

The Aroma of Christ

DAVE BAST

I would guess that most of us do realize our lives, that is, our words, but especially our actions, have an effect on those around us. I would also guess that most of us would want that impact to be positive, and we would be very sorry to think that our lives were somehow having a negative effect on another person; but finally, I am guessing, few of us have considered how the very same words and actions could have both a positive and a negative impact on people at the very same time. Well, it all depends on how they react to us and our message, as we will learn today on Groundwork.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast. So, in this series, Scott, as we have pointed out in the first program, we are listening to a one-sided phone conversation between Paul and the church in Corinth. We only have what he told them. We have to kind of fill in the blanks as to what they said to him, but it was a series of letters, really, that went back and forth. We are not sure we even have all of them; but we do possess I Corinthians, in which he replies to many questions that they raised; and now, we are actually just looking at II Corinthians in this six-part series, where Paul responds to personal criticism that was raised there against him.

SCOTT HOEZEE

As you just said, it is a little easier to figure out what was going on between Paul and Corinth in the first letter to the Corinthians. II Corinthians, we are not quite sure. We know that there were at least three, four, five letters that went back and forth between Paul. We only have the two. It is a little hard to know exactly what is going on here; but one thing we do know, Paul had gotten wind of the fact that there were people in Corinth very critical of him. After he had left town – he had established the church, he had moved on to Ephesus – and some super apostles, as they were called, moved in very critical of Paul; and we will see some of that also in this program as we look mostly at the second chapter in II Corinthians; but to help make sense a little bit of this chapter, maybe just a little geography lesson would be a good idea in terms of where Corinth was located.

DAVE BAST

The city of Corinth was right in the middle of Greece. There is a small isthmus called the Isthmus of Corinth with the Gulf of Corinth around it; and that connects two bigger parts of Greece. In the north it was called Achaia, and that is where Athens was. Further north of that, Macedonia, where Paul planted churches in Philippi and Thessalonica, for example. The southern part of Greece doesn't really come into the New Testament, but Corinth lay right in the strip of land connecting those two. It was a very important city. Paul spent about 18 months there, bringing the Gospel, starting the church; and then he moved on and he actually went across the Aegean Sea to the east into what today is western Turkey. That is where Ephesus was, and that became his base next.

So, the messages are flying back and forth principally between these two cities, Corinth and Ephesus.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And one of the things that is flying back and forth, maybe being carried on boats – maybe some of these letters went on boats, as you pointed out, across that body of water... one of the things that Paul was accused of... In our next program we will see still more accusations that Paul refers to and refutes, but in this particular chapter he is also talking about people accusing him of being wishy-washy: Oh, when Paul says yes he really means no, and when says no he means yes. You cannot trust anything he said; and this has Paul very, very upset; in fact, so upset that he almost got back on the boat in Ephesus and headed straight back to Corinth to straighten it out in person; but then he said: No, I made one painful visit to you already...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We are not one hundred percent sure...

DAVE BAST

Which we don't know about, yes, yes; right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But he said: I sure don't want to make another painful visit; so he is addressing it instead in this letter; but along the way as he writes this letter, he also points out some other things that he has been doing along the way: Seeking encouragement, seeking to get more news from Corinth, seeking to catch up with some of his companions.

DAVE BAST

Yes; interestingly, if you actually back out of this letter and go to the tail end of I Corinthians, Paul tells them there in Chapter 16 what his travel plans are; and he says: I want to go through Macedonia and come down to you in Corinth, but meanwhile, I am going to stay for a little while in Ephesus. Well, that apparently didn't happen right away; and thus, the criticism arises: Paul told us he was coming and he didn't show up, so we cannot really trust him. Just kind of almost shocking to us that this great apostle whom we revere and whose authority we recognize was slammed so continuously by people who just didn't like him. So what he does here in II Corinthians at the end of Chapter 1 is tell them just exactly what he did. We pick up Paul's explanation of what happened in Chapter 2:

2:¹²I went to Troas to preach the Gospel of Christ. Now, I should add that Troas was a city to the north of Ephesus near the ancient site of Troy – ancient Troy – and that was very close... the sea was narrow at that point, so that was a convenient place to go back and forth fairly quickly and safely between Asia and Greece – Asia and Europe, really. So Paul says: I went there to preach the Gospel and found that the Lord had opened a door for me. (So, in other words: Hey, I went to Troas and I was having success); ¹³but I still had no peace of mind because I did not find my brother Titus there; so I said good-bye to them and went on to Macedonia.

So apparently, he had sent Titus, another helper, to Corinth to figure out what was going on there; and he came to Troas and Titus wasn't there. So Paul... Here he is, anxious, worried, what is happening? Have they been listening to my counsel? Are they against me? Are they for me? And Paul is just filled with questions and doubts, so he figures: I better head there myself.

SCOTT HOEZEE

What we get here, Dave, is such a lovely insider's look at the heart of Paul. I mean, poor Paul; I mean, he couldn't pick up the phone and call anybody in Corinth to find out; he couldn't send an e-mail or a text...

DAVE BAST

No e-mail!

SCOTT HOEZEE

He couldn't even send a telegram... go back even further than our current age of communications. As you said in the first program, nothing moved quicker than somebody's walking pace or the walking pace of a horse in the ancient world. He is so burdened for these sisters and brothers in Corinth – so upset about what is being said about him there – so upset to not know whether people are believing these super apostles. What a lovely portrait of Paul's heart we get here; the heart of a man for ministry; the heart of a man for the Church, who is just so concerned: I have no peace. So he was hoping to get an update from Titus. He cannot find him in Troas. Go to Macedonia, which is no short trip...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Gotta find him; gotta find out, because he is so upset. It is just a lovely peek into the heart of the Apostle who carried these people very, very close to his own heart and mind; and there is something just beautiful to see about that in terms of the love of Jesus being spread through the Church.

DAVE BAST

Yes. Paul is upset. Paul is filled with anxiety. Paul's heart beats for this church, and he lives or dies by whether they are flourishing or not. He has no news from them. He hasn't been able to hear from Titus; so he goes over to northern Greece himself and what happens when he gets there is what we will look at next.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to Groundwork, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we are looking at II Corinthians; the second program of a six-part series here on Groundwork; and we are looking at II Corinthians 2, and we just said that Paul is be-bopping around the ancient world trying to locate a fellow pastor named Titus; trying to get news about how things are going back in his beloved Corinth, and with the often troublesome but nevertheless dear to his heart congregation there; and so he is expressing frustration. He cannot find him; but then all of a sudden at verse 14 there is this big shift of tone, like a shaft of sunlight comes out of a dark sky: Thanks be to God, Paul writes in verse 14.

DAVE BAST

Right. So what happened? What caused this abrupt turnaround? Because he has just been talking about anxiety and care and suffering; and one thing that happened – and we don't learn it here in Chapter 2, we learn it a little bit later in Chapter 7 of this letter, is that he actually did meet Titus in Macedonia. He writes this in II Corinthians 7:

⁵For even when we came into Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were afflicted at every turn; fighting without and fear within; ⁶but God comforted us by the coming of Titus.

Incidentally, in our last program we talked about comfort in trouble and how comfort comes through other people, too. It is not just a purely spiritual thing; but God strengthened Paul when Titus came; ^{7b}as he told us of your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me. So they were hanging in there with Paul. They had not turned against him. Titus brought him that news and that caused him to burst out in praise: Thanks be to God!

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes. He (Titus, that is) told us of your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me. So Paul is comforted by the fact that the Gospel is going forward in Corinth, and not everybody by any means are believing the lies that

are being spread about Paul; and that settles his spirit. I imagine he had a lot of fitful nights of bad sleep until he finally found out the truth. Not all was lost in Corinth, his sisters and brothers staying true to him there.

DAVE BAST

Right; and then he also goes on to say something really striking and dramatic that ultimately makes the point that, you know, this whole ministry thing – this whole Christian mission that I am embarked on – it is really God's work; it is really His doing; it doesn't finally depend on me. I might have fighting on the outside and fear on the inside; I might be facing all kinds of opposition; I might be filled with worry and anxiety; but I can lay that aside because it is really God's doing, this Gospel thing; it is a God thing. It is not on me.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So he goes on, now... back to II Corinthians 2, beginning in verse 14, and he talks to the Corinthians about what we are all supposed to be doing in the service of the Gospel; and so he writes:

Thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives in Christ's triumphal procession, and uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of Him everywhere. ¹⁵For we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing; ¹⁶to the one we are an aroma that brings death; to the other an aroma that brings life; and who is equal to such a task? ¹⁷Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity as those sent from God. So here is an interesting, kind of complex set of images...

DAVE BAST

Yes, really...

SCOTT HOEZEE

That Paul is drawing off of sort of the ancient parades that victorious generals and kings and Caesars used to have.

DAVE BAST

Yes; they called it a triumph, and it was an elaborate set piece. When a Roman general conquered a whole new province it had to be a major victory... or an emperor... He would be awarded a triumph in the city of Rome; and what that was was this long parade with soldiers and prisoners being pulled along and the general is in a chariot and they are proceeding in... The streets are thronged with people; and Paul says: You know really, the progress of the Gospel through the world is kind of like that. It is like a triumphal procession. It is a victory parade. The Gospel is on the move and we are part of it, and the aroma of this is rising up to God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And apparently in those ancient parades, too, they would burn incense, right? They would have these special... they weren't really candles, but you know, sometimes you see incense sticks yet today... so that as the parade went by the air was perfumed with a certain aroma; but what Paul knows and what he is reflecting in this passage is that what that smells like to you depends on who you are. If you are part of the victors – if you are the victorious people – hoo, that is always going to remind you of a good day, you know; but if you were one of the defeated ones or if you just don't want to have anything to do with this, then that is the smell of death to you. It is the same incense, but to the one person it smells like a backyard barbecue – it makes your mouth water and mmmm; but to somebody else it smells like a backyard barbecue on the day you have the stomach flu. It is like... I don't want to smell that at all. It depends on who the other people are. We smell like life to those who believe in Jesus; our lives are like fragrant offerings; but to those who don't believe in Jesus, who refuse to believe in Jesus, then it is a bad smell and they don't want anything to do with it. It is an interesting image that he is able to parley two ways.

DAVE BAST

It really is fascinating; and you know, if you think about the sense of smell...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Powerful, right?

DAVE BAST

It is; it is one of the most powerful ones. It is subtle, but there is no sense... and actually, I have read that studies have proved this... none of our senses is so closely tied to memory as the sense of smell is. You smell something and it can immediately send you to another time or place or remind you of another person. I happened to be riding on a plane once, talking to the guy next to me, and he asked me what I did and I told him, and I was going to preach somewhere, and he said: What are you going to preach on? And as it happens, I was going to preach on this passage from II Corinthians, and I started talking about smell and how it can trigger memory, and he said: Aqua Net; and I said: Aqua Net? [He said]: Yes; my wife... when we were first married we didn't have any money and that was the hairspray she bought, and to this day if I catch a whiff of Aqua Net I am sent back to my bride. You know, I thought that was really cool. Here, Paul says this striking phrase: We are the aroma of Christ to God. So, in one sense, one thing that he means by this image is, when God sees us He is reminded of His Son – He is reminded of Christ – God loves us. We are one with His Son and we trigger that, if we can say such a thing, in the mind of God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

There is a lot of Old Testament background here, too. So, there is the Roman parade thing, but a lot of Old Testament background here of God enjoying the sweet aroma of sacrifices offered by those who were truly pure in heart; and of course, the sacrifice of Jesus was the most perfect sacrifice of history. We get identified with that; and so, to God we are as the aroma of Christ. To others we are the aroma of Christ – again, for good or for ill. It is going to trigger good things in the believers and bad things in unbelievers; but that is what we are supposed to be; and so it is an interesting question, and we can think a little bit more about it before we close the program. Do our lives as believers exude the aroma of the Gospel as we are supposed to do? How exactly does that work? We will think about that in just a moment.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to Groundwork, where today we are digging into II Corinthians Chapter 2, and this image that Paul uses there for Gospel ministers, for himself certainly, preachers, missionaries, evangelists; but really, for all Christians, and how our lives affect people around us as we bear witness for good or ill to Jesus Christ.

So, he has this image of the parade and the aroma, and the way smell works – the sense of smell. We have been talking about how closely linked to memory it is; how reactive it is, really. The same smell, depending on how you are doing on a given day, can either make your mouth water or it can turn your stomach; and that is what Paul says, in a sense, *we* are. He doesn't just say it is the Gospel that can provoke these different reactions, but *we* can provoke different reactions; I guess by how we share the Gospel.

SCOTT HOEZEE

He doesn't really use the language here, but you know, in most of Paul's writings in the New Testament... You see it all over the place in Romans... It is all over the place in I Corinthians, too... a little more subtle here, but Paul's favorite two-word phrase to communicate the essence of what it means to be saved is that we are now "in Christ," right? *En Christo* in the Greek – two words in Greek, two words in English – in Christ; and for Paul, what that seems to mean is that we have been so radically... as believers, we have been so radically identified with Christ that it is like our spiritual address, our spiritual location in the universe has changed; and we now live inside the new situation of cosmic victory that Christ achieved through the cross and through the resurrection and the ascension into heaven; and we get so tightly identified with Christ, that in this passage, in this particular image, we bear the very aroma of Christ; we bear the very smell of Christ in our own lives; and that is supposed to have an impact on those around us. I mean, our witness to Christ is supposed to be so consistent... our work at evangelism is supposed to be so consistent that it just kind of leaks off of us, you know. Sort of like if you have ever been around... My son went to a get together at the

college that he was at and they went to a bonfire; and when he came in the house he just smelled of smoke, you know. If you have ever been around anybody who spent some time making s'mores at a bonfire, you know right down to the fibers of their hair they just exude the smoke smell. Well, we are supposed to exude the good smell of Christ.

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And it has just got to come off of us all of the time. People should notice it when we are at work, when we are on the bus, when we are at school, when we are at a movie, when we are at home; and I guess it is an interesting question to wonder: Exactly how does that go; but also, is that true, or do we not smell much like Jesus at all sometimes because, what; we are covering it up? I don't know.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right. A number of questions come to my mind as I read these words and think about what Paul is saying here; and certainly one issue is that how people respond to Christ and His Gospel – to the message of Christ – is a life or death matter.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And maybe we would prefer that it not be so. We would kind of like to think: Well, everybody is okay one way or another; but Paul clearly says that if you are turned off by this, if you are repelled by Christ rather than attracted to Him, that leads to death; that is a death sentence; and life is only found by coming to Him, by being drawn to Him, by finding Him to be that sweet aroma. So, that is one issue. This is a serious deal; and the other issue is, we cannot help but be part of this process as Christians; and you might want to say: Well, I don't want to cause anybody's death, but sorry, there is no getting out of it. If you are a Christian, you are identified with Him; you carry His name; and the way you act, especially... not just your words, but your actions... You know, woe be to us if we act in such a way that it is our behavior that turns people off, not the message of Christ – not the Gospel.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and you know, it is interesting that, again, Paul is writing this to the Corinthians in the context of... the overall context in II Corinthians, of defending himself against accusations that he was wishy-washy or that he had other problems that we will look at in other programs as well; and there is a sense in which Paul is subtly here... it is subtle, but there is a sense in which, by writing this in this second chapter already in II Corinthians, Paul is almost saying to the Corinthians: Look, you have heard these bad reports about me. I am being bad-mouthed by these super apostles in Corinth. Look, you sniff my life. Do I smell like Christ or don't I? I mean, you know, am I an authentic, consistent witness or am I not? You choose; but if you have picked up the scent of life – eternal life in Christ from me... and of course, the Corinthians had... Paul established this church – then that ought to be enough – that ought to be enough.

Back to the other thing you were saying, Dave, this is where it gets maybe a little bit uncomfortable for us to think about, that God is not just going to get the message across by skywriting it, you know. The Holy Spirit is not going to write in on a wall or send people text messages from a mysterious source. God is going to use us – us ordinary Christian people – to bring the Gospel. What people think of Jesus depends on what they think of us. When we mess up, when we stink as Christians, it hurts the witness to Jesus. When we do it right, then we are the sweet aroma of life, but that is the thing that we sometimes wish wasn't true; we wish it wasn't all up to my witness, but the Gospel makes it clear, it is. What people think of Jesus is going to depend to a degree on what they think of you. If they know, indeed, you are a believer, how do you smell?

DAVE BAST

No wonder Paul says: Who is sufficient for these things?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly.

DAVE BAST

I was just reminded of a story; I think it was told about Billy Graham. He was in India once talking, trying to witness to a distinguished person, a Hindu, talking to him about becoming a Christian, and the man replied: Well, I would become a Christian, but I have never met one; as he is talking to Billy Graham, you know; but you get the point. We don't really live up to the example that we follow of the Lord Jesus. Who is sufficient for these things? We cannot... but you know, God can still use us...

SCOTT HOEZEE

And does, by grace.

DAVE BAST

And we are going to look at that, too, because Paul is going to talk about jars of clay in a future chapter, and how even our imperfect witness can be the aroma of life, the aroma of Christ to those who are drawn to Him; so yes, God give us grace to try to be the best witnesses that we can.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well thanks for joining our Groundwork conversation. I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and we always like to know how we can help you to dig into the scriptures. So go to our website, groundworkonline.com, and suggest topics and passages for future Groundwork programs.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/the-aroma-of-christ>

Printed on September 5, 2025