Text: 2 Corinthians 2:12-17
Title: Distressed but Thankful
Truth: We thank God for victory in Christ and for advancing the gospel through us.
Date/Location: November 30, 2025 at FBC (rev. from 10/9, 23/2005)

Introduction

The high-level outline of this passage is that there are two major sections. The first in is in verses 12-13 and it has to do with Paul's distress caused by the missing Titus. He was anxious despite the fact of a fruitful ministry. The second section starts at 14 and runs until verse 16a or 17 and is a word of thanks to God for spreading the gospel through His servants. Paul uses a rich metaphor to explain that the gospel is received in two very different ways.

It is not immediately evident how these two sections are connected. This "problem" is heightened by the fact that if you read 2:12-13 and then jump over to 7:5, it seems like you skip four chapters of material that are a digression from the storyline. In fact, 20 years ago when I preached through 2 Corinthians, I actually treated 2:13-14 and 7:5-7 about Paul's distress and how he later found comfort while in Macedonia. There is nothing wrong with that, but I am convinced there is a little nugget in how the two pieces of text relate to one another. We will see that momentarily.

I. Paul's Fruitful but Anxious Time in Troas, v. 12-13

A. The two short verses can be summarized like so: Paul had a wonderful opportunity for the gospel in the city of Troas, but at the same time he was restless or anxious in spirit because Titus had not arrived as previously planned.

B. Sometimes we have fruitful times in our spiritual life or the life of the church or ministry; other times we have anxious times; and sometimes we experience both at the same time. Paul had both at the same time.

C. Despite the fact that many people put Paul on a pedestal and think he is second to Christ in near perfection, he is very relatable to us. He is not at all perfect. In fact, we could question whether he

should have been anxious at all. How could Paul not follow his own teaching in Philippians 4:6-9? Of course, the reality is that teaching it is one thing; putting it into practice in a variety of life situations is a different matter. It is easy to show a child how you tie shoes. But for the child to get the hang of it takes some practice. It is easy enough for the Lord to stay calm and at ease, but it takes us some time to get the hang of it—and a lot longer than the time it takes to learn to tie shoes. This matter of not being anxious is simple in theory, and we can teach others about it, but living it is a different matter!

D. The circumstances surrounding this are a bit difficult to reconstruct but seem to go something like the following. Paul had been in Ephesus for a stretch of several years. During that time, he had made a brief but painful visit to Corinth and then returned to Ephesus. Later several factors induced Paul to make alterations to his travel plans. He wrote them the "severe" letter from Ephesus to help straighten out their problems, sent it by the hand of Titus, and expected to hear back from Titus afterward. He had apparently arranged to meet Titus in Troas. Paul went via Troas but continued on farther when he did not find Titus.

F. As with everywhere Paul went, he tried to press the door open for the gospel of Christ. He was not only passing through enroute to Macedonia but was doing something "useful" along the way.

When Paul had been on his second missionary journey, he had passed through Troas on the way to Philippi (remember the Macedonian call, Acts 16?). The gospel preaching he might have done then, or the m ore likely the ministry referenced in this verse, which was toward the end of his third missionary journey, would probably be the reason that there was a church there in Acts 20:7. That church was the one where he preached on Sunday evening so late that Eutychus fell out of the third floor and had to be resurrected!

Note that a door "stood open" (perfect tense) for the apostle while he was in Troas. The Lord Jesus Christ opened that door of opportunity for him. As an apostle, Paul may have had direct revelation that this was the case. We do not have such revelation

today and so must determine through other means whether the door is open for the preaching of the gospel. In our country, dear friends, it stands wide open. The opening is a huge cargo door for us to go through. We need not wonder or ask if that is the case. We simply need to invest our effort in telling others of Christ.

F. Despite this good thing happening, Paul had no rest in his spirit. In other words, he was spiritually and emotionally troubled about something. The reason is that "I did not find Titus." But it was not really Titus that Paul was concerned about (I know, that sounds bad!). What concerned Paul was the *news* Titus would bring about the situation in Corinth—whether they had amended their ways, had a renewed appreciation for Paul and the gospel—or whether they seemed to be slipping away from Christ. And since Titus was the messenger from them, Paul had to find him.

   As far as we are concerned today, are we concerned? Are you concerned if you are *not* concerned? Do we genuinely care about the state of our brothers and sisters, our sister churches, our church plants, our missionaries? Would we care enough to actually be distressed and have a bad feeling in our stomach about them? This is a manifestation of love for the brothers—Paul for Corinth and us for our churches.

G. As a result of his restlessness, Paul decided to move on to Macedonia to find Titus. This means that he left the open door behind! Sometimes this may be necessary but generally we should capitalize on open doors for ministry instead of leaving.

II. Paul Thanks God, v. 14-17

A. The subject matter of this section is that Paul thanks God for victory in Christ and for employing him as a vehicle for the gospel.

B. The tenor of this passage is very exuberant, a big shift after the depressed state of mind in verse 13. This abrupt change of thought from the difficulties of Paul's ministry to a tone of thanksgiving is what I mentioned earlier about the relationship between the two sections being difficult to ascertain. There seems to be such a dramatic change in subject matter that they are almost unrelated.

C. But they are related! Paul has had wonderful fruit in gospel proclamation in Troas and elsewhere. Even though his spirit is restless and anxious about another matter, he is reminded of the power of God to lead him through the most difficult circumstances.

D. This leading is not a "barely make it" kind of leading, but rather a victorious one. Paul is thankful to be on God's side, to be led by God, and to be a channel of the good news despite the fact that he is inadequate for all this and that many people consider his ministry to emanate the stench of death. The apostle's thoughts are inspired to shift for a few pages of his letter from his unrest in Troas and Macedonia to the general triumph that is his in the gospel ministry, and probably to the outcome of the Corinthian situation, to which he will come in chapter 7.

E. Here is a lesson we should learn from Paul's shift of mindset: always go back to thanksgiving to God when you are in troubled circumstances. It will lift your spirits. Do not wallow in your miry thoughts, the negativity, anxiety, stress, restlessness, the past, the failures, the baggage. You can go over it and over it and over it again, and it will not change it one little bit. Instead, turn your brain toward thanks-thinking, and your spirit toward thanks-praying, and your lips toward thanks-speaking, and you will see a change.

F. Two reasons for thanksgiving. Paul thanks God for two reasons: first, that He leads us in triumph and second, He manifests a fragrance of the knowledge of Christ through us.

1. The Triumphal Procession. The verb in verse 14 has the nuance to "lead in a triumphal procession" rather than "to cause to triumph." While the latter is true, i.e., that God does give us ultimate victory, in this context Paul is using the image that we are part of a victory parade with God and Christ at the head. One dictionary puts it this way: "The picture is the triumphal entry of a military hero into the city of Rome. The victorious Roman general marched into the city in a long procession preceded by the city magistrates. They were followed by trumpeters, then the spoils taken from the enemy, followed by the king of the conquered country, then officials of the

victorious army and musicians dancing and playing; and at last the general himself, in whose honor the whole wonderful pageant was taking place…Paul represents himself as one of the victorious general's soldiers sharing in the glory of his triumph." See also Col. 2:15.

In spite of seemingly insurmountable difficulties (e.g., the problems in Corinth, the "sentence of death" in 1:9, the missing Titus), God demonstrates his all-surpassing power to give the victory.

2. The second verbal form (*diffuse*) means to make manifest. What is being made manifest? The text says the sweet savor or fragrance of His knowledge. This refers to the knowledge of Christ being spread out like the wafting of an aroma over a distance. If we keep our thinking in terms of the triumph parade, this ties in with the fragrant aromas of flowers, spices, incense, and perfumes that would waft throughout the parade route. Paul is using the fragrance to illustrate the **advance of the gospel of Christ by which people come to know God**.

   There are at least three important points to get from this picture. First, it is "through us." The apostolic ministers, and I hope you agree that we as well, have the privilege of having the knowledge of Christ diffused through us.

   Second, it is "in every place." This is not just in some places where the apostles go, but in every place.

   Third, it is God who is doing the manifesting. This is significant as we will see in the next verse.

G. Verses 15-16 explain the aroma image. The parade incense and flowers waft up to God and He is pleased with it. Wherever Paul ministers the gospel, this fragrant offering is coming up before God, something like the smell of an Old Testament sacrifice or incense at the temple.

   At the parade, the wafting fragrances of all that was going on represented at the same time two things: victory for the general and his soldiers, and defeat and death for the captives. One smell, two associations.

The fragrances of licorice, mint, lavender, and mango are polarizing. Each has a single scent, but different responses based on previous experiences, genetics, and olfactory tuning. To some, the sweet smell and taste of a mango are wonderful. To others, it is sickening. This is just like the polarizing nature of the gospel.

1. Sweet aroma to God. The amazing thing is that Christians are a fragrance of Christ to God. God himself is the one manifesting this knowledge through us. He Himself is pleased with this. The word used here is slightly different than the one for a general "smell" in verse 14; this word refers to a sweet odor, a good-smelling thing. We are this way whether we are in the midst of those being saved or those who are perishing, which are the only two groups of people that exist.

   The measure of your life and ministry is not ultimately now many converts you make, but whether or not his ministry is a sweet savor to God, that is, he is truly presenting the message of Christ.

2. Deathly aroma to the unsaved. Many places and people are not friendly to the gospel. Some do not like the "smell" of the Christian minister and want to get rid of him. To those who are perishing because of their sins, Christians smell like defeat and death. The message of Christ to them leads to death because they are rejecting it. After all, the gospel message does have a negative side to it (Rom. 1:17-18).

3. Aroma of life to those who are being saved. We are a blessed fragrance to those who are being saved. The message is one that brings eternal life and it is welcomed.

H. The fact that we are a "vehicle of the gospel" could be illustrated using this modern phrasing: "we are influencers for Christ." Someone becomes an influencer by building a following and using words and actions to affect the opinions and actions of those who watch them. We should do that to impact people's opinion and behavior regarding Christianity! Our life is an influence. Our words are an influence—not for our own advantage or benefit, but for the advantage of Jesus. We all are supposed to be influencers for Him.

III. Paul Expresses Humility

A. In light of this, no one is sufficient for these things, Paul says by way of rhetorical question. Who could be? The job of preaching the gospel is more critical than that of the trauma room surgeon working on a life-and-death case. This is true for all of us as gospel ministers. We may not feel the ER sense of urgency, but the reality is that people's eternal destiny is determined by to their response to Christ.

B. Who could be adequate as a minister of such an important, life-and-death message. The answer is no one—that is, if you are really trying to be true to the message. If you water it down and make it palatable to everyone, then many people could be "sufficient," or at least think they were, because there would be no edge to their message. There would be no line in the sand because the message would fit everyone's desires and interests. This is just the of verse 17.

C. Paul uses a word that means to peddle or huckster. The object is the word of God, that is, the gospel message. He speaks of twisting the message and seeking profit from the mutation that results. There are many people who do this. Paul says "many" or "the majority" were doing this at the time of his writing.

Paul does not go about with a twisted message for greedy gain. Rather, he speaks sincerely the message from God. He is aware that he speaks it before God (in his sight), so he does not alloy the message with any impurities. There are no hidden pretenses or motives here. To use the earlier metaphor, Paul is not mixing in worldly aromas with the heavenly aroma to get a combination that will please an unbelieving audience.

Conclusion

What a wonderful privilege that we have to be led in triumph after the victorious risen Savior, with Him supernaturally diffusing through us the knowledge of Him in every place. If we allow ourselves to be proper channels, then we can be the ones who are the aroma of life unto life and death unto death. But we have to not peddle the word, not twist it nor go for greedy gain in any way.

Our gratitude to God for being in this place of victorious privilege and service for the gospel overpowers our occasional distresses.

MAP

The Aroma of Death: A Giant 'corpse flower' blooms in Germany

October 21, 2005

BERLIN (Reuters) - The world's tallest -- and smelliest -- flower has bloomed, reaching a height of 2.94 meters, 18 centimeters more than the previous record for the species, the Stuttgart botanical garden said on Friday.

The Titan Arum, or Amorphophallus Titanum, nicknamed "corpse flower" because of its putrid stench, blooms rarely and briefly.

Garden staff have nicknamed the purple flower "Diva" and are charting its life on their web site, www.wilhelma.de.

But those keen for a glimpse, or a whiff, in person must be quick: just 24 hours after the 11 year-old plant produced its first flower, the bloom began to wilt on Friday.

The Titan Arum was discovered in 1878 in its sole indigenous habitat, the Indonesian island of Sumatra, and grows in cultivation in only a handful of places around the world.

Its scent has been likened to rotting fish or animal flesh.

"The smell is crucial to its survival in its natural habitat because it attracts pollinating carrion beetles and flesh flies," said botanist Franziska Lo-Kockel.

Lo-Kockel brought the bulb of the plant, weighing some 40 kilograms, from the University of Frankfurt to the Stuttgart gardens 11 years ago.