

2 Corinthians 2:14-17

Introduction

Having spoken of suffering, and of what the Holy Spirit does in the Christian's life, Paul now speaks of the glory of the Christian life as we see how Christ gives such meaning and richness to it. The background is important, as it provides a valuable backcloth by which to see the glory of the jewels.

In this troublesome and difficult church, some were rejecting Paul's authority and forever criticizing him. He made a flying special visit, but it only made matters worse, and nearly broke his heart. Therefore he had written a severe and stern letter of rebuke, concerned that the ringleader should be disciplined. Then he heard good news about the ringleader's penitence, so Paul wants to stop further discipline and show him mercy. Till this news came, Paul was very restless and could not settle down to work. Then Titus told him the good news and he was at peace.

One troublemaker or quarrelsome person can cause enormous difficulties in the work of the Gospel. C.f. in society, a tiny minority can greatly disrupt society and the country. One person can absorb time, energy and money which is urgently needed elsewhere. Difficult and half-consecrated people can be a terrible drag on a church though they do not realize it, and cause difficulties when they do not pull their weight. How often a minister wishes people would grow up and mature in their Christian life. So much emotional energy, distress and time are used up, which ought to be devoted to reaching outsiders. Sometimes the trouble is not so much what people do, but what they do not do.

But Paul had at last got over this hurdle. Now there is a change in the tone of the letter. Up to this point, he has given a rather depressing account of his ministry – suffering, criticism, personal pain and restlessness. Now to balance the picture Paul strikes a positive note. He shows how God always and everywhere enabled him to carry out an effective ministry despite all the problems and difficulties. This very positive and thrilling side of Christian work becomes our concern now. It is a wonderful life being in Christ, and He enriches it, making it meaningful and so very worthwhile.

Life which is triumphant in Christ

**Thanks be to God who causes us to triumph in Christ** (A.V. 2 Corinthians 2:14).  
**Thanks be to God who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ** (N.I.V.).  
Here is a picture of a Roman triumph. The victorious Roman general is honoured by a triumph after a victorious campaign. The conditions of this award – to have completed the campaign, to have pacified the region, to have won some territory and killed at least 5000 men in one engagement. The triumph involved a procession through the streets of the city of Rome. The state officials would be there. Trumpeters would play. The spoils of war would be displayed, as well as pictures of the conquered land. A white bull would be sacrificed. Then the wretched captives he had conquered would be led out in chains, soon to be executed. They would be followed by officers,

musicians and priests. Then the victorious general, clad in purple with golden palm leaves, crown and sceptre, would come in a chariot drawn by four horses. He would be followed by his family, and then all the soldiers with their decorations, amidst shouting and triumphant cries. Cheering crowds lined the route from the Roman forum to the great Temple on Capitoline hill in Rome, where the sacrifice would be offered. It was a tremendous day, which most people could only expect to witness once in a lifetime.

In Paul's picture, the Lord is the conquering general triumphantly marching through the world. Paul himself is part of the procession, either as one of the Lord's soldiers or one of the captives, conquered by Christ, but now enabled to live triumphantly in Him. Even though there are setbacks in the Christian life, it is essentially triumphant and victorious. Not because of tremendous personal strength and willpower, but because God leads us in triumph. He has taken us, entered our lives with power, and leads us on and enables us. **He leads us in Christ** is the key to it all. We need to be aware of this important relationship and enjoy it, make it vital and real in the life.

Life will not be trouble-free, but in the troubles God will comfort us, i.e. not only sympathize, but make us adequate, overruling adversities for our good.

*“Since all that I meet shall work for my good,  
The bitter is sweet, the medicine is food.”*

(John Newton)

A mass of texts rush into the mind about this. **Hard pressed on every side, yet not crushed; perplexed but not in despair, persecuted but not forsaken** (2 Corinthians 4:8). **Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ... tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril or the sword** (Romans 8:35). **If God is for us, who can be against us** (Romans 8:31).

We will face difficulties and troubles, but as we realize our position of being “in Christ” God can turn the situation around, and it can become a stepping stone leading us higher and closer to Himself. He always (παντοε) does it. In the Philippian jail, after a beating, when their feet were put in stocks, **Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God** (Acts 16:25), such was their resilience. In Rome, as a prisoner, alone, deserted by those he counted on, Paul could testify, **The Lord stood with me and strengthened me** (2 Timothy 4:16,17). And we all know others from our personal experience who can witness to the same strengthening and sustaining power in the midst of suffering.

But it is only when there is personal submission to Christ that we share in His triumph. It is easy to sing the old hymn, “*On the victory side*”, but it is only if Christ is within can we claim to win the fight. He has first to triumph over us and bring us low before we can triumph in life.

Life which is glorious for Christ

**And through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of Him. For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To one we are the smell of death; to the other the fragrance of**

**life** (2 Corinthians 2:14-16). We go back to the procession going through the streets of Rome. The priests in the procession swing their censors with sweet-smelling incense burning in them. To the general and the victorious soldiers, the perfume of this incense is the perfume of joy and triumph, a reminder of the victory. But to the wretched slaves, the smell of the incense is a reminder of defeat and coming death, either by execution or in the arena where they would be the victims of wild animals or cruel gladiators.

Paul's point is that there should be a fragrance or aroma about the Christian, which arrests and compels attention. Christ is reigning in the heart, and that should be felt, people should be aware of it like a fragrance. To fellow believers, it is a delightful perfume in which they rejoice because it reminds them of Christ. But to the perishing the aroma is like the stench of death and doom, a reminder of what they have not got and what they have rejected, and what will therefore be their end. One group is encouraged, the other group is depressed. It is either welcome, or it is an embarrassing, disturbing irritation.

Christ, His Cross and His people have a divisive effect. They force people to a crossroads. The same heat which hardens clay, melts metal. The same sunlight which gladdens the healthy eye irritates the diseased eye. The Gospel which appeals to some, will raise opposition in others. Some are drawn to Christ, while others close their hearts against Him and stiffen their wills against His invitations. The Gospel is our salvation or our ruin. Men could never be neutral in Jesus' presence, nor nowadays in the presence of His followers from whom the same fragrance comes. **This is the condemnation that God has come into the world and men love darkness rather than light** (John 3:19). Whenever the Gospel is preached, however poor the preaching, some will rejoice because Christ is preached. It can be seen in earnest contented smiles on faces. And there will be those who will reject the message.

So there is this fragrance from the Lord to His people. What is it? It is not just about being correct, orthodox and upright. Nor is it cringing, crowning or servile. But it is a sweetness, attractiveness, grace that compels attention. God's grace, as well as power, seen in life. The lowliest life, when Christ is leading in triumph, will speak persuasively for Him. There will be new strength and tenderness which is deeper than neutral affection.

Do we not find this embarrassing? There may be much about us which seems straight and orthodox, but we would not describe ourselves as fragrant and attractive. Why? It is not that we don't try hard enough. The real root of the problem is in our self-will – something within us which has not yet made complete surrender to Him. "Not till He leads us unresistingly in triumph will the sweet savour go forth" (James Denny)

#### Life which is eloquent for Christ

**We do not peddle the word of God for profit... we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God** (2 Corinthians 2:17). Paul pleads his integrity and genuineness as Christ's servant. He is not in the business to make a living out of it, like many bogus preachers at that time. The word for peddle, *καπηλευω*, was used for tavern keepers or traders who used various devices and deceived customers for

profit. Like those who water down wine, some preachers water down the Gospel for their financial advantage. They compromise the message.

This can happen in any form of Christian work or service. Some avoid mentioning certain truths because they make them unpopular or lose the support of influential people. The main concern can become money, or feeding personal vanity, or parading learning to win applause, to gain a following. Thus making the Word minister to them, instead of ministering to the Word. It is sin to put any interest other than God in first place.

Paul was not going out of his way to be objectionable and ungracious, but he was determined to be faithful. He was aware he had a message from God to pass on intact and complete. The Holy Spirit within wanted to make known truth through him and his life. So this kept him true to his commission, whatever the cost, and whoever was upset. He spoke from the heart and was utterly sincere. A burden had been laid on him by God, and he preached as in His presence so that others felt it.

“You can take the story of my life and write it across the sky – I have nothing to hide” (C.H.Spurgeon). Hudson Taylor reminded every C.I.M. missionary that the secret of living for Christ was not found in effort and struggle, but “in complete surrender of whole being to Him, and constant looking to Him for grace.” Even when men reject the Gospel, they know when the messenger is utterly sincere and convinced of his message.

### Conclusion

No wonder Paul asks who is sufficient for such a calling and living such a life. The answer is “no one” – only a man who has turned away from himself and who has been made sufficient by Christ. Shortly in the next chapter Paul goes on to disclaim any competence in himself, only the competence of God, His grace, His Holy Spirit, calling and direction (2 Corinthians 3:5). All we need is in Him. Take eyes of self, and put them totally on Him.