

## IV. The Victory Parade

October 21/22/23, 2014

2 Corinthians 2:5-17

**Aim:** To smell the aroma of life while marching as forgiven members of the church community in the triumphal procession of Christ.

### A. The Process of Church Discipline (2 Corinthians 2:5-11)

One of the most difficult aspects of church life is the carrying out of spiritual discipline. The Bible leaves us in no doubt about its importance. The church's responsibility is not to judge those outside the church, but those inside (cp. 1 Cor. 5). Church discipline aims to promote the health of the whole church. Church discipline is an essential aspects of pastoral care. It begins with applications for church membership and is an important ground for establishing a church membership, rather than a casual relationship of belonging together.

#### 1. The Problem of Identification

##### a) *The Offender of 1 Corinthians 5*

Many commentators think that at verse 5 Paul is moving from the general to the particular and that he is thinking now of one man. If one person is in view, many think he is the incestuous man about whom Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 5. This is a real possibility, although this interpretation is not without problems. If this is Paul's meaning, the reference to sorrow (v. 7) suggests that the man concerned has shown true repentance, and that Paul is here counseling the Corinthian Christians to restore him to their fellowship. The fact that he had written to them about the matter (v. 9) would link up well with this, for it is quite natural to assume he is referring to what he has said in First Corinthians.

##### b) *The Offender Against Paul*

There is, however, another possibility, and this is argued by other commentators. There were people at Corinth who had been working against Paul. He is perhaps thinking here in general terms about such people (hence the somewhat vague 'if anyone') or he may have one in particular, perhaps a leader of the group, in mind. If this is so, there is little doubt that his readers would know who he was referring to. His references to his own forgiveness of this man, even though he plays down the wrong done to him somewhat, would suggest this interpretation. In this case, perhaps the reference to writing is in fact to the painful letter of verse 4 and not to 1 Corinthians 1 5. The context fits this second interpretation even better than the first, for Paul there shows his awareness of criticism directed against him personally. What for many commentators is decisive in favor of the 'opponent' theory and against the 'incestuous man' theory is Paul's comment in verse 10, 'if there was anything to forgive.' It is a positive character mark to play down an offense against ourselves, but definitely a negative one to dismiss lightly an offense such as incest, which is not only against God, as of course every sin is, but which involves grievous harm to another person.

When Paul learned from Timothy's visit to Corinth that there were troubles in the church, Paul paid the Corinthians an unscheduled visit, presuming that he would quickly fix things and be on his way. To his surprise, he was opposed to his face. Apparently a leader of the Corinthian church publicly assailed Paul while the church passively observed (cp. 12:11). The attacker evidently had come under the sway of Paul's opponents who had recently come to Corinth. As

## 2 Corinthians – Lesson 4

to the nature of the insults, we surmise that they had to do with Paul's integrity—namely, that he was dishonest and double-minded and lacking in courage. Also, it was likely charged or insinuated that he was appropriating the collection for the poor in Jerusalem for his own needs. Moreover, all this was probably laced with *ad hominem* comments about his ministerial effectiveness. In any event the humiliating surprise attack, coupled with a lack of support by the church, had so taken Paul aback that he elected to leave Corinth for a time.

It was in the wake of this rejection that Paul wrote his severe, painful letter, poignantly described in the opening verses of chapter 2. The letter did its work, as Paul reflects later in 7:8-13a. The majority of the Corinthians repented. And though it does not say what they did with the offender, the consensus is that they cast him from the fellowship of the church, because this best fits the following account and is consistent with a previously mentioned case of discipline in Corinth (cp. 1 Cor. 5:1-13). And glory to God, the offender repented and sought forgiveness. There was only one problem—the Corinthians hadn't forgiven him and had no desire to do so! How true to life, and the church universal! The church is loath to exercise church discipline against an unrepentant sinner. And then when it finally steps up to its responsibility and does it, it finds it difficult to forgive and restore the repentant sinner.

The apostle Paul understood the importance of forgiveness. In this passage he urged the Corinthians to forgive one of their number. This individual (his identity hidden by the terms 'any' in verse 5 and 'such a one' in verse 6) has apparently verbally and publicly assaulted Paul during the apostle's 'painful visit' to Corinth (see 2:1). Following Paul's instructions, the Corinthian church disciplined the sinning member and put him out of the fellowship. He had since repented, and not only did Paul forgive him, but he also instructed the Corinthians to do so too.

### 2. The Pain of Sin (2:5)

*<sup>5</sup>Now if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure—not to put it too severely—to all of you.*

Paul acknowledges that hurt had been caused by the sin committed. This was entirely appropriate. What grieves God should grieve us. When the Spirit of God is pained by what happens, so should we be.

The assault upon Paul had inflicted a church-wide pain that Paul carefully delineates. Paul's sensitivity here is implicit as he avoids naming the offender because identifying the culprit by name would not contribute to the man's desired restoration. And even more, Paul takes care to minimize his misery caused by his attacker; everyone had suffered pain when Paul was abused (cp. 11:29; 12:26). Clearly, there is a profound spiritual commonality between all true believers. For Paul, the church was central to Christian existence. Christians live in such profound relationship that the pain of one was truly felt by all. And the drubbing that Paul suffered was a misery for all.

The clause 'if any has caused sorrow' assumes the condition to be true. Paul acknowledged the reality of the offense and its impact on the church. Paul also acknowledged that the offended who assaulted him had caused sorrow, but he refused to take it personally (cp. 12:10). Paul defused the situation by insisting that the offender had not really caused sorrow to him. He was not bitterly resentful, nor did he seek vengeance on the one who had insulted him. Paul humbly rose above the offense and forgave the offender, refusing to see himself as a victim or to carry a

## 2 Corinthians – Lesson 4

grudge against the one who offended him. Paul also did not want ‘to say too much’ about the offense; he did not want to exaggerate it. Instead, he downplayed the incident and cautioned the Corinthians not to blow it up out of proportion. The man had repented; the incident was closed; and it was time to move on.

Paul would never have countenanced the free-riding ecclesiastical hitchhikers of today, much less the McChurch consumers who attend one church for the preaching, send their children to a second church for the youth group, and participate in another church’s small groups—people who live without commitment, without accountability, without discipline, without the Lord’s Table. Today’s church needs to take back the seriousness of the doctrine of the church and live out the profound mutuality of the Body of Christ. We must take to heart that the commitments of praying for the church, participating in the regular services and ministries of the church, supporting its ministries and missions with our resources, and submitting to the constituted leadership are not options but rather Biblical imperatives.

### 3. The Punishment by the Church (2:6)

*<sup>6</sup>For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough...*

The cause of all this suffering has been just one man! The ‘majority’ conveyed to the person what was probably the verdict of withdrawal from fellowship with him. Paul calls it a ‘punishment.’ His policy has borne fruit; as a result of his letter the Corinthian church as a whole has dealt with the matter. The ‘sorrowful’ letter has achieved what the ‘painful’ visit failed to achieve – a clear-cut unified response among the Corinthians (cp. 7:11). Again Paul’s pastoral sensitivity comes to the fore. The punishment—the extended exclusion from the church—has been ‘enough.’

*Epitimia* (‘punishment’) appears only here in the New Testament. Both its use in extrabiblical Greek writings and the context of this passage suggest *epitimia* refers to an official disciplinary act ‘by the majority:’ excommunication or dis-fellowshipping. The Corinthian congregation had officially acted and put the sinning individual out of the church. Apparently that discipline had had its desired effect, and the man had repented. It was time to forgive and restore him.

The offending member at Corinth had been punished. He may have been put out of fellowship (cp. 1 Cor. 5:2), or perhaps the privileges of church membership, such as sharing in the Lord’s Supper, had been withdrawn from him until he proved his repentance. If he held any office or responsibility in the church, that privilege would have been removed from him. The task of those exercising church discipline is to determine the most appropriate punishment.

Paul’s words suggest that the decision was not unanimous. That may often be the case. Unanimity is a great blessing, but we must not demand it to the point that we do nothing whatsoever without it. Nevertheless, the decision of the majority is to be followed, since God gives His people corporate wisdom as they look to Him.

The phrase ‘the majority’ is quite revealing, for it shows there were still disagreements among the Christians there, presumably due to the fact that the party spirit so evident when Paul wrote First Corinthians was not completely a thing of the past. It also may suggest that, in a church living in a cultural environment that was deeply ungodly, some had not yet grasped how important it was for the church to maintain high standards of conduct.

## 2 Corinthians – Lesson 4

### 4. The Penitence of the Offender (2:7)

<sup>7</sup>...so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.

Some of the Corinthians believed that the individual who had insulted Paul needed to suffer further before being restored. But Paul disagreed, and insisted that on the contrary the Corinthians ‘should rather forgive and comfort him.’ His pain had brought him to repentance, and now it was time to restore his joy. The church cannot set arbitrary limits on grace and mercy; it cannot reject a truly penitent individual, no matter how serious the sin was.

What steps then are they to take? They are to forgive this man. Paul mentions pain often in verses 1-7. His stress on this is now replaced (in verses 7-10) by an emphasis on forgiveness. The references to comforting him and reaffirming their love to him clearly show that their forgiveness is not to be half-hearted, but full and final. It is to be a true expression of love and therefore to lead to a completely restored fellowship. In this case the act of discipline has had its divinely intended effect.

Paul evidently feels God’s purpose in the act of discipline has now been fulfilled. It seems clear from verse 7 that the man at fault must have shown signs of genuine repentance. A local church should pray for such repentance and be willing to recognize the signs of it. Paul was concerned lest the man should be ‘overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.’ An act of discipline does not mean the church and its leaders now wash their hands of the offender. Far from it! Their concern for him should in fact reach new depths.

Positively, the Corinthian congregation needed to ‘comfort him.’ ‘Comfort’ translates the familiar New Testament word *parakaleō*, which means, ‘to come alongside,’ ‘to strengthen,’ or ‘to encourage.’ Paul feared that ‘otherwise such a one might be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow,’ not only the sorrow of his punishment, but also the sorrow caused by the Corinthians’ continued rejection of him. *Katapinō* (‘overwhelmed’) is variously translated in the New Testament as ‘swallow’ (2 Cor. 5:4; Mt. 23:24; 1 Cor. 15:54), ‘drown’ (Heb. 11:29), and ‘devour’ (1 Pe. 5:8). God does not want believers to be totally consumed by the grief caused by their sin. After sorrow has done its convicting work, it is to be replaced by joy.

Paul was concerned that the punishment, or the spirit in which it was given, had been too severe. ‘Overwhelmed’ is the word used of Satan devouring people as a line (1 Pe. 5:8), or of the waters of the Red Sea causing the Egyptians to be drowned (Heb. 11:29). Here it is used of a person’s mental or spiritual state, since the individual may be filled with the despair of hopeless repentance.

Sorrow is a right response to our sin and part of our repentance concerning it. Overwhelming sorrow, however, that means we despair of being forgiven, and of ever putting things right, is not what God wants or what we should desire. Church discipline must be tempered with mercy. With the punishment the hope must be held out of repentance and restoration to fellowship.

Paul’s fear that the offender ‘may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow’ conjures up the picture of a terrible end because ‘overwhelmed’ is literally ‘to swallow up’ and is an allusion to the judgment of Korah when Moses prophesied that the earth would swallow up the rebellious (cp. Num. 16:31-34). Paul sensed that the excommunication had left the man so drowning in despondent sorrow that he was in danger of being sucked down into the earth in death. Perhaps he was even contemplating suicide.

## 2 Corinthians – Lesson 4

Again, this poor excluded man understood the mountainous doctrine of the church. And he could not bear to live apart from the benefits and comforts of the Body of Christ. He feared for his own soul. How unlike some people who blithely brush off church discipline and travel a few miles to another church where they continue on without history and accountability and fear of God.

### 5. The Petition for Restitution (2:8)

<sup>8</sup>*So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him.*

The corporate nature of Christianity comes out clearly in the passage. Paul's words are addressed not only to individuals, but also to the church whose members minister to one another by their gifts. Lively and open relationships provide the best context for the word of God to work out its purposes among us. Therefore, he exhorts them to restore the now-penitent man.

It would appear that the Corinthians may have maintained their punishment for too long. They need to reaffirm their love to him, the love that God puts in our hearts for one another as members of His family. Paul assures the Corinthians that he identifies with them in their forgiveness. What others have forgiven, we must forgive.

For Paul, forgiveness was of paramount importance for the sinner and for the church, and he concludes the thought by saying, 'So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him'—by a formal act of the congregation. Paul did not merely beg the Corinthians to forgive the sinner—he viewed it as a matter of obedience. Obedience to God's Word demands doing the hard work of church discipline, and then the hard work of forgiving.

In its only other New Testament appearance, *kuroō* ('reaffirm') speaks of formally ratifying a covenant (Gal. 3:15). The Corinthians had officially and publicly disciplined the offender (v. 6). Now they needed to conclude the matter by publicly and lovingly restoring him to the fellowship. By so doing they would display their collective as well as individual affection for him.

*Agapē* ('love') is the love of choice, of will, of humble service to others. It is the love not of sentimental feelings but of action (cp. 1 Cor. 13:4-7). Love is essential in the life of the church. At its core, unforgiveness is a lack of love. Forgiveness, on the other hand, fulfills the royal law of love (cp. James 2:8). Forgiving love is a precious jewel, a rich treasure in the life of the church. Without it, churches are torn, split, and fragmented. Churches that faithfully practice church discipline must also forgive penitent sinners.

### 6. The Purpose for Writing (2:9)

<sup>9</sup>*For this is why I wrote, that I might test you and know whether you are obedient in everything.*

One reason Paul wrote the severe letter between 1 and 2 Corinthians was so that he might put the Corinthians to the test and see whether they would be 'obedient in all things.' Whether they were willing to forgive would be a real test of whether the Corinthians' hearts were right before God. The Corinthians had proven themselves obedient by disciplining the offenders. Forgiving him and receiving him back into the fellowship would also be proof of their obedience.

Paul put the Corinthian church to the test to see if they would both discipline and forgive. Unlike most churches today, the Corinthian church passed both tests. They did the hard work of confronting sin; they also obeyed Paul's command to graciously forgive and restore the sinning

## 2 Corinthians – Lesson 4

individual. As Titus discovered and reported to Paul, the Corinthians had obeyed the apostle and forgiven the offender (cp. 7:12-15). Out of the chaos and confusion of their turbulent past had come an obedient church.

### 7. The Presence of Christ (2:10)

<sup>10</sup>*Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. Indeed, what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ...*

To clinch his appeal to forgive the offender, Paul cites his own example as a model for the Corinthians in verse 10. Just as Paul had minimized the pain that the offender caused him, he minimizes his own forgiveness of the man with the dismissive ‘if I have forgiven anything,’ as if it were no big deal. The implicit message was, ‘I, the offended, did it, and you can do it too.’ The fact was, if the Corinthian church refused to forgive the penitent sinner, a poison would clog the way of grace. The Corinthians’ refusal to forgive could have killed the church. The church was already suffering from its corporate mercilessness.

Paul’s agreement with the majority’s decision to forgive the offender demonstrated his humility. Once again, the apostle downplayed the offense against him. His primary concern was for the fellowship to be restored and for there to be unity in the Corinthian church. Thus, he forgave the individual primarily for the Corinthians’ sake.

The power to forgive was given to Paul ‘in the presence of Christ’ (literally, ‘in the face of Christ’), as Christ looked on in approval and empowerment. Jesus Christ taught that unwillingness to forgive is evidence of not having experienced His forgiveness (cp. Mt. 6:12, 14-15). By invoking the lordship of Christ, Paul also focuses our hearts on Christ as the one who not only demands that we forgive but empowers us to do so.

### 8. The Plans of Satan (2:11)

<sup>11</sup>*...so that we would not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs.*

Paul concludes his plea to forgive the sinner with the hard reality that an unforgiving heart has been duped by Satan. If they had let the repentant sinner stew in his despondency, they would have cooked their own souls. And Satan could then have put a fork in the church of Corinth.

Satan, who is every ready to destroy churches, will, in the absence of love and forgiveness, quickly bring bitterness and division. If church discipline is insufficient, Satan is delighted because sin is then minimized, and perhaps even encouraged. If church discipline is too severe, however, it may lead the offending individual to desperation and perhaps apostasy.

Satan’s goal for the church is the opposite of God’s. If sin is confronted, Satan wants it done so in a harsh, graceless, merciless manner. Both failing to deal with sin and failing to forgive repentant sinners can destroy a church. An unforgiving spirit plays right into the devil’s hands and gives him the leverage he needs to split a church apart.

## B. The Procession of Christ’s Triumph (2 Corinthians 2:12-17)

### 1. Troubled in Troas (2:12-13)

These verses may surprise the Christian reader somewhat. If Paul had found an opening for the gospel in Troas and was fully persuaded that God had given it to him, why did he let anything

## 2 Corinthians – Lesson 4

deter him from exploiting it fully? The tension that may be set up for a Christian worker between his evangelistic and his pastoral concerns is not always easy to resolve.

### *a) The Opened Door (2:12)*

<sup>12</sup>*When I came to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ, even though a door was opened for me in the Lord...*

Troas, although scarcely mentioned by surviving documents of the ancient world, appears in the New Testament as a transit city for travel between northern Greece and Asia Minor. It was a seaport on the Aegean Sea in western Asia Minor, located in the province of Mysia near the mouth of the Dardanelles. It was about ten miles from the famous city of Troy, for which it was named. Troas was founded in 300 BC, and Emperor Augustus had granted it the coveted status of a Roman colony.

Poor Paul had been so taken aback by the surprise opposition during his second visit to the church in Corinth that though he was the church's founder, he cut short his visit and retreated to Ephesus where he wrote a tearful, severe reproach to the Corinthians. Then, anxious to hear how they had received it, he dispatched Titus to Corinth to find out and traveled to Troas where they had agreed to rendezvous.

Paul arranged to meet Titus in Troas to hear how the Corinthians had respond to his letter. It may be that he had been planning for some time to come there 'to preach the gospel of Christ.' His forced withdrawal from Ephesus had provided him with the opportunity to do so. Troas, then, would be the place to which Titus was to bring the Corinthians' reply to Paul. (The arrangement appears to have been that if Titus had not come before winter closed the seas to shipping they would meet in Macedonia.)

The serious riot in Ephesus (Acts 19:23-41), sparked by Paul's fearless preaching of the gospel, may have prompted the apostle's departure for Troas. But more important, Paul hoped to meet Titus there. Paul had sent him to Corinth to find out how the church there had responded to 1 Corinthians and, especially, to the 'severe letter' (see 2:3-4). Anxiously awaiting Titus's report, Paul feared the worst, and his heart was heavy with concern. The apostle knew that Titus would pass through Troas on his way back to Ephesus from Corinth. Unable to wait any longer, Paul went there hoping to meet him and get his report sooner.

Paul had passed through Troas before, on his second missionary journey (Acts 16:8-11). On that visit, however, the apostle apparently did not found a church. When Paul visited Troas on his way back from Macedonia and Corinth, there was a church there (Acts 20:6-12). Therefore, it seems likely that he founded the church at Troas on this visit. While waiting for Titus, Paul as he did whenever he had the opportunity, preached the gospel of Christ. His mission in going to Troas included evangelization, not merely meeting Titus.

It was there that Paul had his dream of the man from Macedonia (Acts 16:8-10) and where he restored Eutychus to life (Acts 20:5-11). Paul's going to Troas was part of his obedience to his Master's commission. When Paul writes of saying 'goodbye to them' (v. 13), it is clear that there were at least some Christians in Troas.

When Paul arrived in Troas he found 'a door was opened ... in the Lord' for him. By this he presumably mean that people welcomed him and were ready to listen. The apostle commonly used that phrase to describe ministry opportunities (cp. 1 Cor. 16:8-9; Acts 14:27; Col. 4:3). As in Philippi, the Lord opened people's hearts to receive the gospel.

## 2 Corinthians – Lesson 4

As he waited in Troas, his ministry flourished remarkably. We know this because an open door is the same metaphor used to describe his extraordinary ministry in Ephesus—founding the church and spreading the gospel throughout Asia (cp. 1 Cor. 16:8-9; Acts 19:1-10). The ministry in Troas burgeoned while Paul waited and waited—and this doubled his anxiety. He was desperate to hear from Titus, and reluctant to leave the work of God—he was torn.

### *b) The Restless Spirit (2:13)*

<sup>13</sup>...*my spirit was not at rest because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I took leave of them and went on to Macedonia.*

Titus, in all probability converted through Paul, enjoyed a close relationship with the apostle. He will refer to him as ‘my partner and fellow worker’ in his labors among the Corinthians (8:23). God had given Titus, like Paul, a deep and affectionate concern for the Corinthians (8:16; 7:15). In this letter Paul reveals how dejected he had been – in Ephesus (1:8), in Troas (2:13), and in Macedonia (7:5). When God restored Paul it was by means of the arrival of his good friend Titus and through his encouragement. Loyal Christian friends are treasure beyond price; Titus is an admirable model.

Why his lack of peace? There could have been more than one reason. Titus was a member of his team. Perhaps he was anxious about his safety. A responsible leader must always have a pastoral concern for his team members. Also he was deeply troubled about the situation at Corinth and probably found it hard to concentrate until he got news of it. The later passage in 7:2-7) may be the key to our understanding of this one. Paul was no super-man but a normal human being and one deeply sensitive to the welfare of others (cp. 11:28).

The turmoil and discontent of his heart were debilitating and threatened to close the door that was opened for ministry at Troas. His intense concern for the Corinthian church raised troubling questions in his mind. Would they affirm their love for him? Or would they follow the false apostles? Paul’s heart ached because he did not know the answer to those questions, and as a result he had no freedom to minister. Until he heard from Titus, the apostle feared the worst. He was so burdened by the situation at Corinth that he lost interest in the open door of ministry at Troas. So he headed for the province of Macedonia, bordering the northwest shore of the Aegean Sea, north of Achaia.

There were a lot of marbles at stake for Paul because he realized that if matters didn’t get straightened out in Corinth, the future of that whole apostolic church was jeopardized. So Paul waited on pins and needles for Titus’s return. Finally, when he could no longer stand the torment, he said good-bye to the open door. And even when he got to Macedonia, the anguish continued (cp. 7:5). Paul even became depressed in Macedonia (cp. 7:6)! This was a tough, tough time for the apostle.

Paul means for us to understand that concern for the Corinthians was the chief source of his anxiety. This is another example of Paul laying bare his inner emotional life to the Corinthians (cp. 1:8; 2:4). It is possible that Paul makes these disclosures deliberately so that the readers will understand the reality of his weakness, as opposed to the dazzling image of powerful self-sufficiency projected by his opponents. For Paul, integrity (4:2) and reality, even reality about weakness, were fundamental to the gospel.

His zeal for the gospel brought him to Troas, but his passionate concern for the Corinthians kept him from staying there, despite the opportunities for preaching the gospel that now existed.

## 2 Corinthians – Lesson 4

Significantly, Paul revisited Troas a year later when finally withdrawing from the region. On that occasion he remained for seven days (Acts 20:6). Perhaps God kept the door open?

### 2. Triumphant in Christ (2:14-17)

What happened next? On arriving in Macedonia, did he find Titus? How had the Corinthians responded to the letter? Having aroused our interest, Paul, for reasons that are unclear, leaves us in suspense. Rather, he will engage in a long digression about the apostolic ministry of the New Covenant. Not until 7:5 will he resume his narrative and say what happened when he came to Macedonia.

This is where the so-called ‘Great Digression’ begins. You may have noticed, in reading Paul’s epistles, that he moves away sometimes from his main argument and writes for a little while about some other issue, before returning to his main line of thought. This is a characteristic of his style. This phenomenon usually seems to occur when he pens a word or phrase that fires his imagination. His heart becomes so filled with wonder and praise that he simply must put into writing the thoughts evoked by that wonder. This means such digressions are often very rich. The digression here, by far the longest to be found in Paul’s writings, does not end until 7:4. Its subject is the Christian ministry, its principles and its practice, and it is the fullest exposition of the nature and implications of that ministry in his letters.

This part of his letter is immensely valuable for anybody doing Christian work, whether as a pastor or missionary, a Sunday school teacher, or youth club leader. It is also full of instruction and challenge for any Christian seeking to witness for Christ in his home or place of work. This means of course that it is of real value for us all, as we are all called to Christian service. We should not, however, view it simply as a digression. After all, it is approximately a third of the whole letter, and it must surely be linked to the reasons for Paul’s writing of the letter as a whole.

Paul now introduces the shadowy figures of his newly arrived opponents, whom he refers to as ‘many’ (2:17) and as ‘some’ who ‘need letters of recommendation’ (3:1). At no time in the letter does he address them directly. It appears from what he writes that they have made many criticisms about Paul to the Corinthians.

Paul uses this brief account of his tough time in Troas to set up a mighty restatement of his central theme in verse 14.

#### *a) The Triumph of Christ (2:14a)*

*<sup>14</sup>But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession...*

Verse 14 marks an abrupt change in Paul’s attitude and he launches into thanks to God. The joyous picture of the triumphal procession is in sharp contrast with the discouragement Paul expressed in verses 12 and 13. He figuratively went from the pit of despair to the exhilaration of marching in a triumphal parade. Paul’s confident hope was that ‘God ... always leads’ believers, through every circumstances of life. No matter what trials or persecutions he endured in Corinth, Ephesus, or anywhere else he ministered, Paul rejoiced that God was in control. The apostle never lost his sense of wonder at privilege of belonging to the ranks of the sovereign Lord, of marching behind the Commander in Chief in His Triumph.

## 2 Corinthians – Lesson 4

### (1) Roman Triumphs

Paul employs a most striking analogy based on Roman military practice, one that would be immediately recognized and appreciated in a Roman city like Corinth. The Greek word *thriambeuein* translated ‘leads...in triumphal procession is the key to this, and its background is most illuminating. A general and his army have won a notable victory over the enemies of Rome. The general makes contact with the Senate in Rome, and asks permission to have an official triumph. If this is granted, he will proceed with his victorious troops and his notable captives to a spot some miles from the capital city, and there arrange all the personnel in order. He will of course be leading the way, riding with considerable pomp in his ceremonial chariot. Behind him will come his victorious troops who will be anticipating a reward and also the captives who will be going to their execution. Sacrifices would be offered to the gods of Rome when the procession reached its destination. In connection with the procession, there were people scattering incense, so that its fragrance would herald the arrival of the victorious general and get the crowds ready to give a mighty cheer when he came into sight.

The Roman ‘triumphal procession’ of Paul’s day was the result of a long development that went back to the pre-Roman Etruscan dynasties. A triumph of the first order featured the conquering general riding in a triumphal chariot drawn by four horses (and in some triumphs, even elephants). He was clothed in a purple toga and a tunic stitched with palm fronds. In his hand he carried a scepter crowned by an eagle, and his face was tinted red in reference to the god Jupiter.

The general picture is of a Roman victory procession. Military leaders were granted a public victory procession (*triumphas*) through Rome only after winning major battles. The most spectacular procession of the first century was the celebration of the conquest of the Jews when, in AD 71, the Emperor Vespasian and his son Titus rode in chariots through the streets of Rome behind their pathetic prisoners of war. Josephus, the Jewish historian, records this at length (*Jewish War* vii, 132-157), and it is also depicted on the Titus Arch in Rome, where it may still be seen. It is not clear whether Paul sees himself as the conquering general or as his captive. A case can be made for both, though the apostle as a captive slave seems more likely.

### (2) Paul – Victorious Soldier?

In the present context, the triumphal procession must represent the progress of the gospel of Christ. Despite his change of plan, the gospel continues to progress, and so in this way God has over-ruled the situation for His glory. There is a somewhat similar passage in his letter to the Philippians, where he says that what had happened to him – that is, his imprisonment – had actually turned out for the advancement of the gospel (Phil. 1:12ff.).

Are the followers of Christ, and of course the apostle himself, pictured here as his victorious troops or as vanquished foes? Commentators hold both views, and it is not easy to decide between them, for both interpretations can be support.

In favor of the ‘victorious troops’ interpretation is the fact that the context is an expression of thanks to God. This might suggest that Paul is here thinking of Christians as members of the victorious army of Christ. Calvin is among the commentators who have thought this. For example, MacArthur writes, ‘Paul proclaimed that God leads believers in triumph in Christ. They follow the all-conquering Commander in the victory parade, sharing in the triumph of His decisive victory over sin, death, and hell. There is, however, a problem with this. The same

## 2 Corinthians – Lesson 4

general analogy occurs in Colossians 2:15 and possibly also in 1 Corinthians 4:9 and both these passages feature defeated foes.

### (3) Paul – Vanquished Subject

In Paul's day, triumphal processions were conducted with grand theatrical pomp, always with a train of conquered subjects in a vast vanguard. The question is, what did this picture of the triumphal procession mean to Paul—how did he see himself in relation to it? The answer is, not as a victorious soldier (as some have thought), but as a conquered subject! Startling as this idea may be, the application goes beyond that to the frankly shocking—because conquered enemies—or a representative group of them) were put to death at the end of the processional as a sacrifice to the Roman gods. Thus Paul viewed himself as *God's captive being led to death*. This is confirmed by the only other occurrence of the Greek word translated 'triumphal procession' in the New Testament, in Colossians 2:15 where God, having conquered the rulers of this age, has let them in triumphal procession and a public display of their destruction.

This verse and Colossians 2:15 are linked by the presence in both of the verb *thriambeuein* ('to triumph' or 'to lead in triumph'), a word occurring nowhere else in the New Testament. There is no instance in extant literature of this period of the use of the verb in relation to victorious troops. It is always about defeated foes. In Colossians, this is certainly the way it is used. This shows the great divine irony of the gospel. The crucifixion appeared on the surface to have been a victory for the enemies of Jesus, but in fact it was the reverse.

Some have argued however, that Paul is not likely to have applied the same picture quite differently here, picturing Christians, not the Satanic forces, as defeated foes. If this interpretation is a problem for us, it is perhaps because we have not sufficiently faced the fact that, prior to knowing Christ as Savior, we were rebels against God, and therefore could be thought of as members of the devil's army. Paul's 'defeat,' then, was his conversion on the Damascus Road. If this seems strange for Paul to picture himself and other Christians in this way, we should remember that there is plenty of irony and paradox in this epistle.

The bottom line is this: suffering/death (which is part and parcel with the cross) is the very thing God uses to make Himself known. Therefore, Paul's driving point is that his suffering, pictured here as being led to death in the Roman procession, is the medium through which God is revealing Himself.

### (4) Triumphalism

The word 'triumphal' is critical to this section. It may be that the new teachers in Corinth presented themselves as sweeping all before them as they triumphantly captured the Gentile churches for Moses and the Old Covenant (cp. 10:13-15). To them, Paul with his recent reversals in Corinth and Ephesus and with his message of a crucified Messiah was a sorry, defeated figure, the embodiment of weakness compared with their self-sufficient power.

For his part, Paul consistently applies anti-triumphalist language to his ministry throughout this letter. He is the Corinthians' servant, a dying man, 'weak,' and a fool (4:5, 11; 11:29; 12:11). The newcomers' ministry, like their Christ, was characterized by a this-worldly triumphalism. His ministry, like his Christ, was characterized by crucifixion. This has serious implications for the way Christians think and speak about their faith. 'Triumphalism' in all its forms is excluded by the studied remarks of the apostle Paul within this letter. What is important to God is not

## 2 Corinthians – Lesson 4

‘bigness’ – of church buildings, or of the numbers who gather there – but faithful and sacrificial service, based on the example of Christ Himself.

### *b) The Fragrance of Christ (2:14b)*

*„and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere.*

The burning of incense along the victory route was part of the ceremonial of the Roman triumph. The sense of smell, as well as of sight and hearing, was involved in the splendor of the occasion. Although Paul rejects triumphalism, his ministry is not without effect. If incense impinges on the senses, even though invisible, so too Paul’s ministry makes its presence felt.

The ‘sweet aroma’ of the Triumph arose from the incense-filled censers carried by the priests in the parade and from the garlands of flowers that were thrown in the streets. God uses human preachers to give off the sweet aroma of the gospel, to influence people with the saving knowledge of Christ.

As to the effectiveness of this ministry, it is diffuse and universal. The triumphal procession (during which the incense offered to the gods wafted over the processional) left its aroma lingering over the spectators long after the parade had passed by. So it was with the fragrance of Paul’s ministry, so redolent with suffering and death. The apostolic procession smelled of God and His lingering grace. So it is when your life bears the crushed fragrance of suffering and daily death. As God led Paul in triumphal procession, the fragrance of God is wafted over the ancient world. It could not be shut out. Grace lingered in its train.

Our Lord Jesus won the victory over all His enemies by His cross and resurrection. As we, His servants, preach the gospel – that is to say, exercise the ministry of the new covenant – we proclaim His victory and gather to Him the great company of people of every nation whom the Father has promised Him.

Perhaps you have been sensing the dissonance of this as it interfaces with life around us—it is all so contrary to how we would like to consider the Christian life and Christian ministry. We would much prefer riding in the chariot with the conquering general (God Himself!) while the fragrance of our triumph wafts out to the masses and gospel tracts rain down on the fortunate. But that is not the way it happens—the gospel emanates from our weaknesses and death.

Regarding Christian ministry, whom do most people prefer to follow? What train do they readily jump on? Surely not that of the weak and dying. The preferred train is that of personality and performance and success. The ‘successful’ ministry rides on *savoir faire* and a message dependent on technique and technology and knowing how to create ‘worship environments’ and effect the latest in corporate management. Such ministry leaves no place for Christ because our Lord said, ‘Take up your cross and follow me.’ The fragrance of Christ can only come through being led in triumphal procession as captives of the cross.

### *c) The Aroma of Christ (2:15-16a)*

*<sup>15</sup>For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, <sup>16</sup>to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life.*

The thought of incense introduced in verse 14 is further developed as Paul uses a fresh word for fragrance that is here rendered ‘aroma’ or ‘sweet aroma,’ sometimes used as a woman’s name, Euodia (cp. Phil. 4:2). As faithful followers of Christ, Paul and the apostles were the sweet

## 2 Corinthians – Lesson 4

aroma of Christ rising up to God, irrespective of the human response to their message. As they preached, the smoke of Christ's sacrifice ascended to God, well pleasing to Him. Thus, the primary audience in Heaven was glorified.

Paul pursues the imagery of fragrance, though he changes it from the incense of the Roman triumph to the 'aroma' associate with the burnt offerings of the Old Testament (cp. Lev. 2:12). The point of the metaphor is that, although the 'word of God' (v. 17) is also invisible, there is no doubting its effects.

When he uses the phrase, 'to God,' he may also have in mind the burnt-offerings of the Old Testament, for these are described in Leviticus as 'an aroma pleasing to the Lord' (Lev. 1:9), because they showed the obedience of His people. Paul says, 'We are to God the aroma of Christ,' so we see that it is not simply the message but the messengers who are Christ's aroma, for they reveal His character.

But the aroma also had a horizontal and mutually exclusive effect upon the people who heard. The smell of incense would have had different connotations to the victors and to the captives in the procession—namely, life and death. The apostolic witness would be 'a fragrance from life to life' for those who believed and 'a fragrance from death to death' for those who rejected it (cp. Lk. 2:34; Jn. 3:36).

Paul likens the preacher's ministry to a fragrance of Christ to God. Although a preacher proclaims the gospel to men, it is in reality God who is his audience. His faithful gospel ministry causes the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Christ to be manifest to people, but the fragrance of that gospel ministry ascends to the very throne of God. Paul's preaching had a twofold effect on the people who heard it. To 'those who are being saved,' the fragrance of apostolic preaching was 'an aroma from life to life.' These are the elect and redeemed people of God, who are headed for full and final glorification. On the other hand, the same message was to 'those who are perishing'—those unbelieving sinners destined for eternal damnation—'an aroma from death to death.' In the Roman Triumph, both the victors, who were to be honored, and the vanquished, who were to be executed, smelled the aroma from the priests' censers. To the former, it symbolized their victory; to the latter, their impending deaths.

The fragrance of v. 14 and aroma of v. 15 are all part of the picture. As a Roman triumph progressed, priests filled censers with burning incense. This meant life to the victorious soldiers because they were sharing in their leader's triumph, but it meant death to the captives heading for the arena.

To some, the gospel is just a message about a defeated, dead man which they reject in the same way a person would recoil from the odor of a decomposing corpse. These people are 'perishing,' as dead in principle as they perceive Christ to be. To others, however, the message is about the risen Christ which they receive in the way a person welcomes the fragrance of a beautiful perfume. These people are being saved; they are as alive in principle as they perceive Christ to be.

How did Paul feel when his hearers did not receive the word of God? It is apparent that he made strong efforts to persuade people to respond positively to his message. Jesus wept over Jerusalem even though its people would demand his death (Lk. 19:41). Paul experienced 'great sorrow and unceasing anguish' towards his fellow Jews even though they had caused him such

## 2 Corinthians – Lesson 4

heartache and suffering (Rom. 9:2). Do we weep like Jesus or, like Paul, feel deep anguish about the indifference of our fellow countrymen towards Christ?

### *d) The Sufficiency of Christ (2:16b)*

*Who is sufficient for these things?*

The sacrificial lifestyle of the messenger is an extension of the ministry and death of Jesus Himself. It is not too much to say that the message about Christ is encountered and received (or rejected) in the person of the messenger. The message incarnated in the messenger is a fragrance of life to those who obey it, but to others it has the odor of death. The notion that others reach their decisions about Christ, for salvation or destruction, on account of those in whom the message is embodied is so onerous that Paul exclaims: ‘Who is equal to such a task?’ Later he will reply to his question with the affirmation, ‘our competence comes from God’ (3:5).

Given the call to follow Christ in His triumphal procession, captive to death, emblematic of suffering and weakness, and given the life-and-death effect of following Christ, the question naturally rises, ‘Who is sufficient for these things?’ The automatic response is, ‘No one!’ Paul would never claim self-sufficiency, but further, his sufficiency was in Christ.

No wonder Paul exclaims, ‘Who is sufficient for these things?’ To have the gospel committed to us for the world’s benefit is an onerous responsibility. No one ‘is adequate’ with his human ability to render appropriate service to almighty God. Human resources are insufficient to influence people for eternity. Paul repeatedly acknowledged his inadequacy to carry out divine ministry.

It is not surprising that Paul cries out, ‘Who is equal to such a task?’ The work is so holy and the issues of it so solemn that such a response is natural. In fact, it is to be expected. We need great confidence in the gospel God has committed to us, but not in ourselves.

### *e) The Ministers of Christ (2:17)*

*<sup>17</sup>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.*

#### (1) The ‘Many’ (2:17a)

Paul now mentions for the first time his opponents, who will reappear throughout the letter (3:1; 4:2; 5:12; chs. 10-13). His lack of reference to them in those sections that refer to the ‘painful’ visit and the ‘sorrowful’ letter (1:23-2:11; 75-16) suggests they had not yet arrived in Corinth at the time of Paul’s ‘painful’ visit. They appear to have arrived since then, so Paul would have known of them only through the report of Titus.

Paul affirmed his sufficiency *negatively* and *positively*. Negatively, he declared, ‘For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God’s word.’ This denial was pointed at his detractors who actually did trade in the Word because the word ‘peddle’ references traders who would dilute their wine with water or use false weights—all suggesting tampering with the Word or watering it down for personal gain. Paul never watered down God’s word to make it more palatable. He never looked to see which way the wind was blowing. He never practiced the homiletics of consensus. He never held back.

Paul now places the ministries of these newcomers side by side with his own. They – ‘many,’ implying a group – both adulterate and profit from the ‘word of God.’ The verb used of these

## 2 Corinthians – Lesson 4

‘peddlers’ was used of wine hawkers who watered down the pure vintage to make fraudulent profits. The implication is that these persons were receiving (excessive?) payment from the Corinthians in return for a diluted, weakened message. In response to the new ministers who focus attention on such visible things as letters of recommendation, ecstatic utterance, visions, and miracles, Paul invites the Corinthians to examine his integrity and sincerity.

‘Peddling’ is from the verb *kapēleuō*; which is derived from the noun *kapēlos*. A *kapēlos* was a huckster, a con artist, or a street hawker who cleverly deceived unwary buyers into purchasing a cheap imitation of the real thing. Paul had in mind especially the false apostles at Corinth, who peddled a corrupt mixture of divine truth and Jewish legalism to the Corinthians.

The word translated ‘peddle’ is found only here in the New Testament, although it does occur once in the Septuagint. It is a somewhat pejorative term, suggesting a distinctly low type of trader, and shows that Paul viewed such peddling of the gospel as contemptible. No doubt such traders often had a touch of the confidence trickster about them, using smooth talk to sell rubbish at unreasonable prices. The Christian evangelist is not plying a nefarious trade, nor does he do his work to feather his own nest; he is sent by God. He does not employ trickery, but speaks out of a sincere heart, for he is conscious that he is speaking, not only in the presence of his hearers, but of the God who has sent him.

### (2) The Few (2:17b)

In point of fact, his suffering came from the fourfold positives of his personal integrity in communicating God’s Word. First, he and his cohorts did it ‘as men of sincerity.’ Whenever Paul spoke, he was wholly sincere. In speaking ‘with sincerity’ (literally, ‘tested by the sun’) he wants the Corinthians to know that he, for his part, was not exercising his ministry for financial or any other kind of gain. *Eilikrineia* (‘sincerity’) comes from *eilē* (‘sunlight’) and *krinō* (‘to judge’). It pictures something held up to the light of the sun for inspection. Paul’s pure life and unadulterated message would stand up to the closest scrutiny.

Second, Paul spoke ‘as commissioned by God’—literally, ‘as *from* God.’ His commission came from Messiah Jesus—and that is how he preached. Unlike the newcomers, whose authorization is no higher than those who commendatory letters they bear, Paul’s ministry originated from God, a reference to the Damascus Road event when he was commissioned to go to the Gentiles with the message centered ‘in Christ.’

The authority with which we speak is not our own, but God’s. We are only messengers, but we must ensure that we convey the message accurately.

Third, Paul ministered the Word ‘in the sight of God’—literally, ‘before God,’ in the presence of God. He wants the Corinthians to know that he lived every day as if it was the Day of Judgment. Thus, he did it humbly and with trembling and with no thought of praise.

Godliness is doing what is right with an eye to God’s approval alone. When we share the gospel, we are not to have an eye upon people’s approval but God’s. That is especially relevant when we explain the seriousness of sin and God’s judgment upon it. If we have an eye upon human approval, we may be tempted to water down the solemn and awe-inspiring aspects of our subject; but not if we speak as in God’s sight, with a view to pleasing Him in what we say.

Fourth, Paul spoke ‘in Christ’—that is, in union with Christ. His preaching flowed from his incorporation in Christ. Nothing has more significance than our union with the Lord Jesus. This

## 2 Corinthians – Lesson 4

is part of the wonder of salvation. As we speak to others, we are to speak in the light of our union with Him, and in dependence upon Him. United with Him, we share His triumph as we proclaim His gospel.

Paul's fourfold integrity produced a sufficiency that was from God and set the standard for all who would minister. He embodied the principle to embrace the triumphal procession (which is at the heart of this great letter) and live its death principle to the fullest. The way to live is to understand that weakness, suffering, and death are the means by which the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ wafts to the ends of the earth. And then to be like Paul and not fight it, but embrace it!

Although Paul's commission by God was unique, and the dispute between the newcomers and himself an unrepeatably fact of history, there is an ongoing application from these verses. It is that those who engage in ministry must speak only the 'word of God' and they must do so 'before God.' The newcomers' style of ministry warns us of the ever-present temptation for ministers to project and to commend themselves on the basis of 'image,' or what Paul calls 'face.' While the minister needs gifts appropriate to his calling, let him come not in the strength of those gifts but in the power of the word of God.

For next time: Read 2 Corinthians 3:1-18.