

The Triumphant Christ

2 Corinthians 2:5–17

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Pastor Trent Eastman

Introduction

This is our third week in our study of 2 Corinthians, and our passage today is 2 Corinthians 2:5–17. Throughout Paul’s ministry, he encountered much suffering and hardship. We have already seen a glimpse of it in his introduction to this letter, where he speaks of the affliction he experienced in Asia to the point of despairing of life itself (2 Corinthians 1:8). But today, in our passage, the pain he talks about is not only what he received from his enemies — it is pain that came from the church he planted in Corinth, from people he loved. What we will see is Paul using that suffering and hardship as a means of proclaiming the triumph of Christ.

The Situation Behind the Text

What do you do when someone hurts you? How do you respond when you are wronged? What goes through your mind? How do you react? These questions matter because they help us get to what has actually happened to Paul. He has been hurt by the church in Corinth in general, and a certain person within that church has caused him particular pain.

About six years before this letter was written, Paul planted the church in Corinth. After spending nearly two years there, he left to plant another church in Ephesus, where he would spend more than three years. While ministering in Ephesus, he received word that things were not going well in Corinth — a number of serious problems had developed within the church. So he wrote a letter of instruction to address them (this is 1 Corinthians), and soon after, he traveled from Ephesus to Corinth to see whether they had carried out his instructions.

What he found upon arrival was deeply discouraging. Not only had the church failed to follow his instructions, but a group of people whom Paul would later call, with unmistakable sarcasm, “super-apostles” (2 Corinthians 11:5; 12:11) had arrived and led the church astray. Part of the damage these so-called super-apostles had done was to turn the church of Corinth against Paul himself. When he arrived, he was publicly confronted and humiliated. His authority was challenged, his physical appearance mocked, his speech dismissed as unimpressive, and everything he did — or failed to do — was twisted around as evidence that he did not really

love them. Paul was devastated, not merely because of how he was treated personally, but because of what was happening to this church he had given years of his life to build. And it appears that one person in particular was leading the charge against him. We do not know who this was, but it was someone who caused Paul deep and lasting pain.

Paul returned to Ephesus and from there wrote a strongly worded letter. We no longer have that letter, but in 2 Corinthians 7:8 we read that it caused grief — and that the church in Corinth repented. When Paul eventually left Ephesus, he had planned to travel directly to Corinth, but he did not yet know how the church had responded to his letter. Rather than arrive in uncertainty, he sent Titus ahead to Corinth to find out, while Paul himself went to Macedonia to wait for news. As we will see in our passage today, Titus eventually found Paul in Macedonia with a good report: the church had repented. That report is what triggered the writing of 2 Corinthians.

There are many things Paul wants to address in this letter, but before he can get to them, he must deal with what we might call the elephant in the room. He needs to speak directly about the person who has caused him so much pain. This is where our text begins.

Discipline, Repentance, and Forgiveness

Now if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure — not to put it too severely — to all of you. For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him. For this is why I wrote, that I might test you and know whether you are obedient in everything. Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. Indeed, what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ, so that we would not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs. (2 Corinthians 2:5–11)

Many readers assume that the person Paul is describing here is the sexually immoral man he instructed the church to discipline in 1 Corinthians 5, and that is a natural inference if you read through the two letters casually in sequence. What Paul says here could certainly be applied to that man, but I do not think that is who he has in mind. Paul is describing someone who has caused *him* personal pain. Because the offense was against him, he is the one who must deal with it, and therefore if he forgives, so should they — which is exactly what he says in verse 10.

The deeper pain Paul is pointing to, though, is not his own humiliation. It is what the assault on him did to the church. They — the congregation — were hurt through what was done to

Paul. So when Paul writes in verse 9, “For this is why I wrote, that I might test you and know whether you are obedient in everything,” I hear him saying something like this: *I told you to deal with this situation not because I needed vindication, but because you had something in your church that needed to be addressed. You did not need to act on my account. You needed to act for your own good.*

And they did. We do not know what form the discipline took, but whatever it was, it was sufficient to bring about genuine repentance. So now Paul is telling them: stop. Reaffirm your love for that person. Care for him. Forgive him. Do not overwhelm him with excessive sorrow. I have forgiven him; so should you.

Notice in this passage the biblical principles of discipline, repentance, and forgiveness — and how inseparable they are. Through Christ, forgiveness is how God has dealt with our sin. And in the name of the Son, we have been given the mandate to forgive one another. But if “forgiveness” is used to ignore or enable ungodly behavior, it is not forgiveness at all. Scripture is clear: “*Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out*” (Acts 3:19). If the church of Corinth had not exercised discipline, and if that discipline had not led to repentance, Paul would not be telling them to forgive this man. But he does — which tells us that real repentance had taken place.

Repentance is the self recognizing the wrong that has been done — sometimes with deep grief — and turning away from those confessed wrongs toward what is true and right as the Lord has given it to us. Forgiveness is not how Christ allows us to walk our own path without consequences. Forgiveness is how Christ welcomes us onto the path He is walking, so that we may follow Him and be with Him where He is. Repent and be forgiven.

And as you have been forgiven, so too forgive. This is what Paul does, and this act of forgiveness — offered in response to genuine pain — is part of what he will describe in the verses that follow as a fragrant aroma spreading through the world and telling others about Jesus.

Sometimes forgiving is very hard, and sometimes genuine repentance from the one who has caused harm is still absent. What do you do then? You pray. You pray to the Lord who changes hearts. This is what Paul did while he waited in Macedonia, praying for the church of Corinth — and the day came when he heard the answer to those prayers.

The Triumphal Procession

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. So I took leave of them and went on to Macedonia. (2 Corinthians 2:12–13)

I find this passage amazing and beautiful. Paul is a missionary. He is the apostle who counted all things loss and became all things to all people. And yet his love for the Corinthians was such that an open missionary door could not hold his attention while the Corinthian question was unresolved. His pain was not primarily about what had been inflicted on him personally. His pain was for a church that was hurting. As much as he longed to bring the gospel to the Gentiles, his care for the church ranked above even his evangelism.

When Titus finally found him in Macedonia and reported what was happening in Corinth (7:6–7), Paul rejoiced. The church had turned back from the wrong road they had been walking. To that news, Paul was overjoyed, and he bursts into praise. We will hear that praise even louder when we reach chapter 7, but Paul cannot wait to share with them who Jesus is, what he has done, and what it means for who we are. He declares:

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. 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. Who is sufficient for these things? (2 Corinthians 2:14–16)

This is the theological heart of our passage. It is a declaration of praise, but it is also Paul's way of making sense of the pain he has just described.

In the Roman world of Paul's day, a triumphal procession was the single most dominating image of conquest. Its entire purpose was to display Rome's dominance over a defeated enemy. The conquering general rode on a four-horse chariot, dressed in the finest armor, his face painted red, with a slave holding a crown over his head. In front of him marched the city dignitaries, the spoils of war, and the hand-picked Roman soldiers who had won the campaign. Along the entire procession route, incense burned.

But behind the chariot — those being led — were the conquered. Defeated kings. Princes. Queens. Their families. Their most valiant soldiers. These people walked in chains, many of them stripped naked, while the crowd jeered and spat at them. At the end of the procession, most of these captives would be put to death. For them, the triumphal procession was a death

march. The burning incense they smelled along the route was, for them, the smell of death. For the conquerors, that same incense was the smell of victory.

Paul now takes this powerful image of conquest and applies it to Christ. Jesus is the one who has conquered. He is the King of kings who leads the procession. “*Christ always leads us in triumphal procession.*” But where does Paul see *us* in this procession? Are we the city dignitaries out in front? Are we the hand-picked soldiers Christ used to conquer others? Or are we the conquered — people whom Jesus has claimed as his own?

There is a genuine debate about this verse, and I suspect we would much prefer to see ourselves as the honored dignitaries or the elite soldiers of the Lord. But neither of those images fits what Paul is communicating in this letter, and neither fits the reality of Paul’s own life.

Over and over, Paul describes himself as a person who has been conquered by the Lord. He was once an enemy of Christ — but Christ captured him, and now he is a slave of Christ. In Christ’s triumphal procession, Paul presents himself as one of the conquered, a man in chains walking behind the chariot. His apostleship is not a victory lap. It is Christ’s victory *over* Paul — Christ having conquered the great persecutor of the early church and now parading this one-time enemy through the world as evidence of the gospel’s power.

This is Paul’s message again and again when he recounts being stoned and left for dead in Lystra, lowered in a basket from the Damascus wall, stripped and beaten with rods in Philippi, fighting wild beasts in Ephesus, and in less than a year facing a beating in Jerusalem, then arrest by Roman soldiers, and more than five years of imprisonment. And to all of it, recall what he writes in Philippians 1:12–13:

I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ.

That is the point Paul is making. As a captive of Christ, conquered by him, Paul is being paraded through the world. People scorn him, mistreat him, abuse him — and that is all right, because every bit of it bears witness to the victory of Jesus Christ.

And in this faithful following of Jesus, as he forgives those who persecute him and endures what comes, something happens: “*through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere.*” His suffering, met with faithful perseverance, is like a censer releasing incense. The aroma rising from it is the knowledge of Christ spreading into the watching world.

Some will see in Paul’s suffering and weakness the glory and victory of Christ. To them it is the fragrance of life. But to those who see in Paul and his crucified Lord nothing but defeat and death, it is the fragrance of death.

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. Who is sufficient for these things? (2 Corinthians 2:15–16)

Paul will answer that question in just a few verses. “*Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God*” (2 Corinthians 3:5). We will take that up next week.

Undiluted Wine

Paul closes this section with a statement that, in English, can feel disconnected from what came before, but which is in fact reinforcing his entire argument:

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 2:17)

The Greek word translated as “peddlers” would be better rendered *hucksters*. It is more than a word for selling something at a profit — it carries the sense of cheating people, the way a marketplace vendor might water down wine and sell it as the real thing. Paul has just said something very difficult: *I am one of the conquered in Christ’s triumphal procession, and it is through suffering, forgiveness, and faithful endurance that, by his grace, the fragrance of the knowledge of God goes out from me.* That is undiluted wine.

The diluted version would say: *We are the city magistrates who share in the plunder but none of the hardship. There are no thorns in our flesh.* That is the huckster gospel.

But that is not Paul’s gospel. Paul speaks of a thorn in the flesh (2 Corinthians 12) through which the glory, power, and grace of God are revealed. He reinforces this with one more striking word in verse 17 — the Greek *ελικρινειας*, translated into English as *sincerity*. This word literally means “judged by sunlight.” It was used to describe something untainted, undiluted, with nothing hidden. That is what Paul is claiming: hold my life up to the light of God, and you will find nothing concealed, nothing watered down. The cracks are visible. So is the glory of God shining through them.

Application

So what does all of this mean for us today? If you have believed upon Jesus Christ, here is the undiluted gospel truth of our passage: Christ has conquered you and is parading you through the world as his trophy. It is through your suffering, your forgiveness, and your faithful endurance as his captive that the fragrance of God spreads everywhere. In the sight of God, this is how we speak in Christ.

Consider what this looks like in everyday life.

The fragrance of Christ goes out from us when we practice forgiveness. Look at what Paul does in this passage. He has been publicly humiliated, his authority mocked, his love twisted into evidence against him. And when the man who led that charge repents, Paul's word to the church is simple: forgive him. Reaffirm your love for him. That is not weakness. That is the aroma of Christ.

Forgiveness is not pretending the wrong was not done. It is not the silencing of grief. But where there is genuine repentance — not merely the discomfort of being caught, but a real turning away from the wrong — forgiveness must follow. That is the pattern of the gospel. You did not earn your forgiveness. You received it. And those who have received it are those who give it. When a broken relationship is reconciled through repentance and forgiveness, the watching world smells something it cannot produce on its own. It smells Christ. You cannot manufacture that fragrance. You can only release it — when, by grace, you forgive as you have been forgiven.

The fragrance of Christ also goes out from us when we patiently endure suffering and hardship. This may sound strange, but it is precisely the point Paul is making. If you want to see how amazing our God is, do not look at the person who has no problems. Look at the person who is hurting and continues to give praise and thanksgiving to the Lord.

Think of the chronically ill believer — she is a censer. Through her faithfulness and trust in God, the knowledge of Christ is being released, and people take note of that witness. Think of the aging saint whose body is failing but whose inner self is being renewed day by day. The younger members of this church are being formed by watching you grow old well. You are a censer, and you may not even know it. Think of the believer who has lost a loved one and is grieving. The world expects faith to collapse under the weight of loss, and when it sees thankfulness and praise instead, it smells something it cannot explain — the presence of God at work. Think of the believer working in a place hostile to their faith, who day after day keeps their integrity, watches their words, and is kind to those who are often shunned. From them too rises the aroma of Christ.

To be clear: the Bible does not glorify suffering for its own sake. The book of Acts is full of stories of Paul fleeing persecution. He did not pursue suffering. The application is not *seek suf-*

fering in order to become fragrant. The application is this: when suffering comes in the course of faithfulness, trust Christ to display his glory in it.

To those who are hurting today — some of you may be sitting here this morning under the weight of something that will not lift: an illness, a difficult marriage, a grief that is still fresh, a child who has walked away, a loneliness that finds you at night. The enemy of your soul wants you to believe that your suffering is evidence of God's absence. That is a lie, and it is one of Satan's schemes.

Here is the truth our passage proclaims today. Christ is leading a procession through this world, and you are in it with him. You are there as his captive. He has claimed you, conquered you, and he will not let you go. And as you faithfully trust him with the weight you are carrying, there is a fragrance coming off of you — and it is not the smell of defeat. It is the fragrance of Christ. Your suffering is not wasted. In the hands of the Triumphant Lord, it is a proclamation of his glory and grace. Thanks be to God.