

# We Are The Aroma Of Christ

2 Corinthians 2:1-17

Key Verse: 2:15

**“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. For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing.”**

In the previous lesson we learned that God is the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who can comfort us in any trouble whenever we come to him. When we are comforted by God, we can become a source of comfort to others. In today's passage we learn Paul's shepherd heart and Paul's identity as the "aroma of Christ." We learn how he could have this identity even in the midst of difficult situations. Let's discover what it means to us to be the aroma of Christ.

## **I. Paul's shepherd heart for the Corinthians (1-11)**

In verses 1-11 Paul's great shepherd heart is revealed in two aspects.

**First, Paul was a man of tears (1-4).** Look at verse 1. "So I made up my mind that I would not make another painful visit to you." After Paul left Corinth, some people arose who did not acknowledge Paul's spiritual authority as an apostle of Christ. So they planted doubt about Paul's integrity and confused the whole church (11:12-15). Paul made an urgent visit to Corinth. Yet he could not solve the problem and returned with sorrow and anxiety. He called it a "painful visit." Paul decided not to make another painful visit. Look at verses 2-3. Paul did not want to grieve the Corinthians by rebuking them again in person. Rather, instead of visiting them, he wrote a letter. He hoped that they would repent through the letter. Then, when they met in person, they could share joyful fellowship together and mutually encourage one another. Here we see that Paul shared both sorrow and joy together with the Corinthians. He cared for them from his heart as a good shepherd.

Let's read verse 4. "For I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you." This verse reveals Paul's shepherd heart all the more clearly. Paul wrote a letter out of anguish of heart and with many tears. It is called "the severe letter," or "the letter of tears." Unfortunately, this letter was lost. Here we can see that Paul was a man of tears. Stoic philosophers say that tears are a sign of weakness and despise men who shed tears. But Paul's tears were different from the tears of ordinary people. There are many kinds of tears. There are tears of defeat, like those

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shed by the U.S. women's softball team at the Olympics after being defeated by Japan. Children cry when they are rebuked by their parents because they don't want to clean their rooms. Many women use tears as their weapon to get what they want. These kinds of tears may have no spiritual value. However, there are tears that are precious before God. When we shed tears over the love of God in Christ on the cross, this is precious to God. Tears of repentance are precious to God. King David committed the terrible sin of adultery and murder, and was rebuked by the prophet Nathan. David could have defended himself as a king. Instead, David went to God and repented his sin with tears (Ps 51). God was pleased and forgave and blessed David.

A shepherd's tears for God's flock are even more precious than tears of repentance. When we shed tears out of anguish and sorrow in the course of helping Bible students, it is beautiful in the sight of God. Paul was a man of such tears. Acts 20:19a shows us how Paul shepherded the Ephesians for three years. Paul said, "I served the Lord with great humility and with tears...." Here we learn that Paul's philosophy of shepherding was "humility and tears." Humility is to consider others better than oneself and to honor and respect and serve them (Php 2:3). Tears refers to a broken shepherd heart. Paul had a broken shepherd heart for God's flock. How then did he become such a man of tears? Before conversion Paul was merciless and cruel, very proud and abusive. He was there when wicked men stoned the righteous man Stephen. But he was changed when he met the Risen Jesus on the road to Damascus. Usually selfish and proud people are not easily changed. But Paul was really changed into a sacrificial and humble person who served God's flock with great humility and tears. This happened when Paul imitated Christ from his heart.

The gospels reveal that Jesus' heart was filled with compassion and tears for God's flock (Jn 11:35; Lk 19:41). Hebrews describes the life of Jesus well in 5:7, "During the days of Jesus' life on earth he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission." When we serve God's flock we need these kinds of tears. Once Dr. Samuel Lee encouraged all UBF leaders to have these kinds of tears by repenting our lack of shepherd heart. He added, "If repentance does not soften your hardened heart, go to the drugstore and buy eyedrops to somehow put tears in your eyes." When we shed tears for God's flock, God is pleased. God values these tears and surely blesses us. At this moment, I realize that my tears are drying up. O, Lord, please have mercy on me and restore tears in my heart for your sheep. Help me to know the heart of Jesus.

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**Second, Paul was a man of forgiveness (5-11).** Look at verses 5-6. It seems that someone in Corinth opposed Paul's apostolic authority by criticizing his integrity. This grieved not only Paul, but all of the Corinthian believers. Paul and a majority of Corinthian believers agreed to punish him. Then the man realized his sin and repented. However, there might have been some people who doubted the sincerity of his repentance. Some may have insisted that his punishment continue. They did not want to forgive him easily. But Paul said in verses 7-8, "Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him." The purpose of punishment is not to destroy one, but to establish him. Therefore, if a brother sins, we should help him to repent based on the truth. However, once he repents we have to forgive him without any conditions. How many times do we have to forgive? Peter had this question, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" (Mt 18:21) To forgive one or two times is hard. Seven times seems to be in the "saint" category. But Jesus said, "Not seven times, but seventy-seven times" (Mt 18:22). Jesus wants us to forgive unconditionally, without limit.

How can we do that? The parable of the unmerciful servant in Matthew 18 tells us how we can forgive others unconditionally. Our debt to God is like ten thousand talents, or millions and millions of dollars. On the contrary, the debt of our brothers against us is like one hundred denarii, or a few dollars. It is nothing compared to our debt to God. As God canceled our debt of sin out of compassion, we have to cancel the debt of others out of compassion. Otherwise, we will not be forgiven by God. In this way we learn how to forgive others and to grow in the image of Jesus.

Paul grew in the image of Jesus by learning how to forgive others. Look at verses 9-10. The reason he wrote them was to see if they would be obedient and stand the test in everything. Now, he asked them to forgive as he forgave. Not only did Paul forgive others, he helped Corinthian believers to forgive others. In that way he helped them to grow in the image of Jesus.

Verse 11 tells us further why we should forgive others. It is in order that Satan might not outwit us. When Christians hold grudges and bitterness toward one another in their hearts, they open the door for Satan to work. Satan's scheme has always been the same from the beginning. It is to plant doubt about God's love, and fear, in men's hearts. In this way Satan destroys the relationship between God and men, and between fellow Christians. Satan especially wants to divide and destroy the church. But when Christians forgive each other and love each other, Satan has no place to stand and must flee from the church of God. When Paul served gospel

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work, he was aware of invisible Satan who was working in subtle and deceitful ways. We also must be aware of Satan's schemes. Ephesians 6:12 says, "...our struggle is not against flesh and blood...but against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." A good shepherd like Paul is aware of Satan's schemes and fights with Satan, not with brothers and sisters. Let's learn to forgive others as Jesus forgave us. In this way let's grow in the image of Jesus like Paul did.

## **II. Paul's identity as the aroma of Christ (12-17)**

Look at verses 12-13. When Paul went to Troas to preach the gospel he found that the Lord had opened the door for him. Usually Paul went through an open door and did great work. But this time he could not. His heart was too troubled by the problems of the Corinthian church. When he could not meet Titus in Troas and hear a report about the Corinthian church, Paul left for Macedonia, hoping to meet Titus there. Usually people lose spirit and give up when things don't go well. Many start well in the mission of feeding sheep. But when problems arise that are not easily solved, they finally lose heart and give up. Then they lose spiritual desire and withdraw to live a family-centered life. But Paul was different. In spite of his hard situation Paul was filled with triumphant spirit in his heart.

Look at 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." This verse shows two thanksgiving topics of Paul. First, Paul thanked God who always led him in triumphal procession in Christ. In order to understand this verse we must know how a Roman general made his triumphal entry. The general was in the lead. Following him were his junior generals and other high officials, and following them were infantry soldiers. At the end of the procession were the captured enemies in chains. The soldiers carried burning incense to spread the smell of victory throughout the city. This triumphal procession was victorious and glorious for the Roman general. This honor was given to the one who won a great victory over enemies through fierce battle. The Roman army was usually victorious, but not always. Yet God always leads us to victory in Christ. So Paul always had victory. Paul thanked God for his victory.

The world we are living in is like a pyramid. The doorway of success becomes narrower the further people advance. Only a few people can experience success and have a triumphal spirit. Most people experience defeat and become fatalistic. But in fact everyone lives with a sense of defeat. It is not because of outward elements, but because of inner anguish over sin and the inevitability of death. Sin and death defeat every person without exception. No matter how successful or

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strong one may be, he is defeated by sin and death. Only Jesus Christ won the victory over the power of sin and death through his death and resurrection. Jesus told his disciples, "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." (Jn 16:33b) No one can say, "I have overcome the world" except Jesus Christ. Only Jesus Christ is the Victor. Christ shares this victory with those who believe in him. 1 John 5:4,5 says, "...for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God." Apostle Paul went through many hardships in order to preach the gospel. However, he was not crushed. He was filled with a spirit of triumph; he never lost his spirit. How could he be this way? It was because he was united with Christ. He shouted many songs of victory: "'Where, O death, is your victory?'...thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1Co 15:55-57). Again he cried out: "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us" (Ro 8:37). We may seem to fail, but in the end, there is no defeat in God. We win the victory in Christ Jesus. Even if we fail, God will change our failure into victory (Ro 8:28). God always gives us victory in Jesus Christ! Praise God!

**Second, Paul thanked God who used him to spread the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ everywhere.** These days worldly knowledge seems to be overflowing. There are different kinds of knowledge. Some worldly knowledge is meaningless "junk knowledge," like trivia. There is also knowledge that leads to destruction. Then again, some worldly knowledge helps us become professional people. That is why we students must study hard this fall semester. However, no worldly knowledge gives us salvation and eternal life. Only the knowledge of Christ gives us salvation and eternal life (2 Ti 3:15-17). God wants to spread the knowledge of Christ to the world so that people may be saved from eternal destruction. Without spreading the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ there is no salvation. That is why God wants us to preach the gospel in season and out of season (2 Ti 4:1,2).

Look at verses 15-16a. "For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life." In these verses, Paul continues the analogy of the triumphal procession. Christ is the King of kings who leads the triumphal procession. The parade ground is the whole world. And Paul is like the burning incense which signals Christ's victory over the enemies of sin and death. Here Paul identified himself as the aroma of Christ. This aroma has two different effects. It is the fragrance of life to those who are in Christ. When they smell the fragrance of

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Christ in Paul they have a sense of Christ's victory. They sing and rejoice and give praise to God. But to those who reject Christ, Paul is the smell of death. In a Roman procession, those who became captives were killed when the procession ended. When they smelled incense, they realized that death was near. When people reject Christ, they smell impending judgment through Christ's servants. In verse 15, Paul says "we" believers are the aroma of Christ. As we preach the gospel, to those who accept we become the fragrance of life. But to those who reject, we become the smell of death. Here we learn that receiving the gospel is not a small matter. It is a matter of life and death. Also, those who preach the gospel are not ordinary people; they are instruments of life and death. God wants to save people through us. We are very important people before God. We are God's fellow workers. We are the aroma of Christ to God. Wherever we go, there is the work of life and death through us.

Look at verse 16b. "And who is equal to such a task?" To be the aroma of Christ demands wholehearted devotion out of a pure heart. Look at verse 17. "Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God." Peddlers are those who sell cheap goods by any means to make some money. Christian peddlers share the word of God as if it were cheap goods. They emphasize the promise of good health, prosperity and human blessing without teaching repentance or the way of the cross. They gain followers, even crowds, who will support them emotionally and financially. But they are mere peddlers of the gospel. In Jesus' time, the Pharisees knew a lot about the Bible. But in their hearts they loved honor from people and money and they legalized divorce according to their caprice. They spread the stench of death and Jesus called them whitewashed tombs. We must feed God's sheep out of a pure motive to please God and to save others' souls. We must teach the whole truth of the gospel clearly until people repent and obey it and grow as Jesus' disciples. Then we can be the aroma of Christ.

Christ our King is in triumphal procession throughout the whole world to fulfill God's salvation plan. He shares his victory over sin and death with all who believe in him, and we become the aroma of Christ. We are the aroma of Christ! However, our aroma needs to be stronger. Our aroma comes from the shepherd heart of Christ, the sense of victory in any situation, and a pure heart to share the gospel sincerely before God. As we grow in these, the aroma of Christ in us will become strong, strong enough to all Chicago area campuses, to all American campuses, and to the whole world.