

2 Corinthians 2:14 - 3:6

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[0 : 00] At the start of the year, looking for a stirring, upbeat message to enthuse and to challenge and to inspire, it would be tough to beat the words of Paul in 2 Corinthians chapter 2 and verse 14. Thanks be to God who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ. In a few moments we'll be reading the passage where those words are found. Thanks be to God who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ. I wonder how these words estrike you. Is the Christian life one long triumphal procession? A bit like an open-top bus ride along Union Street holding aloft the

Champions League trophy with crowds cheering on every side. I wonder if 2009 was like that for you. And if not, why not? In the light of this affirmation by Paul, thanks be to God, and note who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ. Well, of course, the fanciful modern-day illustration that I have given is as detached from reality as the utopian suggestion that as Christians we effortlessly glide from victory to victory never tasting the bitter savour of defeat. So, before we rashly conclude that this no pain, all gain scenario is indeed what Paul has in mind with the words that we have quoted, let's just note a significant but with which the words of Paul begin. And we'd be as well to turn to the passage in question so that we can be close to it as we consider it. In 2 Corinthians 2 and verse 14, the verse begins with this significant word, but thanks be to God who always leads us in triumphal procession.

This but flags for us that Paul is making this statement, which, let's be clear, is a true statement. It is true that God always leads us in triumphal procession. Nonetheless, these words are said and to be understood in a particular context. Hence the but at the beginning of the verse. But thanks be to God.

In the light of, despite of all of these things that I have been mentioning and talking about, I can state this as being true, God always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ.

What is the context of these very stirring words of Paul? Well, in the first two chapters, and we can only very briefly skim over them to discover the context, these first two verses are chapters or chapters where Paul shares of a number of situations and problems that have been the source of great suffering and difficulty for him. We can quickly just note some of them. In chapter 1 and verse 8, we read, we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure so that we even despaired of our lives. This is what he has been living. Then in chapter 1, again, in verse 17, we read, when I planned this, and he's talking of a visit that he was planning to make to Corinth that didn't materialize. We read, when I planned this, did I do it lightly, or do I make my plans in a worldly manner so that in the same breath I say yes, yes, and no, no? The context here is that many people were criticizing Paul. They were questioning his integrity. They were saying, well, you say one thing, but you do another. You promised to visit us, but you didn't. You're a liar. You're not to be trusted. And so here Paul was suffering the attack and the criticism, unfair and unfounded, of the believers. This is the life he was living. Hardship in Asia, his integrity being called into question. Then we read in chapter 2 and verse 4 of his own heart feelings concerning a very deep problem that there was in Corinth of a sinning brother. And what do we read there in chapter 2 and verse 4? For I wrote to you out of great distress and anguish of heart, and with many tears, tears. This is the Christian life that Paul is living. This is the pain that he is enduring. This is the suffering that is his daily portion, and he shares it with the Corinthians in this letter. And it is in this context that Paul then says, but in the midst of all of these things, though all these things be true, though this be my experience, but thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in

[5 : 57] Christ. But as we consider all of these things, and indeed he goes on to speak of further frustrations in chapter 2 and in verses 12 to 14, we won't read them, but in, or rather, 12 and 13, he speaks of frustrations in Troas and of how plans he had had not come to fruition as he had hoped.

And as we think of these things, we might say, well, some triumphal procession. It seems less of an open-top bus and more like trying to hitch a lift into town on a wintry, freezing night that is his experience.

But, says Paul, in the midst of these problems, in the eye of the storm, as the tears flow and as the heart is close to breaking point, God leads in triumphal procession.

Suffering and triumph are not mutually exclusive in the Christian life. In fact, quite the reverse. They go together as the norm rather than the exception.

How, then, are we to understand these words of Paul that we've been quoting there in chapter 2 of 2 Corinthians and verse 14? Let's just read them again and read them together with the following verses, verses 14 of chapter 2 through to verse 6 of chapter 3.

[7 : 29] So, let's read together these verses and then proceed to try and understand what is it then that Paul is saying. How are we to understand this picture being painted of Christians being led in triumphal procession when the day-to-day reality for Paul and for us also is so often one of suffering and pain and frustration and difficulty.

Well, let's read then.

Are we to understand this. In Christ, we speak before God with sincerity like men sent from God.

Are we beginning to commend ourselves again?

Or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation to you or from you? You yourselves are our letter written on our hearts, known and read by everybody. You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of the living God, not on tablets of human hearts.

Such confidence as this is ours through Christ before God. Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God.

[9 : 06] He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit, for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives a life. The way we are going to explore the text and seek to understand what is being said is by identifying what Paul says concerning what God does in verses 14 to 16.

We have these words, Thanks be to God who always leads us in triumphal procession. We understand what is being said. How are we to conceive this?

How are we to live this? And in these verses, in verses 14 to 16, God is described as doing four things. And we're going to look at each in turn, and I think that will help us to understand what Paul is saying.

The four things that God is described as doing are as follows. God leads, God perfumes, God savors, and God equips.

And we're going to look at each of these. But before looking at each of these, it's important to understand the imagery being used by Paul, the picture that's being painted by Paul, when he uses this language of being led in triumphal procession.

[10 : 27] The picture being painted is of a conquering general entering in triumphal procession, be it to a conquered city or perhaps as he returns home.

Having conquered afar, so he returns home, and he enters into his home city in triumphal procession. In his wake, the enemies in their chains dragged along in this procession and surrounded by the cheering crowds as they welcome the hero returning from his victorious campaign.

And it would seem that in Roman times, the practice would have been, as the procession was entering the city, for instance, to be spread along the way of the procession, perhaps as an offering to the gods for their help in the battles that had been fought.

And this is the picture that Paul is employing to teach the Corinthians spiritual truths concerning our being led in triumphal procession.

So it's important to have that in the background as we continue to consider what is being said here. Paul then depicts God as the sovereign emperor and Christ as the all-conquering general leading his soldiers in triumph.

[11 : 58] What then is God described as doing, and what lessons are there for us? Four things, as I've already mentioned. God leads, God perfumes, God savors, and God equips.

First of all, God leads. Verse 14, But thanks be to God who always leads us in triumphal procession. Paul assures us that the believer, the soldier of Jesus Christ, is always being led by

God in triumphal procession.

And the always, as commented, I think already, is particularly significant given the context that we've noted very briefly, the context of pain and suffering and frustrations and opposition.

And yet in that context, Paul very deliberately introduces this word that God always leads us in triumphal procession. It's the nature of that triumph that is surprising.

This triumph of which Paul speaks is often experienced and indeed secured in suffering. The verb used here by Paul of being led in triumph, this word triumph is used on only one other occasion in the New Testament, also by Paul, and this one other use proves highly significant and instructive for us.

[13:32] We've already read in 2 Corinthians 2, and let's just remind ourselves of verse 15.

Colossians 2 and verse 15. There we read, Of Jesus, having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

The imagery is the same. The imagery of the triumphant victor making public spectacle of his enemies. It is the only other occasion where this word or verb of triumphing is used.

And as I say, as such, it is highly instructive. Because here we have Paul in his letter to the Colossians presenting Jesus hanging on Calvary.

And he is presenting the image of Jesus hanging on Calvary as a picture of triumph. The cross as a picture of triumph.

And we might say, well, the resurrection. Yes, the resurrection. Surely there we have the triumph of Jesus as he rises triumphant from the grave. We think of his ascension to glory as he is placed in the highest place above all others.

[14:47] And we say, ah, yes, there is victory. There is victory. But the cross, the cross, the cross does not appear his moment of triumph.

It appears as abject defeat. But as we well know, appearances deceive. It is on the cross that the triumph was won.

It was on the cross that the enemy was defeated. It was on the cross that the victory cry was heard, Teta lestai, it is finished. It is done.

It is achieved. The victory has been won. The cross is indeed the highest point that announces to the world, announces to the cosmos that Jesus has won the victory that he came to win, the victory over sin.

The victory was confirmed and savored on the resurrection morning. The necessary consequences of that victory were displayed as the victor is exalted to the highest place at his ascension.

[16:00] But the victory was won at Calvary. It is at Calvary that we find Jesus triumphant over his enemies, making a public spectacle of them.

What then of us? The triumphal procession that God leads us on, that Paul speaks of in this letter to the Corinthians.

This triumphal procession will also involve for us suffering, and the victory will be gained in the dark valley as we battle with temptation, as we fall but then rise again in triumph, as we are engulfed in personal tragedy but are given grace to endure with a stubborn faith in the goodness of God, as we are confronted with hostile opposition, that fails to stop us in our tracks, as our eyes are fixed on Jesus, as we plod on with perseverance and expectancy in the face of discouragement and perhaps little fruit or success in ministry and service.

In these things we triumph. This is the triumphal procession that we are led on by God. And it is triumph.

It's real triumph. It's genuine triumph. It's Jesus-like triumph. It's God-glorifying triumph as we triumph in suffering and in adversity and in frustration and in opposition.

[17:38] Of course, it is not all the cruel cross. There is also the empty tomb, praise God. And so with us, the dark night of trial and triumph will be followed by the sun rays of dawn in our own life and experience also.

And remember that in all the trials and in all the pain and in all the suffering, God is leading. This is the point we're making here. God leads.

God is the one leading. Just as He led His dear son Jesus to Calvary, so He leads us. It is His victory march. He lays down the route to be followed.

Perplexing and painful as it often may be for us. He leads always. And Christian friend, He is leading you in your life today.

Again, however difficult and perplexing and painful the route He has set out for you. God leads. But the second thing that we are presented with in this passage that describes what God does is that God perfumes.

[18 : 53] We read in verse 14, But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ, and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of Him.

God is the subject of this sentence. And so as we enter into the second part of the sentence, He remains the subject. It is God who spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of Him. God is the one who does the spreading. Now there's a couple of questions we could ask of this expression to help us understand what is being said.

First of all, what is it that God spreads? What is this perfume that He is spreading everywhere? Well, we're told, the fragrance of the knowledge of Him.

That is Jesus. God the Father spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of Jesus. This is the Father's great delight, that the knowledge of His Son, Jesus, would be spread abroad, that the loveliness of Christ, that the loveliness of Christ, would be proclaimed and admired, that men and women would see Jesus and fall in love with Jesus, that men and women would be captivated by His glory and His beauty and His grace.

[20 : 18] This is what delights the Father, and so He spreads everywhere the knowledge of the fragrance, or the fragrance of the knowledge of Him.

And it is the Father's delight that you would see Jesus. It is the Father's delight that you would be captivated by His Son.

It is the Father's delight that you would enjoy the fragrance of the knowledge of Jesus. This is His plan for this year that has begun, that we who are believers would increasingly enjoy and know the fragrance of Jesus, and that those who as yet have never tasted, have never savored, would do so. This is what God does. God perfumes the world with the knowledge of Jesus. He perfumes the world with that which is altogether lovely, Jesus Christ, His only begotten Son.

How does God spread this fragrance? If it is His delight that all would enjoy, how does God spread this fragrance?

[21 : 31] Does He employ the angels for such a task? What does Paul say? Through us. Through us. God, through us, spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of Him.

God, through us, through you, Christian friends. And not only are we to spread the aroma, but wonder of wonders, we are the aroma.

We are the body of Christ. The Father looks on His church, and He sees His Son. He sees Jesus. Jesus. We spread the aroma by being who we are, by being like our head, Jesus.

This is what we're told. In verse 15, for we are to God the aroma of Christ. We are to God the aroma of Christ. This is a marvelous and a surprising thing for Paul to say, but there it is in black and white. We are not only to spread the aroma, we are to be the aroma as the body of Jesus Christ, as the church of Jesus Christ.

[22 : 52] This certainly involves proclaiming the loveliness of Christ, but it also must involve being the loveliness of Christ.

How does God spread this fragrance? Through you, through me, through us. That is the way He has appointed.

And where is this fragrance to be spread? Well, what does the passage say? That God spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of Him. Everywhere. So we have much to do in this year that has begun.

In order for this task to be completed, all must participate. You see, I can't spread the aroma of Christ in your home, in your office, in your street.

The believer who sits next to you can't spread the aroma of Christ where you work and where you live. That is for you to do. You are the one called. You are the one appointed to spread the loveliness of Jesus where you are.

[23 : 56] And only you can perform that task. None other. It is your calling through you. Everyone must hear. Everyone must savor.

And to whom? To whom is this fragrance to be spread? Well, the answer to this question is illustrated by a solemn contrast that we are given concerning the response that there is to this fragrance.

We read there in verse 16, To the one, we are the smell of death. To the other, the fragrance of life.

Two responses from those who will experience this savor. We begin with the second one commented on, To the other, the fragrance of life.

To those who believe, to those who trust, to those who bow the knee to King Jesus, to those who enroll in his army, to such, the fragrance is a fragrance of life.

[25 : 04] It is a beautiful description, a fragrance of life. To the believer, fragrance of life. To the one who trusts, to the one who bows down, fragrance of life.

Is Jesus' fragrance of life for you. But this is not all that we are told. Solemnly, we are told that there is another response.

To the one, we are the smell of death. The good news concerning Jesus, the very presence of the disciples of Jesus in this world is to some the smell of death.

To the enemies of Jesus, to those who refuse to bow the knee, he is the smell of death. And God forbid that there be any here this morning for whom Jesus is the smell of death.

of death. What about you? What is Jesus to you? Is he the fragrance of life? Is he the one in whom you have put your trust for eternity?

[26 : 16] Is he the one who has forgiven your sins? Is he your friend who sticks closer than any brother? Is he fragrance of life? Has he embarked you in a new life? A life that is pleasing to God?

Or is he yet for you? The smell of death, the stench of death, the one who on the last day will condemn you to the place where you belong because you refuse to bow the knee to King Jesus. Who is Jesus to you? the fragrance of life or the stench of death? God perfumes. But God also savors.

God savors. How are we to understand the introduction of the words to God at the beginning of verse 15? In verse 15 we read, For we are to God the aroma of Christ.

The sentence would seem to make perfect sense without these two words to God. If we were to read verse 15, For we are the aroma of Christ among those and what follows.

[27 : 22] It would make perfect sense. But we read rather, We are to God the aroma of a Christ.

What Paul is stating is that this fragrance is experienced not only by those for whom it is a fragrance of life.

This fragrance is experienced not only by those for whom it is the stench of death. We are told that it is savored by God Himself. We are to God the aroma of Christ.

God savors the aroma as it wafts its way to heaven. Our lives as Christians, our Christlikeness, our faith in the midst of suffering, our proclaiming and demonstrating the loveliness of His Son, all a pleasing perfume to God.

We are to God the aroma of Christ. And so, Christian friend, I say to you and I ask you, is it so? Is this your greatest desire as you begin this year that your life would be a sweet-smelling sacrifice to God?

That your life would be a pleasant perfume in heaven? God savors. But then, finally, we are told in this passage that God equips.

[28 : 51] And where are we told this? Well, Paul, as he responds, even as he writes to what he is writing, he is overwhelmed by the implications of what he is penning, penning by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

And his response to it is found in verse 16 at the end. Who is equal to such a task?

Who is equal to such a task? Paul himself is affirming that he is to triumph in suffering. Paul is understanding that what he says is that he must be the aroma of Christ, that he is God's chosen instrument to spread abroad the beauty and the loveliness of Jesus.

Who is equal to such a task? It is as if Paul cries out, I can't do it. It's too much. I can't be expected to do all this.

Who am I to be the aroma of Christ? Who am I to spread this fragrance abroad? It's too much.

What about you? Do you share Paul's dismay?

[30 : 04] At one level, I hope you do. Perhaps as you contemplate making a commitment to Jesus Christ, perhaps as another year begins and you remain uncommitted, but you are not satisfied with the place where you find yourself.

But there is this nagging doubt, I can't do it. I could never be a Christian. I'm not good enough. I could never do these things. Or perhaps you are a Christian like Paul, but the enormity of what is being asked of you is overwhelming.

And you say, but I buckle under the pressure. My faith deserts me when there is suffering. I could never be like Jesus. I'm a hopeless Christian. The fragrance of Christ in my workplace, I've been there for so long and nobody seems to savor the loveliness of Jesus.

I'm hopeless. I'm no use. I can't do it. With Paul, you also say, who is equal to such a task? Who is equal to such a task? Well, listen to the answer that Paul provides to his own question. In chapter 3 and verse 5, we read, not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God.

[31 : 30] In actual fact, it is the same word that Paul uses here in verse 5 of chapter 3 as he is used in verse 16. Who is equal to such a task? It can be, for us, better understood, who is sufficient for such a task?

And in chapter 3 and verse 5, he uses the same word and he says, our sufficiency comes from God. Who is sufficient for this?

Well, our sufficiency comes from God. No, you are not competent. You are not sufficient in yourself, but our sufficiency comes from God.

God equips us. God makes us sufficient. Indeed, it is this same word that is used by God himself as he speaks to Paul with these well-known words, my grace is sufficient for you.

Paul, as he felt incapable, Paul, as he felt that he wasn't up to the task, these were the words that were given to him by God himself. My grace is sufficient for you.

[32 : 38] And so, while Paul understandably responds to what is being asked of him with this word or with this question, who is sufficient? Who is equal to such a task?

He himself is able to give the answer. My sufficiency is not in myself. I'm not competent in myself, but God grants sufficiency.

God makes you competent. God enables you. God equips you. In him, you are able to triumph and shine and perfume the world with the fragrance of Jesus.

Will you still insist that you can't do it? Will you still insist that it's too much for you to do? Because if you will, who are you questioning?

You're not questioning yourself. You're not engaging in some exercise of great humility. You are pointing the finger at God and you're saying, God, you are not sufficient for me.

[33 : 46] God, you are not able to make me this man that you present here in the Scriptures. I can't be that man because you are not sufficient. And will you point that accusing finger at God?

Will you be so bold as to accuse God of not being sufficient? That he is unable to make you the aroma of Christ? That he is unable to lead you in triumphal procession in the midst of pain and suffering and problems and frustrations?

Will you so accuse God? our sufficiency comes from God. He grants you the sufficiency required. What will 2010 be like for you? Will God lead you in triumphal procession in Christ? The first requirement is that you be a soldier of the all-conquering general.

Are you? Have you put your trust in Jesus? Are you able to say this morning there where you are seated in the pew are you able to say I am trusting in Jesus as my Lord and as my Savior.

[35 : 00] He is the general I follow. He is the one I obey. He is the one I have put my trust in. Are you able to do that? Are you able to say that? If not then you must and today is a good day.

For you to put your trust in Jesus. For you to come to Him and to recognize that you are a sinner and that you need of His grace and of His forgiveness. That you would ask Him to forgive you.

That you would ask Him to be your Savior and your Lord. And then that you would be led by God in triumphal procession in Christ and the one in whom you have placed your trust.

Put your trust in Jesus that He would be for you the fragrance of life. Because the dreadful solemn alternative is that He will remain for you the stench of death.

And Christian soldier, let us together be led by God in triumphal procession, triumphing in adversity, trusting in suffering, spreading the aroma of Jesus in an insipid world that the Father would delight in seeing His Son admired and enjoyed and savored in this city that God would grant us the sufficiency.

[36 : 32] Let us pray.