WE ARE THE AROMA OF CHRIST

2 Corinthians 2:1-17

Key Verse: 2:14-15

“But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads 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.”

We thank and praise God who is the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort in our Lord Jesus Christ who is yes to God. As we follow Christ Jesus our Lord participating in his sufferings, Gods’ comfort may come to us in each time of trouble and flow over in our lives and to others in any trouble through us. In today’s passage, we can look into Paul’s shepherd heart, his despair and triumphant spirit, and his identity as the aroma of Christ.

**First, Paul’s shepherd heart (1-11).** Paul says in verses 1-3, “So I made up my mind that I would not make another painful visit to you. For if I grieve you, who is left to make me glad but you whom I have grieved? I wrote as I did so that when I came, I should not be distressed by those who ought to make me rejoice. I had confidence in all of you, that you would all share my joy.” We don’t know when Paul visited Corinth, but he visited and it turned out to be a painful one. He did not want to do it again. Rather, he would wait until a certain change happened in them, which would bring him joy. He believed that their change of mind, that is their repentance, would make all rejoice. That was the purpose of his delay and writing “the severe letter.” . Then he says in 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.” In verses 1-4, we see the words, “painful”, “grieve”, “glad”, “distressed”, “rejoice”, “joy”, “great distress”, “anguish of heart”, “tears”, “deep love.” All these emotions, rich emotion, came out of Paul’s heart. We believe that God accepted it and worked in their hearts. We really see a shepherd’s heart of deep love, which is the reflection of Christ’s heart for us. May we learn such a heart, as Paul said in 1 Corinthians 11:1, “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.”

Then in verses 5-11, the word “forgive” is written 6 times. It teaches us what forgiveness means. Paul says in verses 5 and 6, “If anyone has caused grief, he has not so much grieved me as he has grieved all of you to some extent—not to put it too severely. The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient.” To under stand these words, we need to refer to chapter 7, specially verses 10- 13, which says, “Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. See what this godly sorrow has produced in you…So even though I wrote to you, it was not on account of the one who did wrong or of the injured party, but rather that before God you could see for yourselves how devoted to us you are. By all this we were encouraged.” Here, we can infer that “him” whom Paul mentions in chapter 2 is the one who did wrong, most probably, leading a rebellious group against Paul’s apostleship. The very one who was attacked was Paul. But he did not take it personally. In Paul’s understanding, he was an instrument of Satan in his ignorance, just as Paul was formerly Satan’s instrument to destroy the church not knowing what he was doing. In fact, the Corinthians in the church suffered more, for they had to deal with him directly encountering him in the church. Yes, there was the injured party, who probably had been very loyal to Paul in Christ Jesus. Yet their more grief was to some extent. Paul did not want them to think that it was too severe. The person went through the punishment inflicted on him by the majority – that is, church discipline. One discipline of the church is descrirbed in 2 Thessalonians 3:14, “If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him so that he may feel ashamed. Yet do not regard him as an enemy but warn him as a brother.” Such discipline was sufficient for the person in question, and there was godly sorrow in him, which led to repentance.

So, what should they do? Paul says in verse 7, “Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow”. It was mindful of Paul not to mention the person’s name, leaving him anonymous. As for those who left without repentance, Paul clearly mentioned their names for the sake of God’s flock of sheep in the church, as he did in 2 Timothy, in 1:15, 2:17 and 4:14. Paul was very clear between those who repented and those who did not. Now the person in this passage repented, so “forgive and comfort” him without any hint of grudge. It is according to what Jesus said to his disciples, “If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, ‘I repent,’ for give him” (Luke 17:4). And here we see that forgiveness includes comforting that would bring no more sorrow but joy. Paul says continually in verse 8, “I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him.” Forgiveness includes the restoration of a love relationship. And Paul says more in verse 9, “The reason I wrote you was to see if you would stand the test and be obedient in everything.” Forgiveness is a matter of obedience to God. And in verse 10, he says, “If you forgive anyone, I also forgive him. And what I have forgiven—if there was anything to forgive—I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake.” Paul’s forgiveness was in the sight of Christ, who prayed at the time of crucifixion, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” and was for the sake of the members of the church, the body of Christ. Paul knew that those who have not forgiven suffer more than those who are to be forgiven. Paul wanted them to know the forgiving heart of God as those who have been forgiven in Christ Jesus our Lord. A forgiving heart is a blessed heart. And then he says in verse 11, “in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.” It is a spiritual battle that Satan works through unrepentance of sin and also an unforgiving heart.

We see that in a real living church, there are to be repentance and forgiveness of sin and the restoration of life and relationship and so a healthy body of Christ. May we pursue to be such a church.

**Second, triumphal procession in Christ (12-14a).** In verse 12, Paul says, “Now when I went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ and found that the Lord had opened a door for me.” It is written in Acts 20:1, “When the uproar had ended, Paul sent for the disciples and, after encouraging them, said good-by and set out for Macedonia.” Paul was on his 3rd missionary journey. In Ephesus, Paul did the work of God through gospel preaching and intensive teaching of the word of God and extraordinary miracles, staying there more than 2 years (Ac 19:8, 10). Seeing the mighty work of God in Ephesus, Paul decided to go to Jerusalem, passing through Macedonia and Achaia, and said, “After I have been there, I must visit Rome also” (Ac 19:21). Then there was an uproar against him. Paul moved on and was leaving for Macedonia. On the way he came to Troas, where he once saw a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us” on his 2nd missionary journey. That vision turned Paul’s direction to Europe from Asia. There is no record of Paul’s preaching the gospel at that time in Troas, but he saw this vision there. Now he came to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ. While preaching, he found that the Lord had opened a door for him. What an opportunity for a gospel worker like Paul! Paul said in 1 Corinthians 16:8-9, “But I will stay on at Ephesus until Pentecost, because a great door at Ephesus for effective work has opened to me, and there are many who oppose me.” Paul used this great door and did the mighty work of God in the Spirit’s leading. He said in Ephesians 6:19, “Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel.” He also said in Colossians 4:3, “And pray for us, to, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ.” He prayed for an open door. Now the door is opened. So, at the open door, Paul had to open his mouth and speak and proclaim the mystery of Christ, the mystery of the gospel, the gospel of salvation. That’s Paul’s usual practice. But here Paul said, “I still had no peace of mind, because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I said good-by to them and went on to Macedonia.” We really wonder how he could say to good-by to God’s flock of sheep there and leave. We can deduce that when he went to Troas, he expected to meet Titus, waiting for a certain report from the Corinthian church through Titus, whom he had sent. However, he could not find Titus there, though he waited and waited until he had no hope of meeting him at Troas. Paul’s concern for the Corinthian church was that serious. Paul expressed it this way in 2 Corinthians 7:5, “For when we came into Macedonia, this body of ours had no rest, but we were harassed at every turn—conflicts on the outside, fears within.” What an expression: “no rest”, “harassment at every turn”, “conflicts without and fears within.” His concern for the church in Corinth debilitated him. Would they love him? Would they respond to the letter he had sent with Titus? Would they listen to him? Would they repent? Would they turn away from the mutiny organized by the false teachers? Would they discipline the man who shamefully accused Paul and created a tremendous rebellion? Would they confront the false apostles? Would they acknowledge the integrity of the beloved apostle? He didn’t know the answer to those aching questions. And he loved the church enough to ache over those issues. There was no happiness for Paul at Troas. He had lost his zeal for the work. He had lost heart. Everything seemed to be going wrong. There was no joy anymore in his restless spirit. And he was in jeopardy, in danger of becoming bitter, discontent and beginning to drift. He just had no heart for the gospel preaching and the work of God.

In verse 14, there is an amazing transition. Paul says, “But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ….” What a transition and change in his heart! Paul has been a victorious general to pioneer many cities in Asia and Europe until he could say, “I must see Rome also.” But in Troas he looked like a defeated soldier. However, he rises again and give thanks and praise to God, newly seeing God’s leading him and his gospel coworkers in triumphal procession of Christ, the conquering Christ who has triumphed over the world (John 16:33). We can see what transpired at Macedonia in 2 Corinthians 7:7, “But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, and not only by his coming but also by the comfort you had given him. He told us about your longing for me, your deep sorrow, your ardent concern for me, so that my joy was greater than ever.” This was a great report about the Corinthian church in their repentance and new acceptance of Paul’s apostleship and God’s work in the church. All his distress and conflicts and fear turned into joy and victory in Christ. He could see how God led him in triumphal procession which is in Christ. He confesses that “God always leads us in this triumphal procession of Christ.” There will be times of distress and disappointment and disheartened state and defeat. Yet even in all those times God leads us in triumphal procession in Christ. Even before Paul received the report from Titus, God had worked in Corinthians accepting all his pained heart and distress and tears. Paul despaired in Troas and Macedonia at first, not knowing what was going on in Corinth. But God was doing his work faithfully. Romans 8:28 says, “We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” At this point Paul said, “Thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ…”

When Paul said, “triumphal procession,” he must have had in mind the image of a victorious Roman general who marched through the streets of Rome all the way to the capitol in triumphal procession with his soldiers and captives and with the valuable spoils. Certainly, the triumphal procession of Christ cannot be compared to the triumphal process of a Roman victorious general, even though such an event would happen once in his life time. We are reminded of what Paul said in Romans 8:37, “No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.” Paul takes a great pride in that he is a solder of Christ in this triumphal procession. Paul said to his spiritual son Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:3, “Join with me in suffering, like a good solder of Christ Jesus…to please his command officer.” May we be aware that we are in triumphal procession in Christ and called us to be soldiers of Christ in this procession.

**Third, we are the aroma of Christ (14b-17).** Paul continues in 14, “who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him.” In the triumphal procession of a Roman general there were also the priests who came along swinging their censors with the sweet-smelling incense burning. Here leading us in triumphal procession in Christ, what does God do? It says, “He through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him.” The knowledge of Christ is the most precious and important knowledge of all knowledge. Jesus said in John 17:3 that knowing the true God and Jesus Christ, whom God had sent, is eternal life. Nothing saves sinners but the knowledge of Christ Jesus. It determines one’s life destiny in eternity. This knowledge is the knowledge of salvation (Lk 1:77). Paul said in Philippians 3:10, “I want to know Christ” and in Colossians 2:2-3, “…they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” How precious it is to spread the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ! And God spreads this fragrance of Christ through those who are in Christ, in the triumphal procession. This procession is not the finish of the fight. It is the procession in which the fight is on-going. In this procession, Christ is spread and exalted as Paul said in Philippians 1:20-21, “I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain.”

Paul continues here in verse 15, “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.” “We are the aroma of Christ” and it is to God. What a confession! Christians are to be the aroma of Christ. There are various kind of smells among people, the smell of students, the smell of professors, the smell of lawyers, of accountants, of doctors and nurses, of politicians and of journalists, the smell of soldiers, of police and of sportsmen, and even the smell of robbers, of imposters, of hypocrites, and the smell of various sorts of sinners, seductive and alluring men and women. There are also many artificial scents of perfumes. The aroma of Christ, how wonderful it is!

Through them, the fragrance of knowledge of him is spread and it works as the smell of death or the fragrance of life. It is as Paul said in in 1 Corinthians 1:18, “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” He continued in 1:21-24, “For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.” Here the important thing is that the aroma of Christ ascends to God, whether it becomes the smell of death or the fragrance of life. It is because through all this, God is revealed, his love and mercy and his holiness and righteousness. God gets as much glory out of his wrath as he does out of his grace. We think of heaven as the place where God is glorified; I want you to know hell is a place where God is glorified. He’s not glorified by the people there; but the fact that they’re there evidences his absolute holiness. The same gospel message can be an aroma of death to some and an aroma of life to others.

In Genesis 8, when Noah came out of the ark, he built an altar to the LORD and sacrificed burnt offerings on it. And then 8:21 says, “The LORD smelled the pleasing aroma and said in his heart: ‘Never again will I curse the ground because of man, even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures as I have done.” In this resolution of the LORD, God was looking forward to the sacrifice of his own Son, the Lamb of God to solve man’s sin problem for the salvation of sinners. Burnt offerings and all other offerings pointed to the burnt offering of God’s Son. Leviticus 1:17 says, “…It is a burnt offering, an offering made by fire, an aroma pleasing to the LORD.” Indeed, Christ Jesus became the atoning sacrifice/propitiation for our sins. Romans 3:25 says, “God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith.” And 1 John 2:2 says, “He is he atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the world.” This atoning sacrifice of Christ Jesus satisfied the righteousness of God as the very pleasing aroma to God. Then Paul says in Romans 12:1, “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship.” Because of God’s great mercy to sacrifice his own Son for our sins, Apostle Paul exhausts us to offer ourselves as living sacrifices to God, holy and pleasing to God. We can bear this marvelous grace through our life of faith following Christ and preaching the gospel of the salvation, the gospel of repentance and forgiveness, regardless of how people would respond. In that way, God wants us to be the aroma of Christ.

Here Paul ends verse 16, saying, “And who is equal to such a task?” That is “Who is adequate for such a task as this?” or “Who is qualified for such a task?” Truly no one, but those who received God’s mercy and so know the grace of the Lord Christ Jesus. At that time there were many false teachers who pretended to be the aroma of Christ. Paul says in 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.”

We thank and praise God for the sacrifice and triumph of Christ Jesus our Lord. May we live as the aroma of Christ in the triumphal procession of Christ!