

Introduction

- When you learn about Paul's life from Acts and his letters, you quickly discover that he was no stranger to disappointment, unexpected turns, and even seasons of intense worry.
- He was bold, courageous, and very uniquely called as an apostle, but he was also human.
- He carried burdens, faced uncertainty, made plans that didn't unfold the way he hoped.
- And if we're honest, that's familiar territory for us too.

Issue/Significance

- All of us know what it feels like to walk through seasons when our plans fall apart.
- When relationships become complicated.
- When decisions weigh heavily on our hearts.
- When the future feels unclear.
- And sometimes, like Paul in our passage this morning, those moments leave us restless on the inside.
- We keep doing what God has put in front of us, but on the inside, we're unsettled, distracted, maybe even discouraged.

Invitation to the Text

- 2 Corinthians 2:12-17 gives us a window into that very kind of moment in Paul's life.
- He's in Troas and God is opening doors for the gospel there.
- Yet, at the same time, he's deeply troubled by the situation in Corinth, and waiting anxiously to hear a status report from Titus.
- Paul is committed, but his heart is now divided between Troas and Corinth.
- His spirit is unsettled, and his plans change because of it.
- But this passage isn't about Paul's anxiety, it is about what Paul does with his anxiety.
- It's about the shift in perspective that moves him from a place of restlessness to gratitude, from uncertainty to confidence, and from weakness to worship.
- Because right in the middle of this difficult season, Paul remembers a truth that does not change:
In Christ, God always leads us in triumph.
- And remembering this constant reality anchors Paul in the midst of the storm.

Organizational Sentence and Outline

- So, please keep your Bibles open to 2 Corinthians 2:12-17.
- And following Paul's train of thought, we'll be looking at this passage in three parts:
 - I. A Change of Plan (vv. 12-13)

- II. A Constant Reality (vv. 14-16a)
- III. A Commission by God (vv. 16b-17)

I. A Change of Plans (vv. 12-13)

Biblical Text

*12 When I came to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ,
even though a door was opened for me in the Lord,
13 my spirit was not at rest because I did not find my brother Titus there.
So I took leave of them and went on to Macedonia.*

Explanation

- Our passage this morning opens with Paul reflecting on a painful change of plans.
- Leading up to this passage,
the church in Corinth was planted by Paul and his partners and had great potential.
- But it didn't take long for them to develop serious problems.
- Their root issue was spiritual pride,
and this ultimately festered into divisions, factions, and even resistance to Paul himself.
- Paul addressed these issues when he wrote 1 Corinthians,
but the situation worsened.
- Things grew so strained that he had to pay them a visit,
a visit he calls in 2 Cor. 2:1 a "painful visit."
- After this painful visit, Paul and his partners returned to Ephesus,
and there, Paul wrote another letter,
urging the Corinthians to repent and deal with the divisive member.
- The plan was that Titus would deliver the letter
and later meet back up with Paul in Troas with news of how the church responded.
- So, Paul arrives in Troas, and things are going well.
The Lord is even opening doors as Paul preaches the gospel there.
But in the back of Paul's mind there's a nagging question:
"Where is Titus? Did the Corinthians respond? Did the letter help?
Or did it make things worse?"
- And we understand this kind of inner unrest, don't we?
 - Sending a hard message is one thing,
but waiting for the reply can be even harder.
 - You leave a difficult voicemail, or send a hard email or text message,
and the silence that follows causes you to dwell...
 - And the next thing you know, all you're thinking about
are the million possible responses that could be coming your way.
 - And you can't get much done.
- That is the state of mind Paul is in here in vv. 12-13.

- Paul says, *“When I came to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ, even though a door was opened for me in the Lord, my spirit was not at rest because I did not find my brother Titus there.”*
- And this is such a painful tension to be in:
 - There is a God-given opportunity in front of Paul, and a deep pastoral concern behind him.
 - Paul can see an open door, but he cannot walk through it because his heart is so divided by his deep concern for his friends back in Corinth.
- So, at the end of v. 13, he confesses, *“So I took leave of them and went on to Macedonia.”*
- And this moment highlights the ripple effects of the Corinthians’ sin.
 - Their pride was not only harming the church in Corinth, it was now affecting Paul’s ministry to the people in Troas.
 - Of course, Paul was able to do some preaching in Troas, and God clearly used it since He was the one who opened the door for Paul’s ministry there.
 - But Paul’s time was cut short because his heart was so burdened for the Corinthians.
 - Until he heard from Titus, he had no rest and wore himself out.
 - And unable to focus fully on the work of preaching to gospel in Troas, Paul makes a painful change of plan and decides to press on toward Corinth through Macedonia and hopefully meet up with Titus en route there.
- And this is a sober reminder for us as well:
 - Our sin rarely stays contained.
 - Whether it’s private sin that poisons us, conflict that hurts someone else, or division within a group, the impact of sin often extends farther than we realize.
 - Even small sins can send out wide ripples in the lives of others.
- That is what we see here.
- Paul leaves an open door in Troas because he’s weighed down by Corinth’s unresolved sin and uncertainty about their repentance.

Transition

- So, Paul’s plans change.
- With a heavy heart, he begins the difficult journey towards Macedonia, hoping to meet Titus along the way.
- Yet, even in the midst of what seems like a massive failure, Paul does something very right.
- And that is, Paul reflects on the situation from God’s vantage point.

- And this shift in perspective moves him from anxiety to gratitude.
- And that brings us to our second point...

II. A Constant Reality (vv. 14-16a)

Biblical Text

14 But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere.

15 For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing,

16 to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life.

Explanation

- Reflecting on what felt like a disappointing moment in Troas, Paul stops his train of thought, and turns from unrest to gratitude: “***But thanks be to God...***”
- And what is he thanking God for?
 - For an unchanging, constant reality —a truth that holds him steady even when everything else feels uncertain.
 - And that constant reality is that in Christ, God always leads His people in triumphal procession.
- And this isn’t some coping mechanism.
 - Paul isn’t pretending the situation in Corinth is fine, or suppressing his concern for the church.
- But what he is doing is remembering that while individual battles may be painful, the outcome of the war is settled – Christ has already won.
- And for those who call upon Christ as Lord, you are ultimately being led down the path of His victory.
- And Paul envisions this with the phrase “triumphal procession.”
 - This phrase refers to a Roman triumphus.
 - These were massive parades down the heart of Rome that celebrated a general’s victory.
 - Soldiers marched proudly, and defeated enemies were led as captives.
 - And Paul applies this imagery to the Christian life.
 - Now, commentators debate whether believers in this analogy are the soldiers or the captives.
 - But either way, the point is unmistakable:
 - Christ is the victorious One.
 - And those in Christ are those who have denied themselves and glean the benefits of His victory.
 - His triumph becomes our celebration march.
 - His victory becomes our victory.

- And what is that victory?
 - It is Christ's victory over sin and death, a victory that reversed the curse that began in Eden.
 - From the earliest promises given to Adam and Eve, through Noah, Abraham, David, and the prophets, God's response to humanity's rebellion was redemption, and His plan of redemption pointed to the coming of Christ.
 - And as we approach Advent and Christmas, we remember that the eternal Son of God came *down* to our fallen world for one purpose: to be lifted *up* on a cross and pay the penalty of our sin.
 - And it was there that Christ declared, "It is finished," securing salvation for all who believe.
 - And three days later He rose from the grave victorious.
 - And that is the triumph into which believers have been swept into.
- So, when Paul says God "always" leads us in triumph, he is reminding us that the Christian life is grounded not in our performance, but in Christ's finished work.
 - We walk in a victory that is not ours by right, but ours by grace.
 - And when we stop and reflect on this constant reality like Paul did, only then can we march onward with our heads held up high even in the face of disappointment.
 - And by doing so, we bring God glory.
- That said, that is why Paul extends the image further:
 - *"Through us [God] spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ everywhere."*
 - Just as the Roman processions filled the streets with incense, God spreads the aroma of Christ through His people wherever they go.
- This, too, is part of God's purposes.
 - God's ambition for His glory is found throughout all the Scriptures.
 - What Christ accomplished for fallen creation is to be put on display to all creation.
 - Isaiah 11:9 declares one day, *"the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord."*
 - 1 Peter 2:9 teaches that God brings us out of darkness so we can declare His light.
 - And the Great Commission itself in Matthew 28 is Jesus' own charge for us to go into all the world and make disciples.
 - God desires the knowledge of His Son to spread like a fragrance throughout the world and one of the ways He does that is through His people.
- But Paul also explains the sobering reality of this fragrance: it divides.
 - Look with me at vv. 15-16, ***"For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life."***
 - In other words, to some, Christ is the fragrance of life—they hear the gospel and are drawn to Him.

- To others, the same message smells like death
—it exposes their rebellion against this victorious Christ, and it pushes them away.
- This means that as we walk in Christ's victory,
we will experience mixed responses.
 - Some will rejoice in the gospel we live and proclaim; others will resist it.

Transition

- For Paul, even though he is troubled by the Corinthians
and uncertain how they received the letter he sent with Titus,
he takes comfort in this constant reality:
That Christ's triumph has not changed,
And Paul's task is simply to carry the aroma of Christ wherever God leads him.
- But this calling is weighty.
- To be the fragrance of Christ to both those who are being saved
and those who are perishing is no small responsibility.
- This is true for us as well.
- This raises a question: Who is sufficient for these things?
- And that question brings us to our third and final point....

III. A Commission by God (vv. 16b-17)

Biblical Text

16 ...Who is sufficient for these things?

17 For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God's word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ.

Explanation

- So, after describing this triumphant procession
and the sobering reality that we spread the aroma of Christ,
a fragrance of life to some and death to others,
Paul recognizes the weight of this responsibility and asks:
“Who is sufficient for these things?”
- And given the high stakes of this polarizing message,
the implied answer, of course, is *no one*.
 - No one is naturally adequate for a calling this weighty.
 - No one is strong enough, wise enough,
persuasive enough, or holy enough
to bear the aroma of Christ on their own.
- And yet Paul and his companions *have* been doing this very work for years,
with many coming to faith, and others literally chasing them out of town.

- Paul knows firsthand that *although* the aroma of Christ is a weighty calling, we can press onward and continue to speak, even in weakness, because, as he says in v. 17, we have been “*commissioned by God.*”
- Now, you might be thinking, “Yeah, but that’s Paul, what do I have to offer?”
 - Well, if this calling depended on what we have to offer, not even Paul would be qualified.
 - In fact, in the next chapter, Paul openly admits his sufficiency comes only from God.
 - The truth is this:
Everyone who is in Christ is qualified, because God does not call the ‘qualified,’ He qualifies those who calls...
 - Christ alone is the victorious one, and our worth is not in anything we offer to Him, but in the fact that He offered Himself for us.
 - Put everything you have to offer on one side of the scale, and when Christ steps on the other side, the scale will always tip toward Him.
 - Christ is of immeasurable value, and He gave Himself for us upon the cross.
 - And being purchased at such a high cost, we share in His triumphal procession, and are commissioned to spread the fragrance of the knowledge of Him everywhere, and we are sufficient for the task because the One leading us is God Himself.
- And now you might be thinking, “True, but how can He use someone like me?”
 - Well, God has a really good track record of using even the most inadequate people for His glory.
 - People like Abraham and Sarah, Moses, Gideon, Hannah, David, Jeremiah, Peter, and so many more...
 - God can and has used the runts of the litter and those with impossible odds for His eternal purposes.
- So, “Who is sufficient for these things?”
 - We are, on the basis of being in Christ, and therefore commissioned by God.
 - And even if we do not feel sufficient for the task, like Paul, we can press onward knowing the One who calls us and leads us is.
- And this proper understanding of our commission by God is in sharp contrast to those who are merely “*peddlers of God’s word,*” as shown in v. 17.
 - They recognize the appeal of Christ, but are only interested in treating His gospel like merchandise.
 - They soften it and reshape it into something profitable and popular, not polarizing.
 - They do not march in Christ’s triumph, instead, they set up shop and attempt to profit from the crowd.
- And Paul very bluntly says, “*We are not like that.*”
 - We speak:

- as people of sincerity,
- as those commissioned by God,
- and in the sight of God we speak in Christ.
- Our hearts are captivated by the truth, not personal ambition.
- Our sufficiency is not in ourselves, but in the One who called us.
- And our lives are lived out under God's gaze,
so we speak in Christ – under His authority, in His strength, and for His honor.
- This is how we spread the fragrance of Christ wherever God places us.
 - This is how we can bear the aroma of Christ
even when the road gets bumpy.
- And this is what moves Paul from restlessness to gratitude in v. 14,
*“But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession,
and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere.”*
- And the same truth strengthens us today:
 - For those who feel weak, inadequate, or unsure what God is doing in your life:
Your sufficiency does not come from your strength,
but from the victory of your Savior – so depend on Him.
 - For parents and grandparents:
When your efforts feel unseen or unappreciated,
remember that every moment spent cultivating the aroma of Christ in the home
is a moment done “in the sight of God” that can be used by Him.
 - For our young people:
In a culture that puts sin on parade, remember that you belong to Someone greater.
Your worth is in Christ, not in the approval of the crowd.
 - For our seniors and those homebound,
though you may feel limited, your prayers, encouragement, faithfulness, and example
are treasures in the sight of God that spread the fragrance of Christ.
 - For those suffering or in hardship:
Your perseverance is a powerful testimony.
As Robert Murray McCheyne once said, *“Some flowers must be broken or bruised
before they emit any fragrance ... all the sorrows of Christians do the same.”*
You may never fully understand your suffering,
but continued trust in Christ in seasons of great need
emits the fragrance of Christ to a world in desperate need of hope.
 - And for our entire church family:
May our deepest conviction be that this is Christ's church,
and therefore the aroma of Christ must surpass all other aromas.
Above all else, we must be a church that is truly centered on the gospel,
a church that is truly on triumphal procession
with Christ as our banner
and spreading the fragrance of the knowledge of Him as our ultimate goal.
Everything else must flow from that primary conviction.

Conclusion

- All in all, as we step back and look at Paul's words in 2 Cor. 2:12-17, we see a snapshot of life this side of eternity.
- Paul is burdened and restless, his plans have changed, and he's uncertain about what lies ahead.
- Yet, it's precisely at that moment that Paul lifts his eyes from his circumstances and remembers what is true.
- Though the ripple effects of sin are rarely contained, and though Paul's plans have been forced to change, a constant reality that steadies him is that God's leading never changes.
- *In Christ, God always leads us in triumphal procession.*
- The outcome of the war has already been settled; Christ's victory is certain.
- The triumph belongs to Christ, and in Him, we have been commissioned to carry a fragrance that cannot be hidden.
- And that is the aroma of Christ, the aroma every believer is called to bear.
 - No matter your age, your stage of life, your personality, or your present trials, if you are in Christ, the war has been won.
 - Rest in the victory that He has secured, and may the joy of your salvation, together with increasing faith, hope, and love, spread the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ wherever He has placed you.
- And if you're here today and do not yet know Christ, hear this:
Christ invites you into His triumph over the curse of sin and death.
Today, you can step out of the crowd and join in His triumphal procession.
Receive the gift of saving faith, believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and breathe in the life-giving aroma of Christ that leads to eternal life.