

What is God Doing with You?

2 Corinthians 2:14-17

Turn to 2 Corinthians 2 please. Our Scripture today answers the question, “what is God doing with you?” “What is God doing with me?” If someone asked you, “what do you think God is doing with you,” what would you say to them? How would you answer that? What IS God doing with you? Where does your mind go with that question?

Don’t think about the ways God is trying to make you a better Christian. Our Scripture is not about that at all. What God is REALLY doing with us is not making us better. Let’s refine the question: “what is God doing with you and me in the world?” Try that question on. How is God using you in the world?

The first sentence of our Scripture is the answer: *Thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives in Christ’s triumphal procession and uses us to spread the aroma of knowing him everywhere.* ¹⁵ *For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing.* ¹⁶ *To the one we are an aroma of death that brings death; to the other, an aroma of life that brings life. And who is qualified for such a task?* ¹⁷ *Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, we speak and act sincerely, we speak and act from God, before God, belonging to Christ.*

In 2 Corinthians, Paul has a long section on being a true servant of Christ. The Corinthians were not good judges of true servants of Christ as opposed to false servants, so Paul was explaining. This long section begins with our paragraph, at 2:14, and goes to the beginning of chapter 7. A bit over four chapters on true servants of Christ.

Our paragraph, 2:14-17, is the opening summary. He first crams it all into this dense paragraph, and then expands on it until chapter 7. In 2 Cor, this paragraph is the core of being Christ’s servant.

Thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives in Christ’s triumphal procession and uses us to spread the aroma of knowing him everywhere.

Christ’s Triumphal Procession “*Leads us as captives in Christ’s triumphal procession*” is how the NIV translates this. The NIV has taken some liberties here, but they have captured the truth perfectly.

In the Roman world, when an army leader won an important victory, they would have a parade in Rome. They called it a “triumph.” That was a victory parade. The leader of the army would be honoured, but there would be other people, some of his generals, and so on. And at the end of the procession would be prisoners of war, defeated soldiers who were kept alive for this parade.

They all would parade through the streets, and the crowds would cheer the victor and mock the prisoners, and the procession would end up in the arena, and there the prisoners of war would be executed. The audience in Rome would get to watch the last stage of the battle.

Paul writes about apostles this way in 1 Corinthians 4:9 - *For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like those condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to human beings.*

Now to our text: *Thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives in Christ's triumphal procession and uses us to spread the aroma of knowing him everywhere.*

We are Christ's Captives - In this world, God is the director and leader of a victory parade, which features his Son Jesus Christ. Jesus, the triumphant conqueror, being paraded by God up and down the streets of the world. He has with him his prisoners of war, his captives. That's us.

We think we ourselves chose to follow Christ. Christ's followers usually think that. But Jesus says in John 15, *you did not choose me. I chose you and appointed you.* Christ chose us, conquered us, keeps conquering us, we are his captives, we belong to him.

God is leading this parade featuring Christ the champion. But Christ is invisible. The world does not see him. What does the world actually see? Only his captives, only us. *God always leads us as captives, in Christ's triumphal procession, and uses us to spread the aroma of knowing him everywhere.* That is what God is doing with our lives.

Thanks be to God! That's how this begins. Being Christ's captive is something for which we thank God. It is a glorious parade, and the glory is even on the prisoners. Being Christ's captive, being led to the arena in Christ's parade, is the best thing that could happen to anyone.

The Experience of Captives - What would be the experience of an actual prisoner of war, a captive in one of those Roman triumphal processions? Four things: They are weak, they have very big troubles, they are frightened, and they are humiliated. That's what it was like to be such a captive. Weak, troubled, frightened, and humiliated.

Jesus himself was led to execution. He's been marched to his death. **Weak**? Christ was crucified in weakness, we read in 2 Cor 13. He became helpless. **Troubled**? He's being executed, I'd call that troubles. **Frightened**? Father, with you all things are possible; take this cup from me. **Humiliated**? In the Gospels, there's more emphasis on Jesus enduring shame than pain.

What pleased God was not that Christ suffered, not at all. But what did please God was that Christ continued to trust God and obey God. What's God doing with me? What's God's doing with you? At God's instigation, Christ captured us. God always leads a victorious procession in Christ's honour, parading Christ and his captives up and down the streets of the world.

The Aroma of Knowing Him - *God uses us to spread the aroma of knowing him everywhere.* In Leviticus, we often read that a sacrifice offers a pleasing aroma to the LORD. That's probably what's going on here. When Paul speaks of the fragrance of Christ elsewhere, that's what he means. Christ's sacrifice was a fragrant offering, an aroma that pleased the Lord.

Christ himself was in great distress, as he died, but he continued to trust in God and obey God, and to God that had the most pleasing smell imaginable.

We tend to think that our weaknesses, and our troubles, stop us from doing what God wants us to do. We think that our fears, and the things that shame us, stop us from being used by God. Nothing could be farther from the truth. If we are captives being led to the arena, weaknesses and troubles are assumed, fears and humiliations are assumed.

What God wants is people like that who will continue to trust him and live faithfully. That is precisely what God is doing with us. Christ's captives are regularly weak and troubled, frightened and scared, but they continue to trust in God and live faithfully. *THAT* is the aroma of knowing God, the aroma of knowing Christ.

Folks, this is a long parade. There are millions and millions of Christ's captives who qualify here. There's no parade like this, not ever.

Let's read a bit more. Much of our paragraph about smell. *Thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives in Christ's triumphal procession and uses us to spread **the aroma of knowing him everywhere.*** ¹⁵ *For we are to God **the fragrance of Christ** among those who are being saved and those who are perishing.* ¹⁶ *To the one we are **an aroma of death** that brings death; to the other, **an aroma of life** that brings life.*

Let's be clear what the smell is. It is not just people trusting God and living faithfully. It is people trusting God and living faithfully in a particular context. We trust and obey while being captives in this procession, while experiencing times of weakness and trouble, fear and humiliation. In that context, we trust God and live faithfully.

That's the smell that God is always parading in every place. That's the smell of knowing God.

The Three Noses – What people like that actually smell like depends on whose nose. Some foods smell good to some people and awful to other people. Depends on whose nose.

*For we are to God **the fragrance of Christ.*** No ambiguity here. To God, we smell like Christ, and to God this is a wonderful smell. He's delighted to take this through the world.

To the perishing we are the aroma of death that brings death. To the people who don't want Christ, don't think the gospel is good news at all, we smell terrible, we smell like death, and their response is leading to their own eternal destruction.

To those being saved we are the aroma of life that brings life. To the people who want Christ and think the gospel is the best news possible, we smell wonderful, we smell like life, and that response is leading us to eternal life.

What is the smell? Depends on the nose. To God we have the wonderful smell of Christ himself. To the saved we smell like life, and to the perishing we smell like death.

Paul takes no responsibility for smelling awful to some. There were people who could not stand Christ himself. So of course there will be people who in the same way don't want to be near his servants. We think everyone should be attracted to us, and if they are not, we need to change our ways. Christ did not think that way, and neither did Paul.

To some feel like life, to others we feel like death, and that's just how it is, just as with Jesus.

Qualifications for being such a Captive *And who is qualified for such a task?* ¹⁷ *Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, we speak and act sincerely, we speak and act from God, before God, belonging to Christ.*

Who is qualified for such a task? In some ways this is a silly question, and Paul knows it. We have been captured by Christ, we are being led by God in this victory parade as prisoners of war. All that requires of us is to have been captured by Christ. People, if we trust in God and live in his ways as we are able, we can't NOT be in Christ's triumphal procession.

But the Corinthians have been asking Paul if he is qualified, which Paul thinks is silly, but because of that he brings it up. *Who is qualified for such a task?*

First he describes the people that are not qualified, then those that are: *Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, we speak and act sincerely, we speak and act from God, before God, belonging to Christ.*

Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. In 1 Tim 6, Paul says that there are in the church those who imagine that godliness is a means of gain. There are many who peddle the word of God for profit. These people speak and act like Christ's followers because they benefit themselves. If there were many then, there are many now. Let's be careful.

The qualified servants: *On the contrary, we speak and act sincerely, we speak and act from God, before God, belonging to Christ.* The peddlers of the word of God will say that they speak and act from God, before God, as belonging to Christ. But they are not sincere. True servants are genuine in this.

The last six words of v17 read this way in Greek: *from God, before God, in Christ.* That's how real servants of Christ live.

From God. God tells us how to speak and act, and God leads our lives. We get our lifestyle and our speech habits straight from God. God is leading this procession, and God has told us how to live and speak.

Before God. We live our lives before the Throne. We live our lives for an audience of One. God leads us, and has told us how to live and speak, and we respond for him alone. In Matthew 6, Jesus gave instructions on giving money for the poor, and on praying, and on fasting.

The instruction was always the same: do this so others won't notice, do it privately for your Father in heaven. Do all your righteous acts for an audience of One. This is the mark of a true servant. To some we will smell like life, to others like death, and that is immaterial, as long as to God we smell like Christ.

This paragraph on being a servant of Christ is remarkably God-centered, not people centered. Thanks be to **God**, **Christ** captured us, **God** always leads this procession, through us **God** spreads the aroma of **Christ** in every place. Our response is to live and speak as **God** instructed, doing this so **God** will see, as those belong to **Christ**, captives of **Christ**.

To some this smells like life, to others like death. Does this mean we don't care about people? No, nothing could be farther from the truth. God tells us to love each other, serve each other, forgive each other, honour one another above yourselves, submit to one another, and so on. God told us that, so we do it because God had told us how to live and speak.

Paul deeply loves the unpleasant Corinthian church. But do not turn this into making sure everyone is pleased with us, and making ourselves attractive to everyone. That is a distortion, and we are then dangerously close to being peddlers of the good news, using godliness as a means to personal gain.

In Christ. We live and speak from God, before God, in Christ. We belong to Christ, we are his captives, he captured us, we did not choose him, he choose us. We are sincere in wanting to act this out, we want our lives to show that we belong to Christ. In this paragraph, we are either God-centered, or self-centered. No other options.

We live and speak having instructions *from God*, we live this out *before God*, for his eyes only, *in Christ*, as those belonging to Christ.

When we say this, we are sincere, we mean to live this way. We will regularly fail of course, but the Lord gave us the Lord's Prayer for that, and we continue on. This qualifies us to carry the fragrance of Christ, and it is God's business to get us where he wants us.

So: what is God doing with us? God always leads us as captives in Christ's triumphal procession, and through us he spreads the fragrance of knowing him in every place.

Our Response in Three parts:

One, thank God. Give thanks to God, who always leads us in Christ's victory parade.

Two, no peddling. No godliness for personal gain of any kind. We are Christ's servants.

Three, live and act as instructed by God, for the audience of One, as Christ's captives.

Weakness and severe troubles, fears and humiliations, do not hinder this at all. They are built into being such a captive. If anything, the aroma of Christ gets stronger in these hard times as we continue to trust God and live in his ways.

Almighty God, thank you that Christ captured us, thank you that you are leading us in his great victory parade. Thank you that you are using us to bring the fragrance of Christ to every place. Thank you that weakness and troubles are built into this picture, as are fears and humiliations.

We put our trust in you again, at this moment. We want to act and speak in your ways. May your good Spirit renew us every day and strengthen us in this, again and again. We ask this in the name of Jesus our Lord.

Appendix: who are the "we"? Paul speaks of "we" and "us" several times in our paragraph, and often in 2 Corinthians. It is never clearly defined in 2 Corinthians. I suspect therefore that Paul intends some ambiguity and flexibility here.

In the narrow sense, "we" is the apostles. There is a group of scoundrels in Corinth who consider themselves far superior apostles compared to Paul, and whom Paul calls servants of Satan disguised as servants of light. There is no doubt that in 2 Cor, Paul hope the Corinthians will see that he is a true apostle and they are not true apostles.

But in this letter, Paul almost never speaks of himself as an apostle, and he never separates himself from ordinary faithful Christians. His favorite word for the "we" in 2 Cor is *diaconos*, "servant," "minister," occasionally (but not in 2 Cor) "deacon." All the way through 2 Cor, he distinguishes true servants of Christ from false servants. That is his central interest.

Again, Paul almost never speaks of himself as an apostle in this letter, and he never separates himself from ordinary faithful Christians.

In 2 Cor 5, he writes, *Christ died for all, that those who live would no longer live for themselves, but for him who died for them and rose again.* Everyone for whom Christ died, that is, every believer, should live not for themselves but for Christ.

In the strict sense, "we" are the true apostles, and they understood that in Corinth. But Paul deliberately writes in a way that "we" generally includes all believers, because these same things shape all of us.