

SESSION 15: A FRAGRANCE OF CHRIST, PART ONE

2 Corinthians 2:12-17

July 27, 2025

PREFACE

In earlier sessions I have repeatedly brought out the close connection the apostle Paul has—but wishes were better—with the Corinth church. To him his relation to the church—and no doubt to *all* of his church plants—is personal, intimate; and, as in any human relationships, resulted in both exquisite joy and agonizing sorrow. We have seen how Paul, during this period in his ministry, has been preoccupied with the situation in Corinth, and with their behavior toward him. And in the first two verses of our passage, we have before us another example of how Paul has been affected, spiritually, emotionally, and even physically by the conflict.

Read 2 Corinthians 2:12-17.

vv12-13

Now when I came to Troas for the gospel of Christ and when a door was opened for me in the Lord, I had no rest for my spirit, not finding Titus my brother. But saying farewell to them, I went on to Macedonia.

Troas—literally, “Alexandria the Troas,” or “Trojan Alexandria”—though smaller than Corinth, was another important Roman town, located in Asia on the eastern shore of the Aegean Sea, across that sea from Thrace and Macedonia (again, not a city but a region). It’s a bit confusing to establish just how many times the apostle visited Troas and when, and what he accomplished while there. But the evidence shows that he was there at least once (during his second missionary journey, when he had his vision of “the man from Macedonia”), and perhaps twice, before this visit mentioned in v12. Since it was the port from which one set sail for the cities in Macedonia, he was also in Troas once or twice after this.

Once again we see in our various versions a divide in interpretation—as illustrated by comparing three.

NASB: “when I came to Troas for the gospel of Christ **and when** a door was opened for me in the Lord...”

NIV: “when I went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ **and found that** the Lord had opened a door for me...”

ESV: “**even though** a door was opened for me in the Lord...”

It might be more accurate to say that none of our versions is very specific; rather, all are muddy, inexact. We wonder, *Was Troas the open door, was Paul presented with an open door while in Troas for Troas, or was the open door Macedonia, which was presented to him while in Troas?*

The ESV seems to suggest that *Troas* was the open door, but in spite of this, the compounded result of not finding Titus there and his resulting tumultuous spirit, he split for Macedonia.

Others suggest that the open door was *Macedonia*, presented to him by the Lord once Paul was in Troas. For what it is worth, I incline toward this second interpretation. I am the least among us where it comes to Greek grammar; my position, instead, is based on my perception that the first, and generally more favored option, seems out of character for Paul.

- The first and more common interpretation is this: Paul went to Troas to preach “the gospel of Christ” because a door had opened for him by “the Lord.” That is, the Lord told him to go preach the gospel in Troas. Once there, feeling dispirited because Titus wasn’t there, he left (across the Aegean) for Macedonia. To me, that doesn’t sound like Pauline behavior.
- The second interpretation is that for whatever reason, Paul decided to preach the gospel in Troas. 🚪 While there, though dispirited over Titus’ absence, he obeyed when the Lord opened a door for him to go to Macedonia.

Either way (and the Greek grammar *could* go either way), the point is made by Paul to the church in Corinth that his travel plans changed for a number of reasons, and that there was no personal affront intended to the congregation. Let’s briefly review the pertinent portion of his chronology:

1. late summer 54: The riot in Ephesus precipitates Paul’s leaving the city.
2. autumn-winter 54/55: Paul ministers in Troas, then Macedonia, where he writes 2 Corinthians.
3. 55: Paul in Macedonia, Illyricum, back to Macedonia and then Greece.
4. January-March 56: Paul in Corinth; writes Romans. (Source: George Guthrie)

Like Corinth, it was an important link in the trade and travel network of the Roman Empire. If one was in Asia and wanted to get to Rome, one caught a ship in Troas, crossed the Aegean to Neapolis in Macedonia, where one caught the *Via Egnatia* (a major highway) to Rome. So it would follow Paul’s standard game-plan to commit time and effort to this important city.

v14

Our understanding of vv12-13 helps illumine v14 as a pivot point from the previous section to the longer and deeper next section, taking us into Chapter Seven. Verses 14-17 also carry their own important point, beyond that pivot.

When the various scholars offer different interpretations for a passage, I typically prefer to sort through them and present to the class only the one that tracks the best. In this instance, however, I would like to offer *two* interpretations for your consideration. Both are well-argued; both are feasible. Both hinge on where one places the apostle in the metaphor he uses of the “triumphal procession.” That is, where does he see himself in the imagery he employs: Is he a captive, in chains in the back (Seifrid), or is he instead one of the incense bearers in the parade (Guthrie)? Along with this, of secondary importance, who is it in the metaphor leading the triumph? God or Christ Jesus?

In this session we will look at v14; in our next session we will continue into vv15-17.

Before we dig into this, permit me just a few moments to turn off onto a parallel frontage road.

I made the point in our study of First Corinthians—and it still applies to this study of the second letter—that there is no text in the NT more applicable for us today, because there is no city of the first century than Corinth more like us today. Reading these two letters (but especially First Corinthians) we immediately and repeatedly see parallels to our society and culture today. It is as if the compilers of our Bible made the explicit decision, *We’d better include something that speaks directly to the world that will exist two thousand years from now*. Since the compilers were not prescient, it fell to the Holy Spirit to say, *Listen, Paul wrote a couple of letters to Corinth that will work perfectly for that*. Here at the end of the twenty-first century’s first quarter, we find an accurate description of our own cultural situation being addressed during the middle of the *first* century. While we draw wisdom and application from the entirety of God’s word, I can think of no more-pertinent text for us today than Paul’s two letters to Corinth.

And one of those data points is the contrast between what the Corinthians expected and desired in their apostle—and what he in reality was, and what his *Lord* expected him to be. It is this contrast—indeed, this violent *collision*—that required the writing of this second letter. Just as the Jews were looking for the wrong messiah, and thus rejected the true One, the Corinthians were looking for, expecting, the wrong apostle. Like the Jews, they were looking for dynamism, forceful charisma, strength; also like the Jews with their anticipated messiah, what they were given instead was a gentle servant in Paul who delivered impressive *written* words, but spoke from out of an unimpressive form. ➡

Isaiah 53:2; 42:1-4
Philippians 2:7
2 Corinthians 10:10

In the case of the Jews, they ultimately crucified the Messiah they were given; in the case of the Corinthians, they are questioning the authority over their lives by this unimpressive apostle—hence the need for Paul’s apologia, his defense of his apostleship in this letter, which our current passage cues up for chapters three to twelve, even as it serves as a coda to the previous passage.

But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ,

Using the imagery of the Roman *thriambeuonti*, the elaborate “triumph” procession for a victorious Roman general through the streets of Rome, in the first interpretation Paul does not place himself at the head of the parade, but back with the defeated captives in chains. ➡ In his first letter to the Corinthians Paul confessed to being the least of the apostles “because I persecuted the church of God” (1 Corinthians 15:9), and in his first letter to Timothy will describe himself as “formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor” (1 Timothy 1:13). In his letter to Ephesus he will write that he is “the prisoner” not of the Romans but “of Christ” (Ephesians 3:1). No, the Corinthians’ apostle “has been taken captive by Christ’s love and reconciled to God through Christ’s death” (David Garland). Paul is at the back of the procession, a slave of Christ.

Although at times the conquered generals preceded the victorious general’s chariot, and then were ceremoniously sacrificed to Jupiter at the end of the parade.

Yet even with this we hear the joy in him as he expresses his thanksgiving in this verse. It is *God’s* triumphal procession, and he is included in it only by His grace.

And later in this letter we will learn of at least one reason for his joy beyond the joy he finds in delivering Christ's good news. In our vernacular we might say that Paul left Troas and arrived in Macedonia down in the dumps. But look at what the Lord had in store for His dispirited apostle.

Read 2 Corinthians 7:5-7.

At the same time he uses the imagery of v14 to express to the Corinthians that since he is not the victorious general leading the parade, he is not in charge of where he is sent in service to his Lord. It is God who "leads us." The *Lord* opened the door to Macedonia; in subservience to Him, he had to pass through that open door. Nonetheless, Paul uses this passage to make a far more important point

and manifests through us the aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place.

The surface exuberance of this verse camouflages the "darkness" lying within the following verses. The apostle is not being duplicitous; he honestly expresses joy and thanksgiving for his position in Christ—including the trials that come with it. No doubt this passage, and continuing on deeper into the letter, was difficult for the Corinth church to digest, for it dwells on concepts of the Christian faith many in the first century, and many still today, would rather avoid. Here is how George Guthrie summarizes it:

Guthrie: The section reaching from 2:14 to 7:4 exudes a theological richness and depth of reflection on the nature of Christian ministry unparalleled in the NT.

What is Paul's "product"? What is he, as it were, carrying around the world and "selling" to everyone he encounters? The gospel—more explicitly, *Christ's* gospel. Even as a slave, the apostle is privileged to deliver to "every place" "the aroma of the knowledge of Him."

Here in the second part of v14 Paul introduces a different image from the triumphant procession, one which he weaves throughout the rest of the passage: "aroma" and "fragrance"—which is instrumental in pointing us to the second interpretation.

Our common translations alternate between “aroma” and “fragrance”—except for the KJV, which uses “savour” for both—but they are two different words in the Greek. In vv14 & 16 the word is *osme*, a neutral word for odor, smell, good or bad, while in v15 it is *euodia*, a word for a *sweet* aroma, good-scentedness. ➡

I can only assume that the NASB has added “sweet aroma” in v14 because of the context of “the knowledge of Him.”

Because of this imagery, Guthrie points out that fragrant “incense played a significant role in such celebrations.” There would have been a large number of incense bearers, both in front of the general’s chariot and throughout the procession. Guthrie turns in a good argument for Paul, along with his ministry, not with the doomed captives but with the incense bearers—imagery which permeates vv14-16.

In the passage, especially in vv15-16, Paul contrasts “bad” aroma (death) with “sweet” aroma (life), when he speaks of those who might “smell” the aroma of the gospel.

In our next session we will go deeper into these verses. For now let me leave with you George Guthrie’s summary statement for the passage—which I will include again in our next session.

Guthrie: God in Christ, stands as the cosmic triumphator [i.e., the victorious general leading the procession] who leads the apostle in a triumphal procession through the world. Paul and his mission are analogous to the incense bearers in the parade, for through them God spreads the gospel, the “aroma of knowledge” about Christ, “everywhere” the apostle goes. Further, as Paul lives a Christ-centered life before God, the fragrance of true gospel ministry rises up like pleasing incense to God...while having a dichotomizing effect on those with whom the ministry comes into contact. In the apostle’s metaphor, “the ones being saved” brings to mind those who have experienced “salvation” through the victory of the Roman general. These are analogous to people who had responded positively to the gospel and thus experience salvation through Christ. “The ones being destroyed,” on the other hand, evokes the image of the doomed captives...serving as an analogy to those who reject Paul’s gospel. For those being saved, the apostle’s authentic ministry and its message carry the sweet scent of life, but for those being destroyed, Paul’s ministry and message “stink” of death.