

Triumphal Procession

2 Cor. 2:12-17

Pastor Jason A. Van Bommel

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.

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. 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. – 2 Corinthians 2:12-17, ESV

Introduction: What's the Point of a Parade?

Why do we have parades? Generally, they are to celebrate something we're excited about, like a 4th of July parade that celebrates American freedom or a victory parade after a sports team wins a championship. Sometimes they are a display of impressive artistry, like the Tournament of Roses parade held in Pasadena, California, every New Year's Day, or a display of military power, in a military parade usually overseen by some egomaniacal dictator. The Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade may be the most watched parade in America every year, and in many people's minds it marks the beginning of the Christmas season.

In today's passage, Paul references a very well-known parade in the Roman world, called the Triumphal Procession, or simply the Triumph. Triumphs were fairly rare events in the Roman Empire, granted only to a military general who had been commander-in-chief on the battlefield of a great victory over a substantial enemy, having subdued territory to the Roman Empire. Thus, a triumph was not something which happened every year or even decade. They were almost legendary ceremonial parades of great pomp and high honors. The conquering commander would be at the head of the Triumph, followed by his army and by chained conquered enemies, who were now his slaves.

One report indicates that some of the conquered slaves in the triumph would be carrying incense burners, spreading the perfumed aroma that would announce the coming of the commander even ahead of his personal appearance. The Triumph would lead to a ceremony where the commander would be praised in poetry and song and also where an extravagant sacrifice would be offered to the gods on behalf of the conquering commander.

Interestingly, in 2 Corinthians, Paul introduces the triumph and uses it to explain Christ's victory and how it relates to his own Gospel ministry as a sudden interruption and aside from the story he's telling the Corinthians about his concern for them. Verse 14 – "But thanks be to God" – interrupts Paul's story of eagerly looking for Titus, which he then does not return to until chapter 7.

To see this clearly, here's 2 Corinthians 2:12-13 followed immediately by 2 Corinthians 7:5-6:

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.

For even when we came into Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were afflicted at every turn—fighting without and fear within. 6 But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus

Bible scholars refer to this section of 2 Corinthians, which begins at 2:14 and ends at 7:4 as "the great aside" and it is not only great in length – almost 1/3 of all of 2 Corinthians – but also in rich Gospel content. It shows that God inspired the writers of Scripture in ways that are unexpected but also in ways that allowed the personality and communication style of the authors of Scripture to be clearly seen, and Paul is known as someone who is both very logical and orderly but who can also get caught up in the emotion of the moment and go off on long tangents or extended expressions of praise.

1. Paul's Unsettled Spirit, vv. 12-13

Paul has been telling the Corinthians of their need to forgive the repentant sinner and has also been explaining to them his deep love for them as a church. He had told them that his change of travel plans had been done in love for them to spare them from a painful visit, and now he's catching them up on how he got to Macedonia and on how he heard about their positive response to his directions to them, which he got from Titus.

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.

Paul was so deeply concerned for the Corinthians and was so eager to hear Titus' report about them that he left behind an open door for ministry in Troas, in the area of what is today Northwest Turkey, and he headed over to Macedonia, northern Greece, eagerly searching for Titus. Paul had no rest in his spirit because he needed to hear from Titus how the Corinthians had responded to his urgent calls for church discipline and also how the sinful man himself had responded.

When you really care about someone, you do not have peace in your spirit as long as things are unsettled between you and you're unsure how they're doing. And, of course, in the ancient Roman world, they had no snapchat, no texting, no email, not even a reliable postal service or message delivery service. Communication often had to be face-to-face or in letters that were hand-delivered by trusted friends.

What we need to see here is that one of the marks of a genuine and faithful minister of the Gospel is a deep and personal concern for the people and churches the minister is called to serve. Paul tells us elsewhere of how much he prays for the churches, giving thanks for them and interceding for them before the Father. Here, we see that he will break off a season of fruitful ministry and travel to find Titus so he can know how the Corinthians are doing. This is genuine love.

Right as he's leaving to head to Macedonia, Paul interrupts his narrative. Why

interrupt at this point? Perhaps he is thinking of those critics who will be saying, “See, Paul is unreliable. He just up and left Troas.” Or perhaps he is getting excited because he is recalling the good news he got from Titus. We can’t know for sure.

2. Christ’s Triumphal Procession, vv. 14

What Paul says about Christ’s triumphal procession and his place in it has been debated by Bible scholars for centuries.

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.

Is Paul saying that he and his ministry partners are always triumphant in everything they do because God leads them as victorious conquerors? Or is Christ the One who has conquered, and they are led along behind Him – and if they’re being led along behind Christ as part of His triumphal procession, are they in the role of being one of the victorious conquering army or in the role of a conquered slave.

Central to rightly understanding this image here are two things:

1. How Paul consistently viewed himself in relation to Christ and
2. How this Greek word was consistently used in the Roman culture of the day.

In 1 Corinthians 4:9, Paul had written: “*For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men.*” This public spectacle language has close similarity to the language of a public triumph. Further, Paul repeatedly refers to himself in his letters as a slave to Christ – our translations usually say “servant of Christ.” Never does Paul refer to himself as a commanding general in Jesus’ conquering army. And still further, the job of spreading fragrant incense was almost certainly one given to a conquered slave.

To support this historical and contextual evidence, the Greek word is only found here in the Bible and its usage in other Greek literature of the time always means “to be led as a conquered captive by the triumphant one who has conquered you.”

So, when Paul says, “*thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession,*” he is seeing himself and his fellow Gospel ministers as those whom Christ has conquered and enslaved to His service. Paul is so thankful and praises

God for this, because he knows it is the best service to be in service to Christ and it is so much better than he deserves.

Further, Paul is deliberately contrasting himself with the so-called “Super Apostles” who sought to dominate Corinth and lead the church away from Christ and the true apostles. Paul isn’t making his travel plans based on self-interest, calculating where he can go to intentionally advance his name and fame or line his pockets from wealthy patrons. He is led by Christ as His slave in Christ’s triumphal procession, given the task to spread the aroma of the knowledge of Him everywhere. Paul isn’t trying to maneuver himself into being a super-start celebrity pastor best-selling author conference speaker. He’s praising God for the privilege of getting to be Christ’s conquered and enslaved incense carrier.

3. Our Fragrant Aroma, vv. 14-16

And what is this incense, this fragrant aroma God is spreading through faithful Gospel ministry?

and through us [God] spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him [Christ] everywhere. 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. – vv. 14b – 16a

“*We are the aroma of Christ to God.*” While we are in the world spreading the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ everywhere, we are doing so first and foremost as the fragrance of Christ to God. Incense in the Triumph served two functions: It spread the aroma that announced the Triumph of the conqueror to all who smelled it, but it was also – in a higher sense – a fragrance of worship. Here Paul may also be bringing in incense imagery from the Temple, where the priests kept the incense burning before the Lord day and night.

Jesus is the victorious redeemer. He has conquered sin and death by His death and resurrection. And He did this for us! As Paul writes in Colossians 2 –

And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the

rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him. – Colossians 2:13-15, ESV

Christ's triumph over the spiritual forces of wickedness – the rulers and authorities, Satan and his minions – frees us from our debt-bondage due to sin and make us His prize possessions, His ransomed and redeemed subjects. And we respond to the great victory Jesus won first and foremost by worshipping God with thankful hearts. Paul writes in Romans 12:1: *“I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship”* So, we are first the aroma of Christ to God. We belong to Christ, and we praise God through Christ.

But as we live our lives in this world, we also spread the aroma of Christ to those around us, especially as we engage in Gospel ministry. So, we are the aroma of Christ to God and among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. It's the same aroma in all three directions – the aroma of Christ. To God, it is our act of worship. To those who are saved, it is an aroma of life, as we encourage one another in the eternal life we have in Christ. And to those who reject Christ, it is the aroma of death, of their coming condemnation because Christ the triumphant victor is not their Lord and Savior, but He will be their judge.

The same act – the death, victorious resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ – at the same time brings glory to God for His grace, wisdom, and power in salvation, brings encouragement and life to those who are being saved, as they trust in Christ, and brings condemnation to those who are not being saved, as they reject Christ in the hardness of their hearts and would rather have their sin than a Savior from their sin.

Ministry: Sincerity and Insufficiency, vv. 16-17

As Paul considers the reality of this truth – that by faithfully proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ, he is spreading the aroma of Christ and is bringing life to some and death to others – he asks, *“Who is sufficient for these things?”*

And, of course, no mere human is. No one has the right to take that kind of power into their own hands to somehow try to manipulate or use it for their own advantage. And so, Paul goes on to say, *“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."

The reasoning here is clear and compelling: The more seriously you take the Gospel, the more seriously you must take Gospel ministry, and thus you must see yourself as wholly insufficient to the task. The only way anyone can engage rightly in Gospel ministry is "as commissioned by God" and the One who commissions hold accountable, and so we must be "men of sincerity" who "in the sight of God speak in Christ."

You get a further sense of the seriousness of the calling to Gospel ministry as Paul charges Timothy in the last chapter of his last-ever letter, 2 Timothy 4 –

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: 2 preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. 3 For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, 4 and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. 5 As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry. – 2 Timothy 4:1-5, ESV

If you begin with your eyes fixed on the people with itching ears who will not endure sound teaching, you'd be sorely tempted to tell them what they will hear, to simply scratch those itching ears. But if your eyes are first on the presence of God and of Jesus Christ who is to judge the living and the dead, then you dare not do so. Thus, all faithful Gospel ministry begins by asking, "What has the LORD charged and commissioned us to do?" and NOT with "What do people want to hear?" or "What would be really helpful to people?" or "What would meet people's felt needs?"

People don't always want to hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ. People don't always see the message of the death and resurrection of Jesus as helpful to their present life circumstances or as meeting their "felt needs." But the Gospel of Jesus Christ is what God has commissioned us to proclaim and share, and it is the only truly life-changing, soul-saving, reality-transforming messages in the world. Nothing else

could take our sins away, extend to us true forgiveness and reconciliation to God. And without forgiveness and reconciliation to God, nothing else really matters; it's all just life-coping strategies for short-term gain with no real eternal purpose.

Another way to think of it is this: If Jesus Christ died on the cross to forgive our sins and cancel the record of debt that stood against us, and if He rose again on the third day and ascended to heaven to sit at the right hand of the Majesty on high, and if He is coming again to judge the living and the dead and bring a final end to all evil, then we dare not think we can peddle the Word of God for selfish gain or manipulate the Word of God to please people. And if the Gospel is true, then the world doesn't need to hear anything else from us. They may not want to hear it, but they need to hear it, for it is the power of God for salvation for everyone who believes. And nothing else is.

So, in closing, let me ask you two things:

1. Will you pray for me as your pastor, for the elders and deacons as leaders and servant of the church, and for our missionaries, that all of us would be clearly focused on the Gospel of Jesus Christ, on spreading the aroma of Christ to God and among those whom God puts in our lives and ministries?
2. Will you consider the question: What do you smell like? What aroma is your life giving? Or another way to think about it: Whose parade are you in and why?