

2 Corinthians 2:14-16

Verse 14. *Now thanks be unto God*, etc. There seem to have been several sources of Paul's joy on this occasion. The principal was his constant and uniform success in endeavouring to advance the interests of the kingdom of the Redeemer. But in particular he rejoiced,

(1.) because Titus had come to him there, and had removed his distress, compare 2 Corinthians 2:13;

(2.) because he learned from him that his efforts in regard to the church at Corinth had been successful, and that they had hearkened to his counsels in his first letter; and,

(3.) because he was favoured with signal success in Macedonia. His being compelled, therefore, to remove from Tress and to go to Macedonia had been to him ultimately the cause of great joy and consolation. These instances of success Paul regarded as occasions of gratitude to God.

Which always causeth us. Whatever may be our efforts, and wherever we are. Whether it is in endeavouring to remove the errors and evils existing in a particular church,, or whether it be in preaching the gospel in places where it has been unknown, still success crowns our efforts, and we have the constant evidence of Divine approbation. This was *Paul's* consolation in the midst of his many trials; and it proves that, whatever may be the external circumstances of a minister, whether poverty, want, persecution, or distress, he will have abundant occasion to give thanks to God if his efforts as a minister are crowned with success.

To triumph in Christ. To triumph through the aid of Christ, or in promoting the cause of Christ. Paul had no joy which was not connected with Christ, and he had no success which he did not trace to him. The word which is here rendered *triumph* (θριαμβεοντι), from θριαμβεω occurs in no other place in the New Testament, except in Colossians 2:15. It is there rendered "*triumphing* over them in it," that is, triumphing over the principalities and powers which he had spoiled, or plundered; and it there means that Christ led them in triumph after the manner of a conqueror. The word is here used in a causative sense-the sense of the Hebrew Hiphil conjugation. It properly refers to a triumph; or a triumphal procession. Originally the word θριαμβος meant a hymn which was sung in honour of Bacchus; then the tumultuous and noisy procession which constituted the worship of the god of wine; and then any procession of a similar kind.-*Passow*. It was particularly applied, among both the Greeks and the Romans, to a public and solemn honour conferred on a victorious general on a return from a successful war, in which he was allowed a magnificent entrance into the capital. In these triumphs, the victorious commander was usually preceded or attended by the spoils of war; by the most valuable and magnificent articles which he had captured; and by the princes, nobles, generals, or people whom he had subdued. The victor was drawn in a magnificent chariot, usually by two white horses. Other animals were sometimes used. "When Pompey triumphed over Africa, his chariot was drawn by elephants; that of Mark Antony by lions; that of Heliogabalus by tigers; and that of Aurelius by deer."-. *Clark*. The people of Corinth were not unacquainted with the nature of a triumph. About one hundred and forty-seven years before Christ, Lucius Mummius, the Roman consul, had conquered all Achaia, and had destroyed Corinth, Thebes, and Colchis, and by order of the Roman senate was favoured with a triumph, and was surnamed *Achaicus*.

Tindal renders this place, "Thanks be unto God, which always giveth us the victory in Christ." Paul refers here to a victory which he had, and a triumph with which he was favoured by the Redeemer. It was a victory over the enemies of the gospel; it was success in advancing the interests of the kingdom of Christ; and he rejoiced in that victory, and in that success, with more solid and substantial joy than a Roman victor ever felt on returning from his conquests over nations, even when attended with the richest spoils of victory, and by humbled princes and kings in chains, and when the assembled thousands shouted *Io triumphe!*

And maketh manifest. Makes known; spreads abroad—as a pleasant fragrance is diffused through the air.

The savour. ὁσμήν. The smell; the fragrance. The word in the New Testament is used to denote a pleasant or fragrant odour, as of incense or aromatics, John 12:3, Ephesians 5:2, Philippians 4:18. There is an allusion here, doubtless, to the fact that in the triumphal processions fragrant odours were diffused around; flowers, diffusing a grateful smell, were scattered in the way; and on the altars of the gods incense was burned during the procession, and sacrifices offered, and the whole city was filled with the smoke of sacrifices, and with perfumes. So Paul speaks of *knowledge*—the knowledge of Christ. In his triumphings, the knowledge of the Redeemer was diffused abroad, like the odours which were diffused in the triumphal march of the conqueror. And that odour or savour was acceptable to God—as the fragrance of aromatics and of incense was pleasant in the triumphal procession of the returning victor. The phrase, "makes manifest the savour of his knowledge," therefore means, that the knowledge of Christ was diffused everywhere by Paul, as the grateful smell of aromatics was diffused all around the triumphing warrior and victor. The effect of Paul's conquests everywhere was to diffuse the knowledge of the Saviour—and this was acceptable and pleasant to God—though there might be many who would not avail themselves of it, and would perish. See 2 Corinthians 2:15.

(*) "God, which always"

(*) "savour" "odour"

(*) "savour of his knowledge" Song 1:3

Verse 15. *For we are unto God.* We who are his ministers, and who thus triumph. It is implied here that Paul felt that ministers were labouring *for* God, and felt assured that their labours would be acceptable to him. The object of Paul in the statement, in this and in the following verses, is undoubtedly to meet the charges of his detractors and enemies, he says, therefore, that whatever was the result of his labours in regard to the future salvation of men, yet that his well-meant endeavours, and labours, and self-denials in preaching the gospel, were acceptable to God. The measure of God's approbation in the case was not his *success*, but his fidelity, his zeal, his self-denial, whatever might be the reception of the gospel among those who heard it.

A sweet savour. Like the smell, of pleasant incense, or of grateful aromatics, such as were burned in the triumphal processions of returning conquerors. The meaning is, that their labours were acceptable to God; he was pleased with them, and would bestow on them the smiles and proofs of his approbation. The word here rendered "sweet savour" (εὐωδία occurs only in this place, and in Ephesians 5:2; Philippians 4:18; and is applied to persons or things well-pleasing to God. It properly means good odour, or fragrance; and in the Septuagint it is frequently applied to the incense that was burnt in the public worship of God, and to sacrifices in general, Genesis 8:21, Exodus 29:18,25,41; Leviticus 1:9,13,17, 2:2,9,12, 3:5,16, 4:31, etc. Here it means that the services of Paul and the other ministers of religion were as grateful to God as sweet incense, or acceptable sacrifices.

Of Christ. That is, we are Christ's sweet savour to God; we are that which he has appointed, and which he has devoted and consecrated to God; we are the offering, so to speak, which he is continually making to God.

In them that are saved. In regard to them who believe the gospel through our ministry, and who are saved. Our labour in carrying the gospel to them, and in bringing them to the knowledge of the truth, is acceptable to God. Their salvation is an object of his highest desire, and he is gratified with our fidelity, and with our success. This reason why their work was acceptable to God is more fully stated in the following verse, where it is said that in reference to them they were the "savour of life unto life." The word "saved" here refers to all who become Christians, and who enter heaven; and as the salvation of men is an object of such desire to God, it cannot but be that all who bear the gospel to men are engaged in an acceptable service, and that all their efforts will be pleasing to him, and approved in his sight. In regard to this part of Paul's statement there can be no difficulty.

And in them that perish. In reference to them who reject the gospel, and who are finally lost. It is implied here,

(1.) that some *would* reject the gospel and perish, with whatever fidelity and self-denial the ministers of religion might labour.

(2.) That though this would be the result, yet the labours of the ministers of religion would be acceptable to God. This is a fearful and awful declaration, and has been thought by many to be attended with difficulty. A few remarks may present the true sense of the passage, and remove the difficulty from it.

(1.) It is not affirmed or implied here that the destruction of those who would reject the gospel, and who would perish, was *desired* by God, or would be pleasing to him. This is nowhere affirmed or implied in the Bible.

(2.) It is affirmed only that the labours of the ministers of religion in endeavouring to save them would be acceptable and pleasing to God. Their labours would be in order to save them, not to destroy them. *Their* desire was to bring all to heaven-and this was acceptable to God. Whatever might be the result, whether successful or not, yet God would be pleased with self-denial, and toil, and prayer that was honestly and zealously put forth to save others from death. They would be approved by God in proportion to the amount of labour, zeal, and fidelity which they evinced.

(3.) It would be by no fault of faithful ministers that men would perish. Their efforts would be to save them, and those efforts would be pleasing to God.

(4.) It would be by no fault of the gospel that men would perish. The regular and proper tendency of the gospel is to save, not to destroy men; as the tendency of medicine is to heal them, of food to support the body, of air to give vitality, of light to give pleasure to the eye, etc. It is provided for all, and is adapted to all. There is a sufficiency in the gospel for all men, and in its nature it is as really fitted to save one as another. Whatever may be the manner in which it is received, it is always in itself the same pure and glorious system; full of benevolence and mercy. *The bitterest enemy of the gospel can, not point to one of its provisions that is adapted or designed to make men miserable, and to destroy them.* All its provisions are adapted to salvation; all its arrangements are those of benevolence; all the powers and influences which it originates, are those which are fitted to save, not to destroy men. The gospel is what it is in itself pure, holy, and benevolent system, and is answerable only for effects which a pure, holy, and benevolent system is fitted to produce. To use the beautiful language of Theodoret, as quoted by Bloomfield,

"We indeed bear the sweet odour of Christ's gospel to all; but all who participate in it do not experience its salutiferous effects. Thus to diseased eyes even the light of heaven is noxious; yet the sun does not bring the injury. And to those in a fever, honey is bitter; yet it is sweet, nevertheless. Vultures too, it is said, fly from sweet odours of myrrh; yet myrrh is myrrh, though the vultures avoid it. Thus, if some be saved, though others perish, the gospel retains its own virtue, and we the preachers of it remain just as we are; and the gospel retains its odorous and salutiferous properties, though some may disbelieve and abuse it, and perish."

Yet

(5.) it is implied that the gospel would be the occasion of heavier condemnation to some, and that they would sink into deeper ruin in consequence of its being preached to them. This is implied in the expression in 2 Corinthians 2:16, "to the one we are a savour of death unto death." In the explanation of this we may observe,

(a.) that those who perish would have perished at any rate. All were under condemnation whether the gospel had come to them or not. None will perish in consequence of the gospel's having been sent to them who would not have perished had it been unknown. Men do not perish because the gospel is sent to them, but for their own sins.

(b.) It is in fact by their own fault that men reject the gospel, and that they are lost. They are voluntary in this; and, whatever is their final destiny, they are not under compulsion. The gospel compels no one against his will either to go to heaven or to hell.

(c.) Men under the gospel sin against greater light than they do without it. They have more to answer for. It increases their responsibility. If, therefore, they reject it, and go down to eternal death, they go from higher privileges; and they go, of course, to meet a more aggravated condemnation. For condemnation will always be in exact proportion to guilt; and guilt is in proportion to abused light and privileges.

(d.) The preaching of the gospel, and the offers of life, are often the occasion of the deeper guilt of the sinner. Often he becomes enraged. He gives vent to the deep malignity of his soul. He opposes the gospel with malice and infuriated anger, his eye kindles with indignation, and his lip curls with pride and scorn. He is profane and blasphemous; and the offering of the gospel to him is the occasion of exciting deep and malignant passions against God, against the Saviour, against the ministers of religion. Against the gospel men often manifest the same malignity and scorn which they did against the Saviour himself. Yet this is not the fault of the gospel, nor of the ministers of religion. It is the fault of sinners themselves; and while there can be no doubt that such a rejection of the gospel will produce their deeper condemnation, and that it is a savour of death unto death unto them, still the gospel is good and benevolent, and still God will be pleased with those who faithfully offer its provisions, and who urge it on the attention of men.

(*) "them that are save" 1 Corinthians 1:18

Verse 16. *To the one.* To those who perish.

We are the savour of death unto death. We are the occasion of deepening their condemnation, and of sinking them lower into ruin. The expression here used means, literally, "to the one class we bear a death—conveying odour leading to their death"—a savour, a smell which, under the circumstances, is destructive to life, and which leads to death. Mr. Locke renders this, "To the one my preaching is of ill-savour, unacceptable and offensive, by their rejecting whereof they draw death on themselves." Grateful as their labours were to God, and acceptable as would be their efforts, whatever might be the results, yet Paul could not be ignorant that the gospel would in fact be the means of greater condemnation to many, 2 Corinthians 2:15. It was indeed by their own fault; yet wherever the gospel was preached, it would to many have this result. It is probable that the language here used is borrowed from similar expressions which were common among the Jews.

Thus in Debarim Rabba,

And to the other. To those who embrace it, and are saved.

The savour of life. An odour, or fragrance producing life, or tending to life. It is a living, or life-giving savour. It is in itself grateful and pleasant.

Unto life. Tending to life; or adapted to produce life. The word life here, as often elsewhere, is used to denote salvation. It is life,

(1.) in opposition to the death in sin in which all are by nature;

(2.) in opposition to death in the grave-as it leads to a glorious resurrection;

(3.) in opposition to eternal death-to the second dying-as it leads to life and peace and hey in heaven. See the words "life" and "death" explained Romans 6:23. The gospel is "the savour of life unto life," because

(1.) it is its nature and tendency to produce life and salvation. It is adapted to that; and is designed to that end.

(2.) Because it actually results in the life and salvation of those who embrace it. It is the immediate and direct cause of their salvation; of their recovery from sin; of their glorious resurrection; of their eternal life in heaven.

And who is sufficient for these things? For the arduous and responsible work of the ministry; for a work whose influence must be felt either in the eternal salvation, or the eternal ruin of the soul. Who is worthy of so important a charge? Who can undertake it without trembling? Who can engage in it without feeling that he is in himself unfit for it, and that he needs constant Divine grace? This is an exclamation which any one may well make in view of the responsibilities of the work of the ministry. And we may remark,

(1.) if *Paul* felt this, assuredly others should feel it also. If, with all the Divine assistance which he had-all the proofs of the peculiar presence of God, and all the mighty miraculous powers conferred on him-Paul had such a sense of unfitness for this great work, then a consciousness of unfitness, and a deep sense of responsibility, may well rest on all others.

(2.) It was this sense of the responsibility of the ministry, which contributed much to Paul's success. It was a conviction that the results of his work must be seen in the joys of heaven, or the woes of hell, that led him to look to God for aid, and to devote himself so entirely to his great work. Men will not feel much concern unless they have a deep sense of the magnitude and responsibility of their work. Men who feel as they should about the ministry will look to God for aid, and will feel that he alone can sustain them in their arduous duties.

(*) "To the one" John 9:39, 1 Peter 2:7,8

(*) "savour" "odour"

(*) "who is sufficient"

Barnes' Notes on the New Testament.