

The Triumphant March of Christ

2 Corinthians 2:11–17
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The ministry of the gospel is always challenging. Pastors have a lot of sleepless nights. We don't sleep on Saturday because we're thinking about what to say on Sunday, and we don't sleep on Sunday because we're too busy criticizing what we said. We lie awake, thinking to ourselves, 'I wish I had said this or that' or 'I could have made this point clearer.' And we don't sleep the other five nights of the week because we're too occupied with helping church members face their problems.

Even setting priorities for the ministry isn't as cut and dry as we thought it would be when we were in seminary. Should we seek a call to an established church or start a new one? Should we go to the mission field or teach in a Christian college or seminary? And even after we're established in a work, we'll eventually wonder whether it's time to move on. These are traumatic decisions. Whenever a pastor leaves one ministry to take up another, it's hard.

I can testify to this from personal experience. When the Bakersfield church called me almost twenty-five years ago, I didn't give an answer right away. My wife and I talked about it and prayed about it, but leaving Napoleon wasn't easy. Then, only a week after the church voted to call me, one of the church's elders contacted me to see if I had made my decision yet. I told him that I hadn't and explained why. His response was, "If we don't hear from you in the coming week, we're going to move on to the next candidate." Talk about pressure! Considering this call wasn't just an important decision for me and my family, but it had a time limit on it.

We sometimes assume that these kinds of things didn't happen to Paul. He was an apostle. But today's text says otherwise. He was just as conflicted in the ministry as everyone else is.

Troas, Titus and Corinth

Paul's first conflict is in verses 12 and 13. He wrote, *Furthermore, when I came to Troas to preach Christ's gospel, and a door was opened unto me of the Lord, I had no rest in my spirit, because I found not Titus my brother: but taking my leave of them, I went from thence into Macedonia.* This is all that Paul wrote about this situation here. He then talked about other things that crossed his mind. But he returned to it in chapter 7. We'll talk about what he said there in a few weeks, Lord willing.

What did Paul mean? What was going on? It's actually very simple. Paul had been preaching the gospel in Troas, a small city on the northwestern edge of Asia Minor, waiting for Titus to arrive with a report on the situation in Corinth. But Titus never came. So, Paul decided to cross the sea into Macedonia, hoping to meet him along the way.

So, what was Paul's conflict? It's this: he had to choose between staying in Troas to minister the Word of God and leaving to find Titus and perhaps continue his work in Corinth. This decision was hard for two reasons. One is that ministering in Corinth wasn't easy. Paul knew this only too well because he had been there twice and had extensive correspondence with the church. He knew their problems, which were both many and serious. No pastor wants to go into a situation like this.

The second reason this decision was hard for Paul is that the Lord had opened a door for him to minister in Troas. Earlier, during his second missionary journey, he stopped in Troas, but there's no reason to think he started a church there at the time. On the contrary, he had to leave Troas quickly because God called him elsewhere. Acts 16:8–9 says, *And they passing by Mysia came down to Troas. And a vision appeared to Paul in the night; There stood a man of Macedonia, and prayed him, saying, Come over into Macedonia, and help us.* According to our text, Paul returned to Troas sometime later and his ministry was starting to flourish. As a faithful minister, I'm sure he had a great longing to see the people of that city come to know the Lord. He had to ask whether the Lord really wanted him to leave this work to return to one that was saddled with insufferable problems and might not survive anyway. It was a hard call.

We know how it turned out. Paul left the folks in Troas in order to find Titus and perhaps return to Corinth. This was a case of a man leaving ninety-nine sheep in the wilderness to find one that was lost (Luke 15:1–10). As for Troas, Paul left the work there in the Lord's hands, and the Lord blessed it. By the time Paul returned on his third missionary journey, a sizable church had been established.

It's easy to set our priorities when we're sitting at home in front of a cozy fireplace and everything's going well. But when we actually have to make a decision, it's different. How do we decide what to do? What factors should we consider? Where is the Lord leading us? How do we know that he's leading us here and not somewhere else?

The Savor of Christ

This takes us to the rest of our text — verses 14 and following. In verse 14, Paul's attitude had changed completely. He had been conflicted. When he described his conflict in chapter 7, he said that he was depressed. But in verse 14 he broke out into an exuberant celebration of God's

goodness, thanking him for a marvelous victory. He wrote, *Now thanks be unto God, which always causeth us to triumph in Christ, and maketh manifest the savour of his knowledge by us in every place.*

Paul reflected on Roman victory celebrations when he wrote these words. In these celebrations, the victor led his retinue in a chariot drawn by four horses. His advisors and counselors followed behind him, with the soldiers surrounding him on both sides. The captives trailed behind, making their way to the temple of Jupiter, where most of them would be executed. Meanwhile, the priests of Jupiter carried their censers full of burning incense that reminded the victors of their victory and the captive slaves of their impending death. The fragrance that filled the air was both a savor of life unto life for some and a savor of death unto death for others.

Of course, the savor Paul had in mind was the announcement of God's victory — the preaching of the gospel. Verse 14 identifies it as the savor of God's knowledge. And because Paul and Timothy preached this knowledge, they were also savors. Paul wrote in verse 15, *For we are unto God a sweet savour of Christ.*

Paul emphasized this in our text by using two different words for savor, both of which were used in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) to describe the offerings of the Old Testament (cf. Num. 28:1–2). One word occurs in verses 14 and 16, and the other in verse 15. There's one verse in the Bible that puts both words together and applies them to the finished work of Jesus Christ. Ephesians 5:2 says, *And walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us, and hath given himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweetsmelling savour.* It means that Jesus was the ultimate incense that ascended into the Father's nostrils as a pleasing aroma. And everyone who is in him is also an aroma pleasing to God because of his work on our behalf.

But trying to figure out how Paul applied this to himself is another matter. Verse 14 literally says that God led him and Timothy in the triumph march. That is, they were the captive slaves that were to be executed. But many commentators over the years didn't think this was quite right. Paul was saved. He must be a victor, not a condemned captive. Calvin was one of them. He suggested that we understand the verb *triumph* in a causative sense, i.e., it's not that God was leading Paul and Timothy to their executions, but that he was making them triumph through his Son. Calvin's reasoning was so persuasive that the KJV translators adopted it. Our text says, *Causeth us to triumph.* However, research over the last few decades makes this position almost untenable. Even the NKJV left it in the dust. The NKJV says that God *leads us in triumph.*

Despite Calvin's objections, the literal meaning makes perfect sense. Paul was a slave to Jesus and his people. We might say that this was his favorite self-description. It's how he identified himself to the church in Rome: *Paul, a slave of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle* (Rom. 1:1). In this very letter he wrote, *For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus'*

sake (2 Cor. 4:5). And not only did he see himself as a slave, but he was also executed for Christ — figuratively when Jesus met him on the Damascus highway, and literally after he finished his earthly race. He told the Galatians, *I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me* (Gal. 2:20). Jesus killed everything Paul had been in order to make him a living instrument of his grace to others.

This takes us to Paul's second conflict in our text. Being the fragrance of God's grace meant that his ministry had a twofold effect, just as the incense of the Roman priests signified triumph to the victors and death to the captives. Verse 15 says, *For we are unto God a sweet savour of Christ, in them that are saved, and in them that perish*. Do you see the tremendous weight that Paul carried? Do you see the conflict every minister of the gospel bears? What does the preaching of the gospel do? Verse 16 says, *To the one we are the savour of death unto death; and to the other the savour of life unto life. And who is sufficient for these things?*

This is something I struggled with in my early ministry. One of the first discipline cases I encountered was a man whose wife discovered his adultery. He moved out of his house and lived in a small trailer in a cornfield. I tried to visit him. Although obviously home, he wouldn't answer the door. Over the next several days, I tried to connect with him many times, but he avoided me like the plague. I couldn't reach him. I never saw him again. He was excommunicated from the church.

While all of this was going on, I reflected on today's text. It really struck me that the same gospel that so tenderly draws sinners to Jesus for salvation and assures us of everlasting life repels sinners who want nothing to do with him and seals their everlasting doom, as long as they remain unrepentant. Like Paul, I asked myself, *Who is sufficient for these things?* Who can bear such a heavy burden? How can I preach the gospel knowing that it might confirm sinners in their rebellion against God?

The answer, of course, is that the ministry isn't my work; it's God's. He didn't put me here to do what I want to do but what he wants me to do. And I have to trust him to accomplish his purposes, which I may not understand. As for me, I need to trust that he'll work in and through me. This was Paul's conclusion as well. He wrote, *Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think any thing as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God; who also hath made us able ministers of the new testament*.

Faithful ministers preach the Word of God faithfully despite the conflicts we endure. The last verse of our text says, *For we are not as many, which corrupt the word of God: but as of sincerity, but*

as of God, in the sight of God speak we in Christ. Many preachers corrupt the Word. They're hucksters or peddlers, which is literally what the word translated *corrupt* means. They're only in it for the money. But not the apostle Paul, who, as he wrote later, supported himself in Corinth by making tents.

This verse teaches us four things about Paul's faithfulness. First, he was sincere. He didn't manipulate others. He had no ulterior motives. Second, he was *of God*, i.e., commissioned by God to the gospel ministry. He didn't take this work upon himself; God entrusted it to his care. Third, he did his work in God's sight, knowing that the Lord would hold him accountable for it on the last day. And fourth, he spoke *in Christ*. He wasn't a philosopher or politician. His only goal was to magnify the one who unites sinners to himself by faith.

Not everyone is called to the ministry. Some are; some aren't. But every believer is called to serve Jesus Christ. We all face conflicts and challenges and hard choices in whatever we do. Let's remember that God leads every one of us in his triumphant march. He executes the sins in our lives and makes us alive to serve his crucified and risen Son. This is the God we all love and serve for the sake of the gospel. Amen.