

# UNSEEN REALITY

By Steve Zeisler

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Have you ever tried to hide freshly-popped popcorn? It's hard to do. It's easy to hide the physical evidence, but it's impossible to contain the aroma. I remember school dorms where cooking of any kind was forbidden, yet fresh popcorn appeared on occasion. Then, two things would invariably occur. Great joy and fellowship would break out in the dorm as the smell of popcorn permeated the floor, and second, when the authorities caught the scent, condemnation quickly followed.

One of the figures of speech we will encounter in our study of the apostle Paul's 2 Corinthian letter this morning is that of a fragrance, an aroma which is impossible to hide and which affects everyone who comes into contact with it. It's possible to stop up your ears and thus shut out something you don't want to hear, or shut your eyes and avoid what you don't want to see, but it's impossible to shut out reception of an odor. Although a fragrance is invisible, its influence cannot be stopped.

Second Corinthians 2:12-16:

Now when I went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ and found that the Lord had opened a door for me, I still had no peace of mind, because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I said goodbye to them and went on to Macedonia. But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere 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. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life. And who is equal to such a task?

As we have already pointed out, 2 Corinthians in places reads like the apostle's journal. Here in verse 12 we pick up, first, more information about his travels, and second, more outpourings from Paul's heart as he shares his feelings about the decisions he makes. He says that the disagreements between himself and the Corinthians so disturbed him that he left Ephesus and began travelling west, hoping to find Titus.

**Although a fragrance is invisible, its influence cannot be stopped**

In Troas, an opportunity for ministry presented itself, but his spirit was so troubled he left the city and went on down to Macedonia, feeling that he and Titus would eventually meet as he travelled. Their paths finally crossed, and Paul received some encouraging news, which we will read about in chapter 7.

Next, in verse 14, Paul breaks into a word of thanksgiving: "But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ..." The "triumphal procession" is a reference to the high honor paid to Roman generals who had defeated an enemy of more than five thousand in battle, captured prisoners, and pacified a territory. The procession itself was a resplendent affair, with much pomp and circumstance. All the inhabitants of Rome were called out to attend as the victorious general was honored. Paul applies this to the Christian life and says that this is how believers are led-in "triumphal procession in Christ."

## **Triumphant despite difficulties**

This is a remarkable statement when you consider that by Paul's own admission in these opening chapters, his circumstances seem anything but triumphant. For example: "the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives" (1:5); "we despaired even of life" (1:8); "in our hearts we felt the sentence of death" (1:9). He had been beaten

in Asia Minor, and his feelings of despair and discouragement led him to think he would die. In chapter 2, he refers to a painful visit he had paid to the Corinthians, which had hurt him deeply, so much that he felt he could not return to them until the situation was resolved. In 2:4, he says, "I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears." In 2:5 he refers to a sinful rebellion by someone in Corinth which caused grief to everyone. And here, in 2:13, he says, "I still had no peace of mind." The record shows that Paul suffered difficulty, discouragement and distress, but then comes this note of triumph, "Thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ..."

Paul is using this very descriptive language to say that although he did indeed suffer distress, nevertheless God "always" led him in triumph, spreading "everywhere" the fragrance of the knowledge of him. This is not merely an occasional or a localized triumph, but a continual, all-encompassing victory procession. And remember that this procession is not a minor thing, like a child's birthday party, but a gaudy display of victory, might and power, like the Roman triumphal procession. When they are compared therefore, Paul's statements seem make us want to understand how they can be harmonized.

### **Arresting aroma**

When the apostle uses the words "fragrance" and "aroma" in this figure of speech, he is remembering the priests who walked in the triumphal procession carrying incense burners, the scent of which wafted over the crowds. To the victorious general and his armies, the aroma was a pleasing fragrance which reminded them of the greatness of Rome, but to the defeated prisoners, being led in captives' chains, the aroma of incense had the smell of their impending death at the hands of the executioners. The aroma was a potent though invisible testimony to one of two realities: in the case of those facing death, the reality of tragedy; in the case of the victors, the reality of triumph. Christians are a pleasing fragrance ascending to God which reminds him of the benefits and the wonder of his own Son. This may also recall the Old Testament sacrifices, the aroma of which ascended as a fragrance to God.

The lives of believers have impact everywhere they go. At times, as in the case of people who are in rebellion against God, that impact may harden them in their rebellion. In that case, Christians are an antagonistic, deathly influence. At other times-"among those who are being saved"-we are a remarkable, life-giving influence. When God is present in a life, invisibly, inevitably, no matter whether we like our circumstances or not, there is triumph. Observe Paul's difficult circumstances-the hurt, the frustration, the grief over relationships---yet he recognizes that the Lord God was still using his life in a triumphant way, and his ministry was having eternal significance. He was in difficult circumstances, yes, but the certainty of triumph was no less real. In or out of trouble, Christians are "always triumphant."

### **Invisible and attractive**

"And who is equal to such a task?" asks Paul in 2:16. I'm glad he asked that question and did not assume that the answer is obvious. If we are realistic, we will admit that our circumstances usually determine how we feel or think. It's hard to live believing what is invisible is more realistic than what we can see and feel. How do people live as Paul has been describing, with the certainty of God's triumph no matter what their circumstances? This is a significant question. My own growth in Christ has occurred when I saw someone enjoying a quality of life that was beyond anything I knew about. When there something about them that was unexplainable, it was then I began to pray and seek the face of God, desiring to have the same thing.

I came to Christ as a high school student, living and studying among many other high schoolers who had the same background as me. We appeared to be the same, but some of them were different because they had come to Christ. They had qualities about them-hope, buoyancy, love-that made me feel like an outsider. I remember wanting what they had and discovering the Christian gospel in my search.

It has been the same ever since in my Christian life. I want to be a pastor whose life is an aroma of Christ rather than a man whose life is filled with busyness and self-effort. I have been helped most not by "how-to" books and conferences, but by encountering Christian leaders whose lives defy explanation. Those kinds of encounters have regularly produced for me the possibility of spiritual growth. "And who is equal to such a task?" Triumph in the midst of tragedy. How can we get there? is Paul's question.

I was talking with a woman who is a pastor of women's ministries in another church, and we mentioned the teaching ministry of a mutual friend of ours. This woman had taught a series of thoughtful Bible studies in my friend's church. My pastor friend said, "She is a lovely person, with a sweet spirit and a beautiful faith. But her ministry has not been nearly as effective as others', because to my knowledge she has never really suffered." She even used a basketball expression, saying, "She has never been slam-dunked by life." Most of what is true of her can be explained by her circumstances. Things have gone well for her most of her life. She's a delightful person who has lived a delightful life and has a delightful family. But her life doesn't create a longing to know about reality as perhaps the life of one who has been hurt more, and who yet remains hope-filled and encouraged.

### **A phony alternative**

Having asked the question, "Who is equal to such a task?" Paul now begins in 2:17 with a series of observations which will answer this question. The way the apostle approaches his answer is by drawing a comparison between those who minister sincerely and those who are phonies. Paul recognizes that there will always be self-appointed Christian leaders seeking followers, offering them false options for maturing in the Lord. There clearly were such people in Corinth. In fact, in 11:4 the apostle writes about the group of people we will meet in verse 17. Here is what he says:

If someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough. But I do not think I am in the least inferior to these "super-apostles."

This description "super-apostles" may very well have been the way these people referred to themselves. But here Paul says he does not feel in the least inferior to them, and he wants the Corinthians to be able to distinguish between what was true and what was bogus.

Returning to 2:17 now, Paul contrasts himself with these "super-apostles":

Unlike so many [e.g., the "super apostles"], 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. Are we beginning to commend ourselves [another characteristic of the "super-apostles] again? Or do we need, like some people [another reference], letters of recommendation to you or from you? You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everybody. You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

### **Salesmen or stewards?**

The "so many" to whom Paul refers, the "super-apostles" who offer alternatives to authentic Christianity, have three characteristics. First, they are "peddlers" of the word of God. This word was used in the first century of wine merchants who sold their watered-down wines at bargain rates on the city streets. These men knew how to package and sell their inferior products. They knew how to massage the egos of the Greeks, how to sell to the barbarians, how to appear inoffensive to the Jews. The "super-apostles" knew how to package the Christian faith by smoothing out whatever rough edges it had. The good huckster knows exactly what to say to his mark and thus insinuate himself into his confidence. Of course, a side benefit of peddling the word of God was their own profit. As their crowds grew larger, their own reputations grew.

But, says Paul, he was a steward, not a salesman, of the word of God. The One he sought to please was his Master, not his listeners. Going back to his illustration of the aroma of Christ, Paul says that some people will be utterly turned off by this. They will not want to hear that they are sinners in need of a Savior. They will reject this. But, says Paul, we speak in Christ, from God, before God, with sincerity. We are not peddling the word of God.

My neighbor who is a probation officer in San Jose told me the other day that there are areas in that city where

kids should not go if they are wearing a red or a blue bandana. Gang warfare is so serious there that one can be injured or killed for wearing certain colors. He mentioned the despair that is settling over the criminal justice system. There seem to be no answers to the problem of crime. Kids are more violent, hardened and destructive than ever before. This man said that the loss of any kind of religious influence was one of the main causes. If Christians water down the gospel, and package it so that it says whatever we want it to say, that we are denying the source of hope for a society going to hell. Non-Christians are beginning to realize that we need something apart from government programs, education and money. There must be a powerful spiritual hope or our nation is going to die. This man was not speaking from a position of faith, but wistfully hoping that there is something "out there" that will help.

**I have been helped most...by encountering Christian leaders whose lives defy easy explanation**

Whenever the gospel is watered down and peddled so that it loses its glory, not only do people fail to come to Christ with their whole hearts, but the world we live in is denied the only hope it has.

### **Self-commendation**

The second thing Paul says about these "super-apostles" is that they commend themselves. Then he asks, "Are we beginning to commend ourselves again?" Some people love to do this. They have taken all the right courses, they dress right, they talk loudly, they are deeply committed to themselves. But if that is their only credential, they don't have much to offer. I saw a comic strip the other day of two young women talking together. One of them is reading a magazine and the other asks, "What is it about?" Her friend replies, "Well, it has one moving essay on how the women of the '90's have risen above being judged by such superficial things as clothes and looks, etc., followed by 486 pages of pictures of stunning women, with flawless skin, and perfect bodies, frolicking around in \$1,500 play outfits, being chased into the sunset by incredible looking men driving \$60,000 jeeps." "Why did they even bother to include the essay, then?" her friend asked. "Oh, it was there for a good reason," she replied. "I ripped it out and blew my nose in it."

The cartoon, of course, is a parody of "'90's women" who attempt to achieve self-commendation with mature standards, yet find themselves as insecure as their predecessors.

### **Paper authority**

The third thing Paul refers to here is this matter of letters of recommendation. These people to whom the apostle is referring probably were well educated Jews from Jerusalem. They were not sent by the recognized leadership there, but rather had caught on to the vitality of Christianity and were involved in a peripheral way with the church. They were, in a sense, a new wave, a new cutting edge, peddling a newer, better version of Christianity. They gave themselves credentials, wrote letters telling how important they were, and headed for Corinth.

But, Paul asks, what good really are letters of recommendation, or degrees in theology or ministry? How deep an impression is made by the accolades of others? Shouldn't the real question be, are lives changed by this ministry? A letter, a degree or a standing in any kind of an organization ought to give you a hearing once. But afterwards, if there is no reality, no touch of God, if hearts are not stirred toward the Lord, if all that remains are the credentials, then, says Paul, the whole thing is ridiculous. Why would he need a letter of recommendation to or from the Corinthians when he had already ministered there and seen great numbers of them come to Christ? Recall the passage in 1 Corinthians 6 where he said that some of them used to be swindlers, liars, sexual perverts, drunkards, thieves, etc., but they had been changed and renewed in Christ. Why would someone who could write on human hearts by the power of the Spirit of God need a letter of recommendation?

I spent last week ministering in Oregon with FCAP, the *Fellowship of Christian Airlines Personnel*---pilots, flight attendants, mechanics, desk workers, etc., who meet together for fellowship in cities around the world and have a convention once a year. Because of the rootlessness of their profession, the Christians in the airlines industry are really drawn to need each other. They are aware of the worldliness they are facing daily,

and the attacks on the morality of Christians, so they actively support and pray for one another. Ray Stedman was also there as a speaker, and he gave me a very nice introduction before I spoke, a verbal "letter of introduction." I went on to teach the Bible, making both practical and theological points, and people took notes and looked interested.

Somewhat later, the leader of the group, Joe Ivey, who is a pilot, not a Christian professional, spoke. He said, "You know, brothers and sisters, each one here needs to take seriously the call of discipleship, and I want to see you make some decisions right now to get right with the Lord." After just a couple of sentences from him people right and left were visibly moved to respond to his appeal.

This illustrated to me exactly what Paul is saying here. Joe Ivey has ministered to these people for twenty years. They know him and love him. Through the Spirit of God he has written on many hearts. He is a man of integrity, with a powerful God-given ministry. What God used me to accomplish was less apparent, but it did not come from the recommendation or description of me by others.

The apostle is making the point that it doesn't matter what the documents say. The issue is, are you the kind of person whose life will have an impact because of who resides within you?

Paul is confident about his life. He is qualified to minister, despite the fact that he is hurting and anxious at times and does not know what to do. His circumstances do not lower his sense of confidence. He is, by the grace of God, a man of God. He will go on to say that nothing of this comes from himself. It is not his own human ability that qualifies him. Everything comes from God. This kind of confidence that does not rest on anything visible to the human eye is like the influence of a fragrance. It lingers, it is powerful, it is unstoppable. What is most important is what is invisible and internal. It is not the letters written in ink, documents that can be read, but whether the writing has taken place on human hearts. It is not the chiselling of the commandments in stone that brings obedience, but rather the writing on hearts. It is the law of God loved and embraced by us, the change the Spirit makes within us so that from the inside, not the outside, that makes us different people.

I commend to you the worthiness of this perspective. We can live our lives attempting to do what will be recorded by men, serving God with all our effort; we can be well credentialled and outwardly measured in our influence; we can learn to humanly crank out things and attempt to attach them to the name of Christ. Or we can learn to be the kind of people who triumph because of what God is doing in us, whether or not anybody notices or gives us credit. Join the apostle in a word of "thanks to God" for a life of genuine triumph that is inward, invisible, and inevitable.

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Steve Zeisler  
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