

Life Together

*Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?
If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him.
For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.
(1 Corinthians 3:16-17. ESV)*

*And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same
image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.
(2 Corinthians 3:18. ESV)*

Observations Of A Gospel Shaped Life

December 13th, 2015

2 Corinthians 2:12-17

Rev. Paul Carter

Introduction:

Good morning! Open your Bibles to 2 Corinthians 2:12. This morning we come to the end of the section of text that runs from 1:12-2:17. Maybe by way of introduction it would be helpful to just return to what we said on November 15th when we began this section. We read a quotation from NT scholar Mark Seifrid which says:

It is not finally Paul, but the Gospel that is at stake. Indeed, the Corinthians themselves are being tested. The question is whether they will accept the weak and suffering apostle, who out of love suffers on their behalf.¹

Because the Corinthians have been conditioned by their culture to desire powerful and authoritative leaders, Paul highlights all of his weaknesses and troubles. He is not a power-broker, he is not a super man he is a captive to God's grace, he is a slave in procession – he is the FRAGRANCE and DISPLAY of the cross of Jesus Christ. Paul puts himself forward and he says: “I don't just preach the Gospel – I REEK OF THE GOSPEL! If you reject my life – my Gospel shaped life – then you reject the Gospel.” You see again and again in his correspondence with the Corinthians Paul makes the point that Apostles do not merely teach the Gospel – THEY LIVE THE GOSPEL. In 1 Corinthians 4:9 he says that we apostles, like men sentenced to death:

¹ Mark Seifrid, *The Second Letter to the Corinthians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 46.

have become a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men. (1 Corinthians 4:9 ESV)

The Greek word translated there as “spectacle” is the Greek word *theatron* – you don’t need to have gone to seminary to know what that means. It means theatre. It means a show. God is not just preaching through us he is **SHOWING** through us. You can’t accept the message and reject the life, Paul says. That isn’t an option. Jesus didn’t just say believe in me. He also said take up your cross and follow me². And so Paul reaches the climax here of this very personal but very Gospel narrative. He is painting a picture of a Gospel shaped life and I want to read it to you, I want to reflect upon that with you and by God’s grace respond accordingly. Hear now from God’s holy, inspired and inerrant Word beginning at verse 12.

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)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

Observations Of A Gospel Shaped Life:

Now let me say this up front so that it can apply to every point we’re going to draw from this narrative. Obviously this passage is specifically about the life of the Apostle Paul. There is something special and unique about the Apostles of the New Testament and the Prophets of the Old Testament. The church is built, Paul says:

on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone (Ephesians 2:20 ESV)

So prophets and apostles are special and unique – yes! But that doesn’t mean that they shouldn’t be imitated by regular Christians like you and me – in fact that is implied by calling them the foundation. What do you do with a foundation? You build on it. You follow the pattern. The Apostle Paul expected to be imitated. He said:

² As per Matthew 16:24.

Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ. (1 Corinthians 11:1 ESV)

So just like God spoke through the Apostles – their words and their lives, so too, if we are in line with them – he will speak and shine through us. I say that now so that it can be assumed for each of the points to follow.

Beginning at verse 12 then, I think the first observation we can make about this Gospel shaped life is that:

1. Paul's movements and decisions are determined by the Gospel

Look at what he says there in verse 12:

When I came to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ (2 Corinthians 2:12 ESV)

Actually the words “to preach” are not in the original Greek. In the original Greek it literally says: “I was coming to Troas for the Gospel of Jesus Christ”. We know from Acts 16 that Paul had preached in Troas before and he had left a little church there and so now Paul went there because he wanted to do some follow up, he wanted to do some GOSPEL WORK. My point is simply this, Paul was not living a purpose driven life, he was living a GOSPEL DRIVEN LIFE. Paul didn't sit around having complex philosophical conversations with himself about his life purpose. He knew his life purpose. Preach and show the Gospel. Period. This isn't rocket science. If you're saved then you have instructions. They are pretty simple. Go into all nations and make disciples. Right? Take the Gospel and go somewhere: make disciples. Go to work. Go home. Go to the mall, go to the YMCA, go to India, go to Buffalo – GO WITH THE GOSPEL AND MAKE DISCIPLES OF ALL NATIONS. That's your purpose. Let me save you \$14 on the book. Like Paul a real Christian makes his or her decisions on the basis of the Gospel.

Secondly we see that:

2. God is the ultimate author of Gospel opportunity

Paul says in verse 12 that he went to Troas for the Gospel and that a door was opened for him in

the Lord. Paul didn't open that door, Paul didn't make that opportunity, it came to him. Paul is like a guy with his suitcase permanently packed. He is not necessarily fixed on any particular plan and like a good soldier he does not allow himself to become too entangled in civilian affairs, rather he is ready to go on a moment's notice. If God closes a door, Paul will just sit down where he is and wait for him to open a window.

Here is the point of application in that for us, sometimes plan A is just about getting you to the place of availability. Plan A is what gets you off your duff and ready to move. And then when God has you ready – bags packed and ready to fly – he may in his Sovereignty close that door and direct you to plan B. That's ok, the goal was not to accomplish plan A, the goal was to be obedient to God. Sometimes God changes the plan just to remind you that he is in charge and you are not. Servants aren't very useful until they understand that.

Thirdly, we should notice that:

3. God's work in us always takes precedence over God's work through us

Paul is being very honest here in highlighting his own weaknesses and frailties. He says that he went to Troas for the Gospel, but he also says that the whole trip was kind of a bust. He says in verse 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. (2 Corinthians 2:13 ESV)

Now these folks know that Paul did eventually hook up with Titus because he tells them that in chapter 7:5-6. Paul's point here though is that at this time in his own life, he was so upset about the state of the Corinthian church that he could not effectively minister in Troas. **STOP AND HEAR THAT.** Paul had an anxiety event, or a depressive episode, call it what you want, that so effected him that he MISSED a divinely given Gospel opportunity. That's what he says. He says that God opened a door for him but he couldn't go through it because he was too depressed.

Again, you have to understand that the fundamental problem in Corinth is that they have a worldly understanding of the Gospel that extends even to what they want in Gospel leaders.

They want perfect people. They want shiny people living their best life now and Paul is not that guy. He is this beady eyed, short little man with a very complicated personality who walks with a limp and is going blind. He is not very shiny. He suffers a lot. He is sickly. And, he apparently, has episodes of debilitating depression.

But, Paul says, God is using him. He is doing this work in him so that he can shine the Gospel through him. Paul will say that again in chapter 12 in one of the most beautiful passages in all of Scripture. In his flesh Paul hated being weak and he asked God to take the weakness away:

⁹ But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.¹⁰ For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Corinthians 12:9–10 ESV)

Do you see that? God wanted Paul to be weak. God wanted Paul to fail from time to time. Why? So that in his weakness the power of Christ could rest upon him. God’s ways are mysterious I grant you. Paul seems to be saying that God orchestrated a Gospel opportunity for Paul in Troas but he knew that Paul would be too weak to seize it. He knew Paul would fail and that he would be horribly depressed by his own failure. But that’s ok. God knew that when Paul fell on his face Christ would meet him and cloth him with fresh power for ministry and in the end, that would be the thing that best served the cause of the Gospel. Wow.

Listen to me friend, God uses failure and depression and weakness and inadequacy. Those things don’t disqualify you from ministry, they prepare you for ministry. Sometimes God wants you face down in the ditch because in that place you know who you are and you know who he is and you know how he saved you in the person of Jesus Christ.

Fourthly we notice that:

4. God knows how to comfort weary workers

We catch a hint of that at the end of verse 13:

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

I went to Troas for the Gospel and I totally bombed, Paul says. It wasn't God's fault, he opened the door but I was too depressed to go through it. I went to Macedonia with my tail between my legs but it turns out that God was Sovereign over it all.

He goes on to say:

But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession (2 Corinthians 2:14 ESV)

That's a massively loaded expression and we'll come back to it in a minute but for now notice that Paul is absolutely clear who is ultimately in charge of his life and plans. God always leads us. God knew what he was doing. I thought I was running away from an opportunity, but actually I was running into one. Paul's recollection of this Macedonian side trip seems to have inspired this profound analogy that we will shortly unpack. He returns to his travel narrative in chapter 7. He says:

⁵ 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 (2 Corinthians 7:5–6 ESV)

Paul thought he was running away from trouble and failure, but he was actually running into comfort and harvest. He says that in Macedonia, Titus arrived. Paul's friend, his co-worker, his encourager. He brought a good report, that lifted Paul's spirits and together they began one of the most successful tours in Paul's entire career. He ended up parking for a season we believe in Philippi, which is a city in Macedonia, from which most scholars think he wrote 2 Corinthians. Philippi became one of the most important of Paul's churches. They LOVED HIM and they responded to him and they encouraged him and they funded a large portion of his future ministry.

STOP AND HEAR THAT. When Paul reached rock bottom God redirected him to a place where he could be encouraged and recharged. When Paul felt like a failure, God sent him to good people and easy soil. God knows your breaking point, God knows how much you can handle, God knows when you will fall flat on your face and he knows how to surround you with the comfort that you need. He is working the comfort before you encounter the suffering. Hear that. That's who God is.

Fifthly now and arriving at the heart of this passage, we notice that:

5. The Gospel is essentially divisive

Listen to what Paul says:

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. (2 Corinthians 2:14–16 ESV)

Paul uses an expression from Roman history. He uses the word *thriambe-u-o* which means “a Roman Triumph”. Back in the glory days of the Roman Empire a general who won a great victory might be accorded a special Triumph. In this triumph through the streets of Rome the general would ride in his chariot and before him would proceed all the spoils and prisoners of war. Josephus records the triumph given to the general Titus who destroyed Jerusalem and leveled the temple and was paraded through Rome with all the treasures of the temple and all the Jewish aristocracy going before him in chains on display. Paul says, that’s what we are. We are prisoners on display. We are the naked slaves from a fallen world now held captive by the grace of God in Christ. It is powerful and confrontational language.

In verse 15 he says that we are the aroma of Christ – the Greek literally says “the good smell”. So Paul says we are the good smell of Christ for God among two sorts of people. Those who are being saved AND those who are perishing. The smell doesn’t change – the smell is the SWEET SMELL OF CHRIST – but people experience it in two different ways. He says in verse 16 that for some it is the stench of death while to others it is the fragrance of life.

What Paul is saying is that God presents Christ through the lips and through the lives of his Gospel servants. Real Christians speak of and smell like the cross of Jesus Christ and their message and their lives are essentially divisive. Some people smell them and they draw near as unto Christ. Others smell them and they back away in horror and derision.

But notice the precise way Paul puts this. He says:

to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. (ESV)

The Gospel smells like what you are. If you are dead it smells like death. If you are alive it smells like life. Our response to the Gospel message and to the Gospel people tells us the truth about who we are. One scholar puts it this way:

“We are not and cannot be neutral observers. Our judgments are already formed in the act of perception itself: the crucified Christ is to us either the fragrance of life or the stench of death, and that immediately without reflection.”³

Here is the point: The Gospel divides. It tells the truth about who people are. It is a fundamentally divisive message – by design. What’s more, the Gospel shaped life is just as offensive as the Gospel message itself. Paul doesn’t say that his message is the fragrance that divides he says that HE IS. His life as a Gospel centered, Gospel speaking person is offensive to some and endearing to others. HEAR THAT.

So much energy is wasted in the modern day church trying to mask the essential offensiveness of the Christian life. We try to dress it up with candles and incense and secular music and Bono memes and who knows what else and the plain truth is that NONE OF IT WORKS. You can’t stick a candle in an outhouse and have it smell like anything other than an outhouse. The only way to make the Gospel inoffensive is to make the Gospel not the Gospel. The Gospel STINKS and you STINK to people who are perishing. Period. God made the Gospel offensive. Right? That’s what Paul says:

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. (2 Corinthians 2:14 ESV)

Who is doing this? Who is using the Gospel message and Gospel people to divide the living from the dead? GOD. He is doing it and you cannot undo it. The Gospel is the fragrance of life to those who are being saved. It is the stench of death to those who are perishing. The Gospel divides – BY DESIGN.

Sixthly, we observe that:

6. The Gospel shaped life ends in shame and death

³ Mark Seifrid, *The Second Letter to the Corinthians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 89.

Everybody knew how a Roman Triumph ended. At the end of the procession the captives were tortured and executed before the cheering crowd. Sometimes their eyes were burnt out with hot pokers. Sometimes they were crucified. Naked nobles of a fallen world bowing in defeat before the Roman general and dying in the dust. That's how a triumph ended. And Paul says, that's where my life is going. He challenges them. He says: "You don't like the look of me now, because I'm depressed and blind and socially awkward? Wait till you see me at the end of this process. Wait till you see me with my neck bent over a milepost on the Ostian outside the city of Rome. Wait till you see me executed like a dog for the amusement and entertainment of the crowd."

Don't forget church that all of the Apostles – except John – died a martyr's death. Every single one of them followed Jesus in shame and execution.

The Corinthians didn't want to hear that. They wanted a religion of power and wealth and prosperity. Like us, they wanted escape and security and advantage. But that's not Christianity. Christianity says that this world is dead. It can't be salvaged. You don't want to be king of this world, you just want to belong to the next one. I know that's a hard message for North Americans, but it really shouldn't be, after all what did you think Jesus meant when he said to take up your cross and follow him? How did that language lead to the Prosperity Gospel? How did that cause us to expect our best life now? We follow a guy who died naked and alone on a Roman cross! To be a Christian – to be a little Christ – is to take our place in the line of triumph. It is to stand naked and shamed before the world and to whisper and reek of the Gospel.

And finally it is to give thanks.

7. A cross-carrying Christian sees life and glory in Christ alone and gives thanks to God

Paul is happy to be in this line of captives because CHRIST WALKS AT THE HEAD! Look at what Paul says. He says:

But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession (2 Corinthians 2:14 ESV)

Thanks be to God – it is GOD who leads this procession, not Christ. Christ isn't in the chariot in this analogy – no, he stands at the head of the line. He is FIRST among the naked, FIRST among the shamed and FIRST among the damned. He is the CRUCIFIED Christ! It pleased God the Father to effect his redemptive purpose through the death of his beloved Son, and it pleases Paul simply to walk in his train. Paul is glad to go anywhere, even unto death, as long as he goes in Christ.

That is what it means to be a Christian! The author of Hebrews uses similar language to describe the Christian walk, he says we are:

looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. (Hebrews 12:2 ESV)

After death – life. After shame – GLORY. There is no other way home. This is how Jesus went and this is how we are going, if we are in Christ.

Paul threw this down as a challenge to the Corinthians. They wanted a power Gospel – they wanted something other than the way of the cross. They were culturally conditioned to struggle with the Gospel. In other words, they were where we are at this moment in our history. If I can step into Paul's analogy of the Roman Triumph it is as though we have been marching in procession through a very deep valley for the last 200 years in North America. It has been a lush and quiet valley. We have been walking through it for so long now that we've almost forgotten what manner of march we are on. But now, in these last months and years we begin to ascend the valley and now the city lies in view. With each step up we see more. We begin to see the hostility of the crowd. We begin to taste their animosity. We begin to remember and to anticipate the end we were promised and we are afraid.

We see the news and we hear that Christians are being crucified again in the Middle East and all of the sudden this doesn't feel as metaphorical as it used to. And with each passing day it becomes clear that out there is coming here. And many begin to slip away. HOLD THE LINE. This is not the time to run and hide, Jesus said:

the one who endures to the end will be saved. (Matthew 24:13 ESV)

Hold the line. Keep your eyes fixed on Jesus. See the joy. Endure the shame. Preach the message and shine your light. God is in charge. He opens and he shuts. He kills and he makes alive. Some will respond and some will reject. Your part is to walk the line. Speak, share, live, smell. Wherever you are be the fragrance of the crucified Christ. That's what it means to be a servant of the Gospel. That's what it means to live a Gospel shaped life.

Who is sufficient for these things?

Not Paul, not in himself. He was weak, he was insufficient. But in Christ, by grace he could do all things. By the grace of God alone, Paul was sufficient for these things. He held the line. He finished the race. He completed the course, and so can we. If we are in Christ, then so will we. Because God will come, when you need him and he will comfort, he will strengthen, he will equip and we will stand. This is the testimony of our brother Paul and this is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God. Let's pray.