

**2 Corinthians 2:12-3:6**  
**Dead Letters or Living Testimonies?**

Sometimes in Paul's letters we get a brief glimpse of the complete humanity of the Apostle, along with his loving care for believers, and this is one of those occasions. The Corinthians have been a real trial to him, behaving quite inappropriately and so causing the Apostle to speak to them in some pretty strong language. The result of that was a strain between himself and his Corinthian converts, which made visiting them far from ideal, since it would have proved less than productive. According to what he has said in the first chapter of this letter, he had intended to call on them both on his way to and returning from Macedonia. But such were the feelings between Apostle and Corinthian Christians from his previous visit, he changed his plans deeming it better to wait and write first, so that the record could be set straight. It is not that Paul is a coward, far from it. Rather his reasons are quite simple – both he and they needed time to cool down, as we all do when we fall out or have a disagreement with a friend.

So having abandoned his original plan to travel to Corinth, for the reasons that he has made quite clear in the previous chapter, the Apostle moved north instead to Troas. And he had a good reason for going there.

This was the port from which he had made his original journey into Europe. It was here that the Macedonian cry reached him, and he left almost as soon as he had arrived. So now he was returning, presumably to finish what he had tried to start the last time - the preaching of the gospel. And perhaps to his surprise, considering what had happened in Ephesus, where he was driven from the city by jealous pagans, he found that God had prepared the ground for him and many were coming to know the Lord Jesus. While he was there Paul expected Titus to join him from Corinth. As the weeks passed and there was no sign of his "brother", as he calls him, Paul began to feel uneasy. We know that he loved Titus as a son from the way he addressed him in the letter sent to him. Whatever his reason Paul could no longer continue to preach the gospel in Troas in spite of the open door he had received there.

It seems so out of character for Paul to leave a place which is responding to the gospel. Yet we have all known what it is to be enjoying something greatly but have no peace of mind about it. We have to keep reminding ourselves that serving Christ is not always an easy option. There are times when we have to make hard decisions, which can be quite frightening. Just because we are enjoying some area of Christian life does not mean that God will not move us on to something else which is equally valid in His service.

Paul had expected Titus to join him at Troas and worry about this beloved brother distracted the Apostle from his main task of preaching the gospel.

But Paul knows that God works in everything for the good of those who love him and who have been called according to his purpose, as he says in Romans 8: 28. That is why he can go on to say immediately, "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." (2:14) What might have seemed weakness on Paul's part in leaving Troas for Macedonia in search of Titus, turned out to be a triumph because in the process the gospel was spread further. And, being Paul, he never misses an opportunity to remind his converts, even ones who had somewhat disappointed him on his last visit to them, that Christians, even the weakest, are the "aroma of Christ" (v.15) among those around them. Whatever Paul's leaving Troas suddenly may have

looked like, it did not stop the Lord bringing a people to himself in that place and wherever Paul and his followers went.

It's a good point for all of us to remember. Wherever we are, we represent Christ, and that should mean our lives reflect that truth, even in the worst of situations. Paul had suffered dreadfully for sharing his faith in different parts of the Gentile world, and some would have said he was mad to carry on, since no one could possibly have wanted to follow a faith which cost so much in physical torture as well as constant fear of the authorities. Yet, everywhere Paul preached, people flocked to hear and many were converted regardless of the cost to them and their families. No wonder Paul thanked God for leading all his people in triumphal procession in Christ and through them, spreading the fragrance of the knowledge of that same Christ. For the important person in all of this is Jesus Christ. Everything Paul did he did for Jesus' sake, knowing that as he honoured the Lord who had called him, no matter the cost, the gospel would continue to spread.

Is that like our faith? Are we people who want to share Jesus Christ and the faith we have in him with others, even if it costs us our popularity and our friends? Did you realise you were an aroma - and please note there is a big difference between an aroma and a smell! The former conjures up a pleasant picture of enticing smells, the latter tends to make us screw up our noses in anticipation of a bad odour. And from what Paul goes on to say here, it appears we can be both, because we are the sweet aroma of salvation to those who are being saved, while we can also be the stink of death to those who are perishing. To know that is to bear a tremendous responsibility for people's souls.

The gospel is both a life-force and a death threat, depending on how people respond to Jesus Christ. That means we have to handle the Word of God carefully. It is a sobering thought that introducing a friend to the preaching of the gospel is bringing them to the edge of an abyss, where they have to decide whether it is life or death they want to choose. Although that might seem a very good reason for leaving them in ignorance, it would be a far more fearful prospect to have to appear before the living God and answer for why we did not tell our friends about him. What we need to remember is that the decision for or against Christ is, in the final analysis, not one that we make but which God in Christ makes for us. It is that strange anomaly of deciding to follow Christ only to find after we have made the decision that he says, "You did not choose me, but I chose you!" Yet, like Paul, we must preach the gospel, whether by word of mouth or through our lives, so that we can never be accused of hiding our faith from others. It is hardly surprising that Paul exclaims, following this announcement about being the aroma of Christ to those around us, "And who is equal to such a task?" (v.16)

Maybe your first reaction is to say, "Well, certainly not me!" But look at what Paul goes to say about the responsibility that is ours. (Quote v. 17) In a sense we have no choice about talking to others because our task is to speak as those who are "in Christ". In other words the glory of our salvation should shine through everything we do and say, because, being united with him, we have the privilege of sharing Christ's triumph over death as we proclaim the truth of the gospel.

Paul makes it very clear that he and his companions never shared the gospel among the Corinthians for profit, unlike many who came supposedly from God. Now Jesus clearly stated that the labourer is worthy of his hire, which is perfectly true, as long as the labourer carries out the work given to him to the best of his ability and not simply for gain. Paul's point is that those who are called to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ must be careful not to seek the approval of people rather than God. When that

happens there is a danger of taking lower ground, even denying the sometimes uncomfortable truths which the gospel teaches. The idea of sin and judgement is hardly a popular one, especially today where everyone does what is right in their own eyes. The world thinks that the gospel is a hindrance rather than a release, when we dare to suggest how seriously God views the sins of his creatures. Yet we cannot water down the gospel to accommodate people's sensitivities. They need to hear the truth. No, more than that, they deserve to hear the truth, because only the truth sets people free.

I still remember the first time I heard the full gospel being preached, not some watered-down, nice version, which said we were all fine. It hit me like a ton of bricks and I was angry, yes, angry at the suggestion that I, a good church-going lad, was a sinner who needed to be saved. It took a while of hearing it, and the humbling of an arrogant spirit, until God was able to break through a hard exterior and melt a heart of stone. But if I had never heard the truth of the gospel I would have gone on believing I was fine in God's eyes and what a fright I would have received on the Day of Judgement. Surely none of us wants either our family or friends, who do not yet know the Lord Jesus Christ, to end up like that. Our responsibility is to tell God's truth, no matter what it costs us. Of course the way we tell it can make all the difference between interesting someone and putting them off. Jesus never raged at people he knew were sinners. He interested them by mentioning something in their lives which reflected badly on their position before God, so they could ask him what to do about it. It was the outwardly religious, who should have known better, who received the Lord's real ire. They knew the truth and refused to accept it, because it interfered with the good life they had gained for themselves through fleecing the ordinary worshippers for their sacrifices in the temple. It is sincerity and a sense of call that every Christian should have about the things of God. That was what drove Paul and all his companions.

And Paul is quite blatant about why he is saying all this to the Corinthians. He wants them to trust him again, not because of who he is but because of what he brings, the transforming message of salvation! That is how every Christian should want to be known. One of the dangers for a preacher of the gospel is that human flattery can take over from divine truth. Paul prefers to be known as an apostle from God, rather than someone who was received on another human being's letter of recommendation. As far as he was concerned the only recommendation he needed was the lives of those transformed by the truth of Christ. In fact, probably with Jeremiah's prophecy in mind, Paul sees the Corinthian believers as a "letter from Christ" (2 Cor. 3:3) written by the Spirit of the living God on the human heart. It was Jeremiah in Ch.31 who wrote directly from God, "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God and they will be my people." (Jer.31:33)

The Holy Spirit had changed the lives of these men and women in Corinth, turning them right round, just as he still does today when we give our lives to Christ. There is no such thing as a quiet Christian, in the sense that the change in our life will show, in the way we react to others, in the desires that we have to help rather than hinder, and in the love that God puts in our heart, which cannot be hidden. All of these tell far more powerfully than any written recommendation from another human being. When God writes on our life, it is done in indelible ink, because the Holy Spirit cannot be removed once he enters a believer's life. He is the One sent from God to show the love the Lord has for us.

The Christian preacher, however, while he may not require written letters of commendation, cannot be self-confident either. For any confidence the Christian has comes through Christ from God. The competency any preacher of the gospel has is

not self-taught, but is a gift of God, since the change in anyone's life cannot be humanly induced. Only God by his Spirit has the power to alter our life for the better. The Old Covenant, granted to Moses on Sinai, when he received the tablets of stone containing the Law by which the people of God would have to live if they were to receive his blessing, proved to be a "letter" that killed rather than gave life. Human beings just could not keep the whole law, however hard they tried. In the end the Law of God turned out to be our condemnation rather than our salvation. That was why God finally sent his only Son into the world so that, as the one perfect human being, he could keep the law completely and so fulfil the righteousness that was needed for us to be reconciled to God.

Jesus promised that when he returned to the Father, he would send the Holy Spirit to be a reminder of all he had done for us in his life, death and resurrection. That same Spirit brings life to all who believe.

And Paul makes a play here on the word "letter". Having stated that he needs no "letter" of recommendation, he says that the "letter" kills, but the Spirit gives life. Although he is obviously speaking about the letter of the Law which showed up man's sin even more and kept him away from God, there is also a reminder to the Corinthians that a "letter" of recommendation is purely another human being's idea about the person recommended, whereas the Spirit is the seal of God on a life and he brings life, real life, eternal life through Jesus Christ.

What does all this mean for us today? Simply that until Jesus Christ is central in our life we will always be searching for something else, for some other recommendation to keep us happy. When we know and love the Lord Jesus, as Saviour and Friend, we need nothing else. He is indeed the Way and the Truth and Life for each one of us. That was what Paul wanted to impress on the Corinthians and on us. Will you stand in Christ and become the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ to those around you? Nothing else can touch that truth in your life. With Jesus Christ placed centrally a whole new vista of life opens up. Of course the devil will do everything in his power to distract us from that. But the power of the Holy Spirit is always greater and with him dwelling inside us, we can know the victory of Jesus' sacrifice in our lives each and every day.

Amen