, ministry is unparalleled in blessing and unparalleled in privilege, but it oftentimes comes with lots of discouragement, and that was certainly true in Paul's case, even to the point of despair. Spurgeon would say to his students, "The strong are not always vigorous, and the wise are not always ready, and the brave are not always courageous, and the joyful are not always happy. They are ordinary men, and the Lord knows that they're made out of dust."

I read a letter a while back from pastor who was quitting his church after almost 30 years of ministry. He will say in the letter, "I am ashamed of myself. I'm disgusted, but I've had enough." Let me read to you a little bit about what he wrote to the board of directors. He said this: "In all of my years I have found but very few earnest, unselfish, and consecrated Christians. I've come to believe that the average church member cares very little for the Kingdom of God and its advancement, or even for the welfare of their fellow man. He is a Christian in order that he might save his soul from hell. He does as little as he can, lives as indifferently as he dares, and if he thought he could get to Heaven without lifting a finger, he would jump at the chance. I've spent most of my ministry life pushing, pulling, urging, and persuading reluctant church members to do what they should naturally do in their desire to please the Lord. They speak of commitment, but show little of it. Why for many, even regular attendance is too much. I am tired of being the only one in the church that is expected to show real sacrifice. I'm not leaving Jesus, I'm just leaving His people."

That's a depressed guy. Paul was depressed. The difference between Paul and this guy was Paul wasn't quitting. He believed that God would finish the work

that He started, and even though there were pains in ministry and cost for loving others and caring for them, and the heartbreak of seeing the church do poorly, and the sadness of seeing them stumble, he wasn't quitting. He was going to see this thing through.

He would write to Timothy in his last letter from the death row that, "The Lord has stood by and strengthened me with the message that I was fully able to preach to the gentiles, and had delivered me from the mouth of the lion." He was able to get to the end of his life saying I've stuck the course, but this was a hard one for Paul.

When he delineates in Chapter 12, when he gets there in a couple days, what he had gone through physically in his ministry over those 15 or 20 years, he says at the end, "And add to all of these things just the daily care for the churches." His disappointments, his heartaches. And I don't think that there was any church that moved him more than this one. This is the one that he seemed to care about the most, and they were being turned away from him through the lies of the enemy. His credibility, his dependability were called into question. He loved them so much. He hurt for them, and he hurt because he cared for them. In fact, when he writes in this book in Chapter 12, he will write, "I would gladly be spent by you for your souls; but while I love you more, you seem to love me less." He just had had a terrible time. So he was waiting for some good news.

He leaves Ephesus. He heads north, and he finally gets to meet with Titus and gets the good news, and this is what he writes in joy. These are joyful words. They're not all so joyful. They're all very personal, but these are kind of like victorious words, so we'll savor these for the time being.

Verse 12, "Furthermore, when I came to Troas to preach Christ's gospel, a door was opened to me by the Lord, but I had no rest in my spirit, because I didn't find Titus my brother. And so I took leave of them and departed for --" what would be northern Greece or Macedonia, across the Aegean over to Europe from Asia. Paul had left the Ephesian church because of the riot, Acts Chapter 19 and 20. He traveled up the coast to Troas. It was a seaport village on the Aegean Sea. Been there for a long time. Was established back in 300 BC. It was named by Augustus for that area, actually for the city of

Troy, which was about 10 miles away.

You might remember a little bit about Troas. Paul had hoped to run into Titus here, because if you're traveling, that's the way that you would go. That's the natural port. He wanted some firsthand information. He had already been chased out of Ephesus now, and there was a lot of anxiety about that. Paul had sent a really severe letter at Titus's hand. He didn't know how it was going to go, but nothing had gone well so far, and so he expected, I think, the worst. He hoped for the best. His heart was pretty heavy.

Troas is that natural pass-through point. You might remember Troas as the place when on Paul's second missionary journey he went to all of the churches he had established on his first time out, and then he wanted to go somewhere new. And he tried everywhere. He tried to go north, tried go south. He just kept getting pushed by the Spirit of God to the west. When he got to Troas, he just ran out of land. Swimming would have been the next move. And so he went to sleep that night, and he saw a man standing in Macedonia saying, "Come here." And he sensed that the Lord had called him and his team to come preach the gospel in Europe, the first landing was Philippi, and it kind of went on from there. So Paul had been here before, but he was kind of forced to go there by the Lord.

He was not allowed to share there last time. When he goes back through Macedonia down to Greece, meets with this church eventually, and goes home, he'll stop once more in Troas. And then you probably remember the story about him meeting with the church, and he preached to them all night. You remember that story? And there was a guy sitting in window named Eutychus -- by the way, his name means lucky -- who fell out of the window and died. Got right in the service. Not helpful. But anyway, the Lord spared him and all. But Paul preached that there was a church there. Well, this time Paul is anxious about this church over here, he's been forced to leave this city over here. He can't find his guy that he wanted to hear how it went. He shows up at Troas, and God just begins to bless everything he says, everything he does. People are coming; the church seems to be growing. And everything that you would want as a pastor Paul was seeing in Troas, except he didn't have a heart for it.

Notice that he writes the words "a door is open to me," which is a phrase that Paul will use quite often. He wrote in I Corinthians 16 to the people, Hey, I'm going to stay here in Ephesus through Pentecost, because a great and effectual door has been opened for me here, even though there are many adversaries. So Paul saw God's hand and he was excited about it. Luke will write in Chapter 14 of Acts that a door of faith to the gentiles had been opened for us, and so we're going forward and going through it. He'll say it to the Colossians again, praying that God would open the door for His word.

So Paul gets to Troas, and in all of his despair and concern and hurt and running for his life he sees God's blessing. That's what you long for as a pastor, I would think. But he's not content to stay. And Paul is distracted, and it's such a severe distraction that he leaves this work of God behind, and he gets on a boat and he sails over to Macedonia. He's got to find Titus. He's got to find out what's going on. Will they repent? Are they going to turn from these false teachers? Will they embrace the God that I introduced to them? Will they go back to the teaching of the word that they've learned? Will they love me like I love them? It was this emotional kind of overwhelming fight in Paul's heart, but it was worth it to Paul. Those are his people. He couldn't just leave.

He says in verse 14, "Now thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and through us He diffuses the fragrance of His knowledge in every place. For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing. To the one we are the aroma of death leading to death, to others the aroma of life leading to life. But who is sufficient for these things? We're not, as others, peddling the word of God; but in sincerity, as from God, we are speaking in God's sight in Christ." Paul's mood in verse 14 abruptly changes. I can't rest. The church was growing. I didn't want to be there. I only cared about you guys and what you were doing. And then he turns in verse 14, thank God. Thank God.

If you flip ahead in your Bible with me for just a second to Chapter 7, we are told in verse 5 something that kind of fits in here that I want you to see. Chapter 7, verse

5, where Paul says this: "For indeed, when we came to Macedonia, our bodies had no rest. We were troubled on every side. Outside there were conflicts, inside there was fear. Nevertheless God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, and not just by his coming, but also by the consolation with which he was comforted in you, when he told us of your earnest desire, of your mourning, of your zeal for me, I rejoiced all the more." When Paul finally did hook up with Titus, and we think in Philippi, the news was great. Well, things weren't perfect, as the letter that he wrote afterwards would suggest, but they were better. The fight wasn't over, but they were gaining ground. And though there was a kind of real passive kind of minority that was still standing against Paul's leadership and every word that he spoke the people were coming around. But you worry, because people that are easily moved can be moved again; right? The fickleness can certainly kick back in. So it was good news, but Paul felt it was important that he wrote this letter and encouraged them. So Paul, he's been discouraged, but, oh, he can't be but happy over the things that he hears and realizes that the Lord has been doing a work, and he shouldn't have had to worry so much, and the Lord always kind of comes through.

Which brings me to verse 14, because Paul uses the words "in triumph in Christ." And one of the things that you can learn from church history and also from Rome is there was a March through Rome during the time of the Roman occupation of the world called "The Triumph." And if you as a Roman general could meet stringent requirements, you could have your own parade through town and an arch built in your name and national recognition, and you would be honored forevermore as a guy that brought tremendous victory or triumph to Rome. You had to lead the battle yourself. The campaign had to be finished, the area had to be pacified, the troops had to be brought home. At least 5,000 of the enemy had had to have died or been captured. Land had to be gained. The victory had to take place on the land of the enemy, not like a civil war. But if you got that all worked out, then you were rewarded publicly. And the procession included a victorious general, who would be brought through the streets of Rome in purple robes and gold wheels on his chariot, pulled by four horses, surrounded with soldiers and musicians and trophies. Some POW's that were chained to your chariot that would be taken down and fed to the lion as part of the celebration and the glorying over the

enemy. There would be false priests who would be burning incense along the way, so the whole area would smell of this incense that was burned to the gods. And the family would follow. They would all yell, "The triumph, the triumph." It's the picture that Paul has in mind here. It's the one that he refers to. It's that picture that you get.

And Paul sees Jesus now, marching in triumph through the world and through the church in Corinth. He sees himself marching with Him, a triumphant parade that replaced the despair he had felt over the course of events there. God was going to win this thing. I should have known. We'd just preach clearly the word, and God's word, it always works. It's a fragrance that brings the smell and the knowledge of God to the world. I should have known better. We'd spent a long time there. But this is a victory that God had given to Paul and Paul understood.

If you go to Rome today there is an arch of Titus. It is still standing outside the Coliseum. It was built in honor of the General Titus, who with the 10th legion of the Roman army in 69 and 79 AD attacked Jerusalem, destroyed the temple sent the people packing for the next 1,878 years. Drove them out. A million people died in Jerusalem. And he came back holding a menorah in his hand, bringing captives with him. And so this Arch of Titus has a relief, the artwork and the carvings of him sitting on a horse riding through the town. It says "The triumph of Titus." And he's holding this menorah out for all to see, this is my victory, as they showed the people laying in the streets and the temple was laid down. And it's an amazing kind of artifact of what happened historically.

But for Paul, he uses that term to say, the Lord's leading us. Man, we're going to win. And all of the discouragement he'd felt, he now writes, we're going to triumph in Christ. We can't lose in Christ. Thank God who always causes us to triumph. The Commander in Chief was leading the parade and sin was defeated. Hell was defeated. Satan was defeated. God had won. There'd be setbacks, there'd be discouragement, but in the end the triumph was certain. And Paul he just turns the corner when he hears some good news. Oh, finally, finally. And then he realized the Lord was in charge all the time.

There's a verse in Chapter 11 of Revelation, verse 15,

where the seventh angel in Heaven speaks up loudly and he declares, "The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of the Lord and of His Christ, He's going to reign forever and ever!" That's going to happen, isn't it? Even though you suffer in the world, maybe have disappointments in ministry, that in the end you, have you read the whole book? You win in the end. The book ends up really good. The last chapter is killer. It is great. But you got to get to the last chapter.

So Paul, in thinking about it, he writes in Chapter 7, "Man, I felt so happy to see that Titus was: A, he was alive, he's well; and B, you guys are doing better. Oh, I'm so happy. Thank the Lord, He always gives us triumph in Christ."

And then he says of him and of us, we're always running around carrying the fragrance of God's knowledge in every place that we go. To some people they'll smell, and they'll come and be saved. To others, they'll see the knowledge of God, and they'll refuse it and go to their deaths. And Paul said, I don't know who's fit for that kind of a responsibility, where eternity is so linked, but then he said I'm not. But here's what we can do: We can just honestly share the Bible; and not like the peddlers, the false teachers who use it for their own benefit. As we share the gospel, as we go to the places God sends us, we're going to have victory in Christ. His Word will win out. His Spirit will win out. And rather than being discouraged, Paul came away from that meeting with Titus like, all right. It's going to be all right.

I love the words "in every place" at the end of verse 14. People sometimes say, "How's the best way to reach the world for Jesus?" Just smell good every place you go; right? Take God's mercy, take God's grace, take God's sacrifice in His son, and just go tell people what God has done. When Paul wrote to the Romans he said, "How can they believe in Him, they call on Him when they not have believed? And how can they believe in Him, of whom they haven't heard? And how're they going to hear of Him without a preacher? And how's the preacher going to show up unless he be sent? How blessed on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good tidings and glad tidings of good things." So Paul looked back over his life with the Corinthians. He was so discouraged about what had been going on. But then he realized we had been there for a long time, left a good fragrance of Jesus, and that

fragrance was going to last.

I love the words "in every place they can smell in us the things of God." Smells or odors are intrusive, aren't they? If you're going down the freeway with your windows up at 70 miles an hour and somewhere along the way a skunk was killed, you know it. You are going fast, "Ugh, that's a skunk." Someone's smoking a cigar, they can be half a mile away, you go, "That's a cigar." My grandmother had a favorite fragrance, and the older she got, the more she put on, because she couldn't smell it. Yeah, a little, half a gallon, gallon's got to be better; right? You'd hug her and smell like her for, like, a week. But she could literally walk in and out of a room, and three hours later you could walk in and go, Grandma's been here, right?

The same analogy is applied to us, except Paul's talking about the triumphant entry of the general that rides into town. These false pagan priests would just burn incense and the more the better. And everywhere you go, you'd smell it. If you were the general or one of the soldiers, every breath would go, oh, we're victors. And then that poor guy who's chained to the back of the chariot on his way to the death, every smell was, we're done. We're defeated. We can't win.

At Christian funerals so often, even though there are times of great sorrow, there's always an aroma of life. People aren't the same as they are when you go to a funeral where no one knows the Lord, and there's just somberness, and you look at your shoes and you don't know what to say, and you make stuff up to feel better. But there's that fragrance of death, but not around the believer.

So Paul was overwhelmed with the privilege and keenly aware of his unworthiness to be an aroma for Jesus, but he was so glad that God had used him. He wrote to the Corinthians in the first letter, "I'm the least of the apostles. I'm not worthy to be called one. I persecuted God's people, persecuted the church." He writes to the Ephesians, "I'm a minister by the grace of God, and His power is working in me, and it's just amazing." He talked in Timothy about being called by the Lord, enabled by the Lord, even though he was a blasphemer. He was so amazed that he could carry this fragrance of God's grace and of His mercy. And now he thinks about all of his

worries over this church that he hadn't seen for a long time, and realizes hearing from Titus that he had left behind the things that could bring life, that God wasn't done yet, that he shouldn't be so discouraged. It was a privilege. He'd been troubled.

Notice he says in verse 15 that it depends how people respond to what they hear and what they smell, I love the fragrance. What do you smell like? Maybe that's what we should call this study: What do you smell like? I didn't, but I should have. Darn it. Fragrance of life, fragrance of death; right? We share our lives, our testimony, the simple things of God. It's a fragrance of Jesus. It pleases Him; right? It pleases the Lord when we are willing to do that. We are pleasing in His sight. That's what Paul will say in chapter 5 here. We're pleasing the Lord.

So in the Roman parade, both the victor and the vanquished marched. Both of them were impressed with the smell of the incense. It meant different things to them. Some were saved, some were not, but we know that the word of God always goes out to accomplish God's purposes. It never goes out void. Peter would write to the church that is scattered, "He who believes in Him will by no means be ashamed. If you believe in Him, He's precious. If you're disobedient to Him, He's the stone which the builders have rejected. He's become a stone of offense, a stone of stumbling, and you're going to stumble because you are disobedient to the word, and you're headed to where you've been appointed."

So we really don't know what the fragrance of Jesus will accomplish. We had our baptism yesterday, and it was so sweet. It poured rain like crazy in the morning. We thought, oh, Lord. And it was beautiful in the afternoon. And lots of people came, lots of folks got baptized. We had three people give their lives to Christ. They came to watch others be baptized. They left with eternal life. I'm sure that there were other folks who were there with their families who left shaking their heads, didn't receive the Lord, weren't moved by it, but these three folks were. In fact, one lady got baptized right on the spot. I want to follow Jesus. It's kind of like the two thieves on the cross. They were equidistant from Jesus. They both heard the same thing, saw the same thing, had the same background, had the same needs, facing the same consequences, and one of them

wised up and the other one didn't. For one the fragrance of Jesus was for life; for another, of death.

But it isn't so much the fruit that mattered to Paul, it was the privilege of being that fragrance. You can't determine the outcome. You can't control the fruit, but you can be a witness. You can bear His name, and when people meet you, they'll go (sniff) "Jesus has been in here." And it was you, walking with the Lord, and many people will believe on Him.

And there will be unbelieving defiant folks that will not. But the same sun that now melts the wax hardens the clay. We really don't know what to do. So when Paul writes in verse 16, "Who's sufficient for these things?" Or literally, who's adequate? Who can take on a responsibility like that where eternity hangs in the balance for somebody's life, and what we do and what we say can influence the outcome, who would be sufficient for that? And Paul goes, Well, I'm not. In fact, just a couple of verses down here in our text, Paul will say, I'm not sufficient. I can't do this. I can't handle this. I don't know how to do this. Verse 5 of Chapter 3, "Not that we think we are sufficient of ourselves to think anything of ourselves, is being from ourselves, but our sufficiency comes from God." I know that the Lord can use me. And Paul was able to look back, and time and time again he would always say, the Lord is the one that could make things rich. I strive, I labor according to His power that works in me. And to the Ephesians, I think he said, "According to Your great power, I feel like I'm effective, I'm useful." And so are you and I. Which leads Paul to this declaration in verse 17, because he understands these things, that he's not sufficient of himself. He doesn't have the ability to make a difference eternally. He was reduced to simply being one who would deliver God's word and rely upon His Spirit.

So Paul goes after these false prophets and he said, "We're not like the peddlers of God's word." The word peddler, even in Greek, is a reference to a con artist or a street hawk, or someone who would try to deceive unwary buyers into purchasing cheap imitations of something. They use the Bible for their own good. There's a lot of guys on T.V. like this. They twist the scriptures to get you to send them money, to buy their stuff. They're all into it for themselves. But what they don't realize is, look, at the end of this people are going to hell or to

Heaven based on what God's word says. And Paul says, look, when there's this at stake, how could you be a peddler of God's word? And we're not.

What we do is we want to speak with sincerity. That means without wax, it's a combination of two words. It means to be inspected in the light; right? You get a pot, they covered a crack with wax, they paint it, you don't know it. You put it in the sun, it falls apart. But you would inspect it by holding it up to the light, because that wax would show through. So that's where the word "sincere" comes from. Paul says, look, I got nothing to hide. We just lay out God's word as we learn it. We speak from God, not from ourselves. And we realize that as we're speaking, God's listening. So we have lots of motivation to speak in the sight of God in Christ. We're just delivering His word, and we're trying to be as honest as we can be, and the result is we're fragrance to life for so many folks. People always tell me, "Well, I'm wondering how to lead somebody to the Lord." Just tell them what you know, share what you've learned. God's word is powerful. Be an example. Smell like the gospel that you carry. We're not sufficient for these things, but neither are we peddlers of God's word.

The stakes are high. People need to come to the Lord. Many people corrupt God's word today. It confuses people. But we shouldn't. Look, any false prophet can whittle down and twist the gospel for their own benefit, but to just be a true believer, where you share what God has done, that's enough. You don't have to be clever. You just have to be sincere. You're going to triumph in Christ by just holding out God's word faithfully. If we would all do that, the world could be touched. And we could triumph in Christ. We have the privilege to be a part of His eternal work, and we're like fragrances of His Son in the world. Some people will go, oh, I want that. Grandma's been here. Jesus has been here. Others will just walk away. Either way, we're insufficient, but God is not.

Paul felt real good getting this news from Titus, and I think he reflected upon the fact that the work that had gone before the faithful, God would bless that. And it would last.

We'll pick it up next week. So how do you smell? How do you smell?