

SESSION 16: A FRAGRANCE OF CHRIST, PART TWO

2 Corinthians 2:12-17

August 3, 2025

PREFACE

In our last session I dwelt at some length on the metaphorical imagery in v14 of the “triumphal procession,” presumably (and logically) of the traditional parades staged for returning victorious Roman generals, of which anyone dwelling in or around the empire in the first century would be familiar. Pertinent to this imagery are certain standard components of the procession:

- Prominent would be the leader, the “star of the show,” the victorious general—who was more often than not also a prominent member of the Roman senate. ➡
- Positioned in front of the general would be a group of incense bearers, offering fragrance that would permeate not just the parade, but the audience as well, lining the route; the incense would serve both a festive and religious purpose, offering up sweet incense to the Roman gods.
- Included further back in the procession would be rescued (“saved”) Roman captives that had been held by the enemy, now being returned home.
- Probably even further back would be the defeated *enemy* captives, paraded in chains, to either be made slaves or be killed (sacrificed to Jupiter) at the conclusion of the procession.

The wording of the text does not clearly delineate between God and Christ; “God leads” the procession, but He does so “in Christ.”

Now, drawing from that same imagery, we are ready to consider the remainder of this passage at the end of Chapter Two.

Read 2 Corinthians 2: 12-17.

As I have waded out deeper into this passage, I have broadened my perspective on Paul’s use of the triumphal processional imagery. My conclusion is that we need not force ourselves to choose between placing Paul at the front with the incense bearers or placing him in the back with the doomed captives. He could very well be drawing from *both*—not so much mixing his metaphors, but employing both to make different points. There is a passage in his first letter that supports this. Turn back to 1 Corinthians 4.

Note that in this passage Paul applies a heavy dose of sarcasm when describing the Corinthians.

You are already full! You are already rich! You have begun to reign as kings without us—and I wish you did reign, so that we could also reign with you! For I think God has displayed us, the apostles, in last place, like men condemned to die: We have become a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to people. We are fools for Christ, but you are wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are distinguished, but we are dishonored! Up to the present hour we are both hungry and thirsty; we are poorly clothed, roughly treated, homeless; we labor, working with our own hands. When we are reviled, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we respond graciously. Even now, we are like the scum of the earth, like everyone's garbage. (1 Corinthians 4:8–13 CSB)

I still believe that in our present passage in 2 Corinthians, Paul, obviously, emphasizes the more positive imagery of “we are a fragrance of Christ to God” (v15), which places him among the incense bearers. But, just as in the first letter, he is also continuing in this second letter to contrast his suffering and weakness as an apostle—apparent in Chapter Four.

Read 2 Corinthians 4:7-10.

And even more to the point he finishes with

For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death works in us, but life in you. 2 Corinthians 4:11–12

David Garland: Paul understands his suffering to be a necessary part of his apostolic ministry, but the Corinthians believe it discredits his apostolic ministry.

Thus it seems clear that even if Paul highlights in our present passage the brighter aspect of his ministry as a “fragrance of Christ,” he also still pictures himself as someone “being delivered over to death for Jesus' sake.” Both are part of the same package—which is a concept of faith in Christ with which the Corinthians still struggle.

vv15-16

For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life.

Human reaction to odors is subjective. When I was a kid, I loved the odor of the old regular gas that was pumped into our family car—yes, pumped *for* us, along with receiving a complimentary clean windshield and oil check. I doubt there were many who shared my opinion of gasoline’s odor. Today I have become so inured to the odor of a full cat box that it doesn’t bother me at all; the odor of dirty diapers is something all-together different. One person enjoys the odor of grilled steak, while another cannot abide it. Years ago my lab assistant was staying with us in preparation for house- and cat-sitting while we went to Africa. One evening she steamed up a batch of cauliflower for her dinner, the stink of which wafted throughout the entire house. I almost threw her out of said house. 📌

In the second part of v14 Paul likens “the knowledge of Him” (i.e., knowledge of Christ) to the scent coming off the processional event by the attendant incense bearers. We take that to be a reference to the delivery of the gospel—the “good news” about Christ Jesus. But not everyone who hears this good news considers it “good.” And once again we have a resonant echo from the first Corinthian letter.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:18, 21-24.

The message of Christ crucified—i.e., the gospel—is received in different ways by different people. To one it is a perfectly grilled steak; to another it is steamed cauliflower with a side order of broccoli.

For we are a fragrance of Christ to God...

Paul now changes the metaphor from him (and other apostles) being the channel of an act—“manifests *through* us”—to being the actual fragrance itself: “*we are* a fragrance of Christ.” Here is the only occurrence of *euodia*, because no matter how it is received, the gospel is inherently sweet and good. It may be *received* subjectively, but it is *objectively* good.

I admit that I stumble over that “*to* God.” Just what does that mean? Guthrie’s explanation is that

At the risk of being too pedantic, we should take a moment to differentiate not just the Greek, but also the English words used in this context:

odor = any smell, pleasant or unpleasant;

scent = a faint odor, pleasant or unpleasant;

aroma = can be a neutral reference, but the first definition is of a pleasant odor;

fragrance = a pleasant, sweet smell, e.g., the fragrance of a flower.

osme = can be used for either pleasant or unpleasant smells (Strong’s #3744);

euodia = a pleasant, sweet, agreeable fragrance (Strong’s #2175).

it is a fragrance that ultimately has its source in Christ and rises up to God. This imagery adds a directional dimension to Paul's word picture, for now the fragrance ascends to God... the fragrance that rises up to God is also described as an aroma that has great impact on people in the world... the apostle has merely added to the metaphor, showing a profoundly close relationship between the "aroma" of the gospel itself and the pleasing "fragrance" of authentic apostolic ministry before God.

OK, I can buy that. But at the same time I appreciate Seifrid's remarks. He would change the "to God" to "for God." 📌 And here is M. R. Vincent's thoughts.

Vincent: As so often in Paul's writings, the figure shifts; the apostolic teachers themselves being represented as an odor, their Christian personality redolent of Christ. It is not merely a sweet odor *produced by* Christ, but Christ Himself is the savor which exhales in their character and work.

Would that every one of us could say the same, that "Christ Himself is the savor which exhales in [our] character and work."

among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing;

But to flip back for a moment to the "to God" version of the text, I am reminded once again of that life-changing moment decades ago in California when I was having a conversation with an "elder" in the church. I was whining about the seeming lack of positive response to my recent performance. I pouted that if they didn't appreciate it, maybe I should take my work for the Lord elsewhere.

And I still thank God—not just for the wisdom of this man, but his availability to the Spirit of God to speak through him. For he spoke to me with the wisdom of God when he said, "You're not performing for them. You are singing to Jesus, and He will distribute the blessings where he wants them." I learned that day that no matter what work the Lord has assigned us, whether singing or acting, or preaching or teaching, or cleaning the church bathrooms—no matter what, we do it for the Lord, trusting that He will use it to His glory.

Technical details: "Although most English versions interpret the dative of the biblical idiom as a dative of reference ('the fragrance of Christ to God'), it is better understood as a dative of advantage... In other words, it is for God and for God's purposes that the apostle has been made to be the fragrance of Christ."

I can't help but think that even as Paul writes this to the Corinthians by means of the Holy Spirit, he is taking that counsel himself, that all he can do is be obedient to his calling and his God; he is to offer his work up to his Lord, and let *Him* distribute it as He (God) sees fit. We cannot know who will receive or who will reject the good news of Christ—and that's a good thing, because it is not up to us.

(v16) to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life.

How representative of the world and its bent toward the logic of flesh is the Corinth church—and how strenuously the apostle works to dissuade them of their human logic.

Just as there were those in the first century, as today, who reject a *Messiah* as a suffering servant (Mark 10:45), many in the the Corinth church reject a suffering apostle of Christ. But read your Bible: God repeatedly calls some of the most imperfect, flawed human beings to serve in His name. And in Paul's case, Christ even *announced beforehand* that Saul of Tarsus would “suffer for My name” (Acts 9:15-16).

The older I get the more I realize that, apart from the physical cravings of the flesh, perhaps the most egregious and persistent transgression of the flesh is to insist that a righteous, omnipotent God fit Himself to *its* human logic and standards. It is voiced *ad nauseum* after every painful tragedy: “I don't believe a loving God would permit such a thing.” But who are we to superimpose our weak and impotent standards on the Master potter (Jeremiah 18)?

Mark Seifrid: God's saving work in Christ, communicated through the apostle, bears both judgment and salvation...

The fundamental question is whether our eyes have been opened to see through the suffering and death of Christ to the gift of life and glory that is wrapped within this contrary, outward form. As Paul implicitly has indicated and later makes clear, this capacity to see is not within the power of human reason but is a saving work of God the Creator (4:4-6). “The peace of God passes all understanding, and so does God's plan of salvation” (E. Kasemann).

from death to death... from life to life.

“‘From life’ refers to the source or nature of the apostolic message. ‘To life’ refers to the results.”

The fragrance that spreads the knowledge of God, however, can lead to death. For some the message of the cross is foolishness or a stumbling block, and that response leads to death. They see only a dead corpse hanging shamefully on a cross. (David Garland)

From death to death... from life to life.

v17

The last sentence of v16 would seem to belong to v17. Instead of closing the text of the previous two verses it sets up v17. On the other hand, one can make a connection to vv14-16, especially if the three verses, 15-17, are read as one, for one response to all this—bearing and being the “fragrance of Christ” to those being saved and those perishing, from death to death and from life to life—would be to be overwhelmed by the burdensome responsibility of carrying such a critically important message to mankind.

And who is sufficient for these things? For we are not like many, peddling the word of God, but as from sincerity, but as from God, in the sight of God, we speak in Christ.

The word “peddling” sounds rather innocuous to our modern ears; a “peddler” just sells his wares. But the Greek beneath the word (*kapeleuontes*) speaks of a much darker process: a huckster, corrupt (KJV), to deal in for purposes of trade, to water down (as in selling diluted wine), falsify. *The Revised English Bible* renders it, “We are not adulterating the word of God for profit as so many do.”

As do so many who bear the burden of teaching and preaching God’s word as accurately as humanly possible, Paul concludes, *Who born of woman could possibly be adequate to such a task?*

And then he essentially answers his own question. Though it does not make it easier—for it is *far* easier to sell a corrupted gospel, tickling the ears of the listeners for profit—he can honestly declare that he delivers the gospel sincerely, as from God, with God watching and listening, speaking in and through Christ Jesus. One cannot do more, or better, than that.

As promised last week, I close again with George Guthrie's summary.

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.