

God gave each of us five basic senses to interact with the world: touch, sight, hearing, taste, and smell. Out of all of these, our sense of smell is considered to be the strongest. As I get older and my sense of sight and hearing seem to be lessening, I actually think my sense of smell is getting stronger; it's compensating.

Studies indicate that our sense of smell is closely linked to our memory. Certain smells are nostalgic for us. The smell of a musty garage triggers my memory of the basement in a parsonage where Julie and I once lived. The sweet smell of lilac reminds me of spring in the mid-west. The smell of fish reminds me of my uncle, who liked to fish a lot. And then there is the smell of dark chocolate and fresh coffee. That smell reminds me that all is good and right in my world.

Some see smells as a way of making money. Some celebrities have smells named after them. Fans can identify with their favorite actor or singer by dabbing on the scent bearing his or her name. They call these perfumes their signature scent.

I discovered this week that there are actual businesses whose sole purpose is to help people discover their personal signature scent. Yes, really, it's a thing.

In 2 Corinthians 2:12-18, the Apostle Paul tells us that followers of Christ have a signature scent. It's not a physical scent. It's a spiritual scent, a beautiful fragrance we emit when we offer ourselves to God and live committed to being obedient followers of Jesus.

So far, in 2 Corinthians, we have learned a lot about Paul, the man. As I try to understand Paul in deeper ways, I found myself asking, "What is Paul's unique signature scent that he offers up to God?" His scent seems complex to me. Sometimes Paul's words smell as fresh as spring in the Midwest. Other times Paul's words smell more like my fisherman uncle.

We see Paul's words reveal weighty theology that we just know is delivered to us through divine revelation from God. And on the other hand, we see words written that reveal Paul's inner conflict, his hardship, his troubles as a missionary church planter, musty things, and we just wonder why God would deliver such things through divine revelation.

Then it made sense to me. Paul's signature scent is the scent of someone beautifully broken. It's the scent of a brilliant spirit-led man, but also a flawed man. But when Paul is pressed into a life

of sacrifice and service to Christ, his signature scent wafts up to into the nostrils of God as a sweet aroma.

You and I have signature scents too. And our unique scents are just as complex as Paul's. For us, maybe it's a little bit of dark chocolate mixed with a lot of musty basement with a bit of spoiled fish thrown in. To us, our signature scent doesn't seem like anything beautiful or worthy of being offered up to God. But when it is offered as a sacrifice of an obedient life, it becomes something beautiful to God, something beautifully broken, and therefore useful to God.

My prayer is that through this study, we will be encouraged to understand better how we can be a sweet fragrance to God and the world around us.

**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 as captives in Christ's triumphal procession and uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To 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? Unlike 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. 2 Corinthians 2:12-17**

### **The Scent of Weakness (Held up by Grace)**

Paul starts by telling us that something awesome was beginning to happen in Troas. He went to Troas to preach the gospel, and people were actually eager to hear his message. I get the impression that he began preaching and that people actually responded.

It appears that he started preaching the good news of Jesus to the people in Troas, and the people were receiving the gift of forgiveness for their sins and the gift of eternal life. Paul, who had declared himself in Galatians 2 as the apostle to the gentiles, was about to experience something that had the potential to bring mass gentile conversions to the city.

But look in verse 13. Paul says, "*I had no peace of mind.*" Literally, he is saying, "I had no rest." As people came to him, he had these troubling internal feelings that he couldn't shake. He was

distracted, troubled, and restless in his spirit. Even as all people around him were ready to soak up every word, he shared like dry sponges. Even as lives were about to be transformed, and a city engaged and reached for Christ, Paul's mind was elsewhere.

Where was it? His mind was on his dear friend and spiritual brother Titus. He came to Troas looking for Titus, and he couldn't find him. Paul was supposed to meet Titus and receive an update on the Corinthian church situation. Paul was waiting to hear about how the little church in Corinth received his prior letters. Remember, Paul had written those letters for the purpose of defending his integrity, his ministry, and to confront the sin that had taken root in their church community.

It worried Paul that he didn't know what had happened to his friend Titus. Had he been arrested? Had he been betrayed? Maybe he was killed? Could he be sick? All of us know situations when our intense worry distracts us from the work we are called to do. Present in body but absent in spirit.

So what did Paul do? He left them. He left Troas and headed to Macedonia to try to find his friend. Really? When Paul had a golden opportunity to offer up his beautiful fragrance in Troas, he walks away? I think Paul failed. I don't smell fresh coffee and dark chocolate here. I smell a musty basement. He had a great opportunity and didn't see it through.

It's one thing to let your anxiety and troubled mind get the best of you, but it's quite another to reveal it to others. I love Paul's transparency about his weaknesses. Did you ever have the opportunity to emit something fragrant, and you walked right past it? I know I have. I know I have left a musty smell when I could have left a beautiful smell. Why? Why did I walk by? Was I afraid? Was I unwilling to be inconvenienced? Were my eyes just not open to even see the opportunity?

Verses 11-12 reveal a part of Paul's signature scent. By revealing his weakness, he reveals his need for God's grace every day. It's amazing to think that for us in our struggles, our feelings of failure, frustration, sadness, and pain, God, takes and uses our weaknesses to create our own beautiful signature scent. God redeems and uses everything, the good, the bad, and the ugly for his glory.

A reoccurring theme in this letter is this idea of power through weakness. Paul is confessing here. He is confessing that weakness is part of his signature scent and that he is beautifully broken. He needs God's grace every day.

Look at what follows his confession of weakness. *"But 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"* (vv. 14). From a cry of confession to a cry of grateful thanksgiving—why? Because despite Paul's experiences, he experienced victories. There is victory because Christ is triumphant!

## **The Scent of Victory (tempered by struggle)**

*"Always leads us as captives in Christ's triumphal procession."* Paul explains with a Roman military illustration. It's the picture of a parade. It was a custom in the Empire that when a Roman general was victorious in war, he would lead his army and his captives in a massive parade into the city. If he had fought a hard campaign and had defeated the enemy, the Senate would grant him a Triumph. This would be what we might call a victory parade. The conquering general would ride into Rome in his chariot, being led by a bunch of priests carrying pots of burning incense. Behind him would be his captives in chains. Then his officers and heroic soldiers would follow. The street would be filled with people celebrating the general's victory. The burning incense would be a beautiful fragrance to the people. And the smell would forever remind them of the great victory over their enemies.

So what is Paul's point here? It's that Christ is the commanding general who triumphs in the battle. Christ had won the war on the cross at Calvary. And now it was Paul who was taken captive in God's triumphant procession. Jesus was victorious over Paul's sin and his death. Jesus is victorious over weaknesses, and he chooses to use our weakness to show his power to accomplish his purposes through us. That is why Paul could give thanks even though he was troubled in his spirit at the same time.

Isn't it wonderful to know that our failures don't disqualify us? They don't. God actually uses our failures to refine us. Paul knew that despite his shortcomings at Troas, his calling was still sure.

He saw himself as a priest following his general in the parade, waving a pot of incense to announce his leader's victory. The incense wafted into the air and was taken in by all who were near him. What is that fragrant incense? It is the gospel of Jesus Christ that he preached. Let me tell you that message from Paul's own words.

**Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures,**

**For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me. Whether, then, it is I or they, this is what we preach, and this is what you believed. 1 Corinthians 15:1-4a; 9-11**

Notice in verse 14, the sweet scent of victory comes from being the follower, not the leader. Christ led Paul. If we are not led by Christ, or if we go off our way to lead our own parade, there is no triumphant victory. Our place is right behind our general.

*"For we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are an aroma that brings death; to the other, an aroma that brings life" (vv. 15-16a).* The victory is not measured on how popular or unpopular the response. The people can accept or reject the message. Either way, we see that if we share the gospel through our words and actions, we are spreading a beautiful aroma to God no matter if our message is received or not. The very same message can be received as the smell of life to one person who believes and can be the smell of death to one who refuses to believe.

In the Roman victory parade, the vanquished army leaders were often captured alive, chained together, and forced to march in the parade. The only thing that waited for them at the end of the parade was their execution. So that burning incense that smelled so sweet to the victors smelled like death to the prisoners.

There is no smell of death to the person who turns to God and accepts Jesus Christ in faith. In fact, it's the smell of Jesus' death that is the sweetest smell there could ever be to a sinner who turns to God. There is no middle neutrality when it comes to the gospel. Charles Simeon said, "The gospel must either take us by the hand and lead us up into the sunlight or it must bid us away down into the dark." In other words, God says that we are either all in or not at all.

If you are like me, you can get hung up on what it actually looks like to live as a victorious Christian. There are all kinds of opinions on what it means to live the victorious Christian life. I think it's safe to say that Paul lived a victorious Christian life. And yet his victories were always tempered with personal struggle—struggles that refined him, struggles that required him to rely on God's grace to experience the victories.

Ray Stedman described that the victorious Christian life like taking a ride on Disneyland's Pirates of the Caribbean. If you haven't been on the ride, you get on the boat and go through a dark tunnel where these strangely animated pirates leap out of the darkness with knives and pistols firing and cannonballs splashing around you. But you sit there in your boat, quiet and unmoved because you know that you will be led safely through all this, and nothing is ever going to touch you. It's wrong to expect that Christians will be protected and kept away from every pressure and danger in life and that nothing hard will ever touch us.

Others view the Christian life to be some kind of continually visible demonstration of tremendous power, like an unstoppable army plowing through enemy lines smashing any obstacles in its path. They expect to feel no setbacks, no losses, no struggle in

any situation. Paul did not experience either of these examples in his victorious Christian life. Stedman said,

**The "victorious Christian life" is a feeling of weakness, with only brief glimpses of success, seemingly going from one battle to another.... with little sense of personal triumph at the moment. And yet that triumph is happening.**

If we were to stop right here, I think we might say that the pursuit of a victorious Christian life is a little overrated. It's a lot harder road than we want. It is hard. As Paul said with all sincerity at the end of verse 16, *"And who is equal to such a task?" (v. 16b).*

My signature smell is both musty with weakness and sweetened by the occasional victory. Am I up for such a task? Paul is saying to us, "Don't look at yourself and your situation; look to God. I know this isn't the life you always wanted, but it's the kind of life that brings a sweet aroma up to God. Can you focus on that?" Did you know that God himself appreciates a fragrant aroma? Of course, he does. He created dark chocolate and coffee. But in Genesis 8, it says that Noah sacrificed burnt offerings as a sacrifice of thanksgiving. What was God's reaction? In verse 21, it says, *"The LORD smelled the pleasing aroma and said in his heart... And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done."* The anger of God was replaced by peace because of what he just smelled through Noah's sacrifice.

In the book of Leviticus, God instructs his people to give offerings and burn incense as a sweet aroma to him. In the New Testament, the sacrifice of Jesus himself is called a *"fragrant offering unto God."* Paul says in Ephesians 5:2, *"and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."* Paul is saying the hard road is the right road. Take the road less traveled.

In the last verse in chapter 2, Paul says, *"Unlike 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" (v. 17).* Paul says, "I'm no salesman; I don't tell people what they necessarily want to hear. And I'm not in it for money. If I were in it for money, I wouldn't preach the whole gospel. I wouldn't speak of weakness, hardship, or death. No instead, I emit the scent of sincerity."

### **I emit the Scent of Sincerity (resting upon the foundation of truth)**

So our signature scent is complex. It's one part personal weakness held up by the strength of God's grace, one part victory tempered by going through personal struggle, and one part sincerity resting upon our commitment to understand and apply God's whole truth found in the scriptures. Some of you who might be unaware of the scent you are emitting to those around you.

Smells trigger memories. I remember back when I was in 7th grade, my mom and dad let me take a friend on a family camping trip. I think it was at Sequoia National Park. My friend and I were

the same age, and we were just discovering in gym class that people wanted us to take regular showers and wear deodorant. My older sisters reminded me of that all the time.

Well, on the car ride up to Sequoia, my friend liked to take off his shoes for comfort. And he had the most unbelievably stinky feet you could imagine. My parents were good sports and didn't say anything. They sat in the front seats and just blasted the air conditioner to keep the smell in the back with us. I waited for my friend to become aware of his smelly feet. How could he not be aware? Finally, I told him that he needed to wash his feet and that I was going to tie his shoes to the roof rack on the station wagon for the rest of the trip. He couldn't smell his own stink.

Believe me when I tell you that you are emitting your own spiritual scent, and you may not even know it. And it may be stinky to those around you. How do you smell to others? How would you go about finding that out? That's what good friends are for. That's one of the benefits of community. We are supposed to tell each other if we are stinking up the world or not.

Transparency is key. If we humble ourselves and confess our weaknesses to God and ask God for his grace to work in our weaknesses, we can be confident that he will use our weaknesses to create a beautiful aroma to demonstrate his strength and glory to those around you.

Seek to follow the triumphant Christ. It's only when we get behind him in the parade that we will experience a victorious life. But if you do not see spiritual victories, ask yourself this question, "Am I following someone else who is leading their own parade? Or am I trying to lead my own parade? Because whatever I am doing isn't working!"

I love how wine is made. I love how so many factors are at work to produce a signature bouquet. I remember wine tasting. You smell the wine.

**Some will say, "This wine smells like hickory."**

**Another says, "No, I smell cherry."**

**Then another says, "No, I smell lavender."**

**Then another says, "I sense a hint of lemon."**

**Then they ask, "Dan, what do you think it smells like?"**

**I say, "I just think it smells good." I think when all those complex smells are blended, they just smell good.**

The point is that each of our lives has a unique path that produces a unique spiritual bouquet. Let the world smell your signature scent. And may the world say, "I don't understand all that has gone into your life, but I do know what I smell. Your words and works just smell good."

### **Because a life lived for Jesus emits a pleasing scent**

Lord lead us to be transparent about our weaknesses. Teach us to rely on God's grace to change us. Lord, give us the faith to follow you in your victory parade. Give us the faith to follow you amidst the struggles we face so we may see and proclaim your victories as we follow on whatever path he has for us. And may our sincerity and commitment to the scriptures be apparent to all.

And God, keep us focused on you. May we see our lives to be a living offering to you, a burnt offering that lifts an aroma pleasing to you.