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 2 Corinthians 2:12-16a
 First Message
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THE NEW COVENANT: A FRAGRANCE OF CHRIST

Today we begin a new series, known affectionately at PBC as the New Covenant. This teaching has been foundational to Peninsula Bible Church. In many ways the ideas and thoughts of the new covenant were revolutionary back in the 1960s. They have had a deep influence on many churches and church leaders over the years. When I came to PBC in the early 70s, this teaching was immediately ingrained in our thoughts and words: “Everything from God, nothing from us. God works best in a graveyard. Just show up. A new arrangement for living.”

This material is so foundation to authentic Christian living that it warrants repeating now and again. It’s easy for us to get off course, to begin to live as if “everything is from us, nothing from God.” So once again we turn to the words of 2 Corinthians. Here the apostle Paul defends and articulates his apostolic ministry, which set him so drastically apart from his Jewish roots and the Judaizing teachers who were a constant source of tension for him.

The timing of this study could not be more appropriate. Last week we remembered God’s faithfulness as we observed the twenty-fifth anniversary of PBC Cupertino. Today we embark on another 25 years. It’s time to go back to basics, to go to spring training, so to speak, and work on the fundamentals of catching, hitting and throwing the ball. Our series will last ten weeks, with a two-week break as we remember our Lord Jesus Christ during Holy Week and Easter.

At the height of its glory, Corinth was a city of wealth and luxury. It even rivaled Athens for supremacy. If Palo Alto resembles the college atmosphere of Athens, then perhaps San Francisco resembles Corinth. The Romans destroyed the city in 146 B.C. and repopulated Corinth not with soldiers but with poorer Romans, freed slaves, Syrians, Egyptians and Jews. But by the time of Paul, the city had grown prosperous and wealthy once again. Its strategic location on a narrow isthmus allowed for goods to pass from Asia to Europe without having to be ferried around the southern tip of Greece. The Isthmian Games were held there every two years (the local bronze was valued more than silver or gold), and the temple of Aphrodite was in full operation, with its cultic prostitution, promoting widespread sexual immorality.

The church at Corinth was a wild place, too. Paul traveled there on his second missionary journey, around 50 A.D., and met Priscilla and Aquila. In Acts 18, Luke recounts the story of how the church started. This church had many problems, however, issues that presented quite a challenge to Paul. It had factions and divisions, unruly meetings, sexual immorality, and disappointment with the apostle’s refusal to accept financial support. The church was influenced by leaders who spoke better and appeared stronger than the suffering and afflicted apostle.

Then there were the super apostles who discounted and discredited Paul’s ministry. These men were unwilling to let go of the traditions of Moses and embrace fully the age of the Spirit inaugurated by Christ. This is still a problem in the church today—letting go of the old and fully embracing the new covenant in Christ. 1 and 2 Corinthians, or as some have called these letters, 1 and 2 Californians, were born out of the difficulties that Paul had with the Corinthian church. Thus we find in 2 Corinthians 2:12-6:13 the longest section of text in Paul’s writings, defending his approach to life and ministry. Praise God for all of the difficulties in Corinth, because in this text we find the secrets to living in the new covenant in Christ: everything from God, nothing from us.

Here then is the short version of how things unfolded in Corinth in the first century A.D.:

50-52 Paul in Corinth; starts the church on second missionary journey (Acts 18)

52-53 Paul leaves Corinth; eventually ends up in Ephesus

53-55 Paul in Ephesus; news from Corinth about problems of immorality

Paul writes “previous letter” which is now lost

Paul receives news of more problems/issues for clarification

Paul writes 1 Corinthians

55 Problems in Corinth persist

Paul’s second, “painful” visit to Corinth

Paul sends Titus to Corinth with “severe letter” (2 Cor 2:4)

Paul travels to Troas to wait for Titus

What we learn is that, despite the difficulties he faced, Paul loved the Corinthians. They were not an assignment, a responsibility or a duty. These people were in his heart and, as was the case with so many other churches, he labored and anguished for Christ to be formed in them.

We pick up the story in chapter 2, verse 12:

Now when I came to Troas for the gospel of Christ and when a door was opened for me in the Lord, I had no rest for my spirit, not finding Titus my brother; but taking my leave of them, I went on to Macedonia. (2 Cor 2:12-13)

Paul went to Troas for the gospel, hoping to reconnect with Titus and hear news of the Corinthian church. While there, he discovered an open door for the gospel. Nothing was more meaningful to Paul than being with people who wanted to hear about Jesus. But Titus never arrived, and Paul could find no rest for his spirit. He was anxious and tense. He couldn't relax. He couldn't focus on his ministry even though the door was open, so he left Troas and went on to Macedonia to find Titus.

This is the setting and context for the new covenant. For Paul, life was filled with confusion, disappointment, troubles, tensions and conflicts. This is what he faced in Corinth and this is what we face today. We become obsessed, anxious and worried about how things will turn out. We can't find relief. This is real life. Anyone who insists on anything else is simply not telling the truth.

Can you relate to Paul's experience? Do you know what it's like to be anxious and worried, so much so that your preoccupations distract you from the task at hand? We all know what this is like. These are times when we, like Paul, must embrace the truths of the new covenant; times when we learn that God is in control even though things seem out of control; times when we learn that what we depended on in the past, our own efforts and strength, no longer work. We discover that God is working behind the scenes, that there are surprising reversals and unseen realities.

Here is what Paul discovered when he went to Macedonia and found Titus.

For even when we came into Macedonia our flesh had no rest, but we were afflicted on every side: conflicts without, fears within. But God, who comforts the depressed, comforted us by the coming of Titus; and not only by his coming, but also by the comfort with which he was comforted in you, as he reported to us your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me; so that I rejoiced even more. (2 Cor 7:5-7)

Titus gave Paul the news that everything in Corinth was going well. Relieved to hear that the Corinthians had not rejected him, the apostle expresses thanksgiving to God and

begins to articulate his mindset for life and ministry: everything from God, nothing from us.

But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place. (2:14)

Three things catch our attention. First, Paul's initial words are an expression of thanksgiving to God. The apostle practiced what he preached. He told the Ephesians to "always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father" (Eph 5:20); to the Thesalonians he wrote, "in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thess 5:18). The giving of thanks is the attitude of the psalmist: "Give thanks to the LORD, for He is good/For His lovingkindness is everlasting" (Psa 136:1).

"Gratitude is a loving and thankful response toward God for his presence with us and within this world. Though 'blessings' can move us into gratitude, it is not at the root of a thankful heart. Delight in God and his good will is the heartbeat of thankfulness."¹

Gratitude is possible when we learn that life is a gift and everything is grace. As we grow older we either grow more bitter or more grateful. Gratitude is a sign of spiritual maturity, a recognition that God is in everything that comes our way.

"Thanksgiving is possible not because everything goes perfectly but because God is present. It is a discipline to choose to stitch our days together with the thread of gratitude."²

Are you thankful this morning? Can you thank God for his faithfulness and goodness? Can you even thank him for the difficult things that are occupying your mind? Of course, if we don't believe that God is good, then we will have trouble having a thankful heart. Paul had learned the skill of gratitude, and we are to learn it as well.

Second, Paul is thankful because "God always leads us in triumph." This is an amazing statement. When I was in college I coveted a Triumph, a TR6, made by British Motors. Then I got married and bought a Ford Pinto wagon. But that is not what Paul is talking about. He is referring to a military procession, led by a conquering ruler or general, which included soldiers of the victorious army and captive enemy soldiers. Censers carried in the triumphal procession spread a festive perfume. This spectacle would be like a ticker-tape parade down Fifth Avenue in New York.

Paul is applying this image to our life in Christ. No matter the outcome or the circumstances, God is leading us in triumph as part of his conquering army. This means that even in the midst of apparent defeat we live with unqualified optimism. Notice when this takes place: not sometimes,

but always. God is always leading us in triumph. No matter what, we are in the parade.

How did Paul learn this? He says in chapter 1:

For we do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came to us in Asia, that we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life; indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead. (1:8-9)

How would our life be different if we lived with confident assurance of this truth? When we face conflicts in marriage, tensions with family members, disappointments at work, we can live with a sense that God is present, God is working, and God is leading in triumph. Paul is not talking about unqualified triumphalism. The outcome isn't always to our liking, but in one way or another it is part of the advance of God's kingdom. God is always leading us in triumph.

Third, Paul is always thankful because God is manifesting through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Christ in every place:

For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life. (2:15-16)

There are two images contained in this metaphor. First, a reference to the triumphal military procession. Priests in the procession carrying censers with burning incense that gave off a fragrance. To the victorious soldiers this would be an aroma of victory and life; to the captives, the fragrance would be an aroma of defeat and death, since they would be sold into slavery or killed.

Second, this was a reference to the Old Testament sacrificial system, and specifically to the aroma of the burnt offering: "You shall offer up in smoke the whole ram on the altar; it is a burnt offering to the LORD: it is a soothing aroma, an offering by fire to the LORD" (Ex 29:18).

In the same way that the burnt offering was pleasing to God, much more was the sacrifice of his son Jesus on the cross. Paul uses these same words for aroma and fragrance when he tells the Ephesians, and us, to "walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma" (Eph 5:2). The cross was an altar where Jesus was offered as a sacrifice for our sin, and this sacrifice wafting up to heaven was a sweet aroma to God.

Here is an interesting twist. Paul most likely saw himself as a captive rather than a victorious soldier in the triumphal procession. He was taken captive on the Damascus Road by the blinding light of Christ. His life as an apostle was one of

suffering and tribulation. He was following the example of Jesus, willing to die for the sake of the gospel, and eventually that is what happened. But his willingness to suffer was a sweet aroma to God. This was a problem to the Corinthians. They were attracted to a showy leader and entertaining speaker, not a suffering servant.

Now we follow in the steps of Jesus and Paul. We live and love sacrificially. We lay down our lives and suffer for the sake of the gospel. But in doing this we give off the fragrance of Christ, which influences people around us.

Notice the particulars. Who gives off a fragrant aroma? Every believer in Christ. Where does this happen? In every place. Not just some places, but everywhere we go: work, school, the doctor's office, the grocery store, the gym. We are walking incense. The triumph is "always" and the fragrance is "in every place."

What does an aroma do? It makes known the presence of something we may not see. It makes visible something that might be invisible.

One night a couple of years ago I let my dog Lucy out at the end of the evening. Immediately she sensed a critter in our back yard and took off after it. Soon there was a distinct odor. I didn't have to see the critter to know that it was a skunk. The aroma made it clear.

We can think of many other examples. When you enter a house where there is the smell of popcorn, you know that there is popcorn there. I can't resist the smell of popcorn. Every time I am in the Denver airport I smell popcorn. The smell leads to the vendor and I have to buy some. When you go to someone's house and smell the aroma of a barbecue, you know you are having steak for dinner. When you smell perfume, you know there must be a woman present, even if you can't see her.

We are a fragrance of Christ, and wherever we go people smell our life. Hopefully, our odor is fragrant and pleasant; it is not stinking the place up. We smell like a rose, not a skunk. The fragrance of our life, often given off through suffering like Jesus and the apostle Paul, makes visible the invisible presence of Christ. And this fragrance has an unforgettable impact. For some it is the aroma of life, for others it is the aroma of death. When I smell the fresh mown grass on a golf course, that is the aroma of life. When I smelled the skunk that night it was the smell of death.

There are only two types of people in the world: those who are perishing and those who are being saved. There is no third group, no independent party. We never know if we are in the presence of someone who is being saved or someone who is perishing. They don't wear labels on their forehead. Our life is an offering to God, giving off an aroma which effects either life or death to those around us. Some

people are repulsed by the aroma, but many are just waiting for us to show up because it smells like life and they are attracted to it.

Several years ago, I worked for a period of three months in Germany. We lived in a rented apartment. During our stay I never saw our landlord, but right before we left he invited us over for dinner. He asked me where I had been. He had been waiting for me to show up. The world is full of people who are waiting for us to show up and tell them about Jesus.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was one man with a noticeable fragrance. He was imprisoned in Nazi Germany and executed just days before the Allied victory. “He even inspired his guards with respect, some of whom became so much attached to him that they smuggled out of prison his papers and poems written there, and apologized to him for having to lock his door after the round in the courtyard.”

No matter the outcome, no matter the circumstances, life in the new covenant means that we are always triumphant and always a fragrance, so we can always be thankful. Who can pull this off? Who is adequate? That is the question we will take up next week.

¹ Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2005), 29.

² Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, 30.

³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Collier Books, MacMillan Publishing Company), 17.

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