

# A Savor of Life Unto Life, or of Death Unto Death

by Aaron Hills

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*The sermon emphasizes the significance of the Gospel ministry and its twofold influence, bringing salvation to some and hastening the ruin of others.*

**Scripture:** Matthew 5:13, Matthew 7:21, Luke 12:48, Romans 1:16, 1 Corinthians 1:18, 2 Corinthians 2:14, 2 Timothy 4:2, Hebrews 4:12, James 3:1

**Topics:** "Gospel Ministry", "Spiritual Warfare"

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## Description

Aaron Hills preaches on the powerful imagery in 2 Corinthians 2:14-16, where Paul describes believers as triumphant in Christ, spreading the fragrance of the knowledge of God everywhere. The passage highlights the dual impact of the Gospel, bringing life to some and death to others, emphasizing the solemn responsibility of ministers and listeners alike. Hills draws parallels between the ministry of faithful ambassadors of Christ and historical conquerors, showcasing the enduring influence of those who preach the Gospel with zeal and sincerity.

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## Transcript

2 Cor. ii. 14-16.

Paul drew his imagery from the well known customs of his time. We have an example in that striking passage in 2 Cor. ii. 14-16: "Now thanks be unto God, which always causeth us to triumph in Christ, and maketh manifest the savor of his knowledge by us in every place. For we are unto God a sweet savor of Christ, in them that are saved, and in them that perish: to the one we are the savor of death unto death; and to the other the savor of life unto life. And who is sufficient for these things?"

The "Triumph" in Christ, always accorded to faithful ministers, has reference to the triumphal procession conferred upon a victorious general on his 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, and by the princes, nobles, generals or people whom he had subdued. When Pompey was accorded his triumph, his chariot was drawn into the city by elephants. For two days the grand procession of trophies from every land, and a long retinue of captives, moved into the city along the Via Sacra. Brazen tablets were carried, on which were engraved the names of the conquered nations, including one thousand castles and nine hundred cities.

The word "savor" is used to denote a pleasant or fragrant odor as of incense or aromatics. There is an allusion here to the fact that in the triumphal processions fragrant odors were diffused, flowers of grateful smell being scattered in the way. On the altars of the gods incense was burned and sacrifices offered, and the whole city was filled with the fragrant smoke and with delightful perfumes.

So the apostle speaks of the savor of the knowledge of Christ. In Paul's triumphal career the knowledge of the Redeemer was diffused, like the odors in the triumphal march of the conquerors. And that odor was acceptable to God, as the fragrance of the incense was pleasant in the march of the returning victor. The effect of the apostle's teaching was to make Jesus known and the principles of His kingdom declared. It pleased God to have His redemptive grace proclaimed, even though there were many who might not avail themselves of it and would accordingly perish.

In these words of the apostle there is much both to encourage and to solemnize our hearts.

I. The true minister of the Gospel, with the Spirit of God in his heart, is a mighty power in the world. Lucius Mummius, the Roman consul, conquered all Achaia, and destroyed Corinth, Thebes and Colchis, and by order of the Roman Senate was favored with a triumph and was surnamed Achaicus.

But when Paul entered that same country a poor, footsore, weary, unattended preacher of the Gospel, he was a mightier conqueror than Mummius. Men did him the honor to declare that he was one of those that turned the world upside down. Mummius did nothing but slay and destroy, pillage and burn. His work was wholly destructive. Paul's work was constructive. He started influences that renovated the inner life of the people -- influences that are felt there today, and will be as lasting as time.

Hannibal, one of the mightiest of all earthly conquerors, came with his legions to the gates of Rome, and all but took the city.

Paul entered the city as a prisoner in chains; but with the resistless "Sword of the Spirit" -- the Gospel of Christ, he and the preachers that came after him captured the city and the throne and the legions and all the provinces of the mighty empire; and their influence is felt where Roman legions were never seen. Not a fragment of the great empire is left; but the influence of those preachers is in the full vigor of an immortal prime, marching on, conquering and to conquer the entire world.

Julius Caesar was, by common consent, the greatest pagan of the ancient world. He invaded Britain. Nothing is left of that invasion but a few stones underground here and there that mark the fortifications of his camps. But the Christian missionaries that followed him a few centuries later and entered the island without pomp or splendor or banners or armies, with only the Gospel of peace in their hands and the love of men and of God in their hearts, laid the foundations of institutions that stand there today, in their vast and far-reaching beneficence, like a "tree of life" to the nations.

Alexander the Great marched to India and covered some battlefields with the slain; but the names of Martyn and Judson and Scudder and Thoburn outshine all the bejewelled kings and princes and conquering warriors of India.

The warriors of Babylon and Syria and Rome and France and England, have successively overrun Africa; but the lustre of Moffat and Livingstone and Taylor can never be obscured.

England sent the flower of her army over to America to fight her colonies. She has since sent her royal princes and titled statesmen to our shores; but she gave us her greatest treasures when, with the rude

hand of persecution, she flung to us the godly pilgrim and Puritan ministers and the noble Scotch Presbyterians who built on the Rock Christ Jesus the foundation of this Christian republican. It is President Elliot, of Harvard, who says he would rather be the minister who founded Harvard College than to be any president this republic has had since the first. Oh, it is a wonderful thing to be counted worthy to preach the Gospel, to be put in trust with this mighty message of life that touches the very springs of spiritual activity and awakes powers and influences that never cease to be felt. It may seem to some that preaching is a simple and unworthy calling; nevertheless it has pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save men, to build up His kingdom in human hearts -- the only enduring thing in the world. Paul felt it. He magnified his office. He thanked God for it. He felt that he was given a victory over the wickedness of the earth, over the enemies of the Gospel; he was given success in planting the kingdom of Christ in human hearts. He was marching on under the approving eye of Jesus and the unseen hosts, with more solid and substantial joy in his soul than was ever felt by a Roman general returning from his conquests, laden with the spoils of victory, and attended by humbled princes and kings in chains, when assembled thousands shouted "Io triumphe!"

II. We are assured by this Scripture that the work of an honest and faithful ministry is especially pleasing to God. "For we are unto God a sweet savor of Christ in them that are saved and in them that perish." Like the smell of pleasant incense to men were the consecrated labors and ardent zeal of the faithful ambassadors of Christ to God. And this was true irrespective of their apparent success. They were responsible only for fidelity to the message, to the Master who sent them, and to the hearts of men. Whether men were saved or lost, whether the preacher had a nation at his feet like Samuel, or stood alone like Elijah; whether he was honored like Daniel, or cast into the dungeon like Jeremiah, or martyred like Isaiah, in any event God's mercy was proclaimed, His love made known, and his moral government over sinners justified. The honest ministers who cast in their lot with God, and help to make known the glories of His redemptive work to dying men, are accepted as a sweet savor, whether men persist in dying or not. God is still true, and His Gospel is true, and He is pleased with it and those who faithfully publish it to the world forevermore.

III. We are taught that the Gospel and the ministry are twofold in their influence and operation. They are both a savor of "life unto life" and "of death unto death" to men. In other words, they bring salvation or hasten and deepen the damnation of all who hear. The purpose of the Gospel is to save all. It reveals provisions of mercy for all. If it does not reach all, if some reject and turn away in scorn and contempt, they necessarily incur a greater disaster and plunge to a darker doom.

The mind shrinks from the contemplation of so solemn a truth. One is loath to believe that the fate of the persistently wicked is more dire, and their everlasting woe is intensified by a Savior's dying for them, and by the proclamation of mercy to their guilty souls; but we cannot avoid this conclusion, however dreadful to contemplate it may be. It must be so in the very nature of things. The very quality of the Gospel that makes life, produces death. The self-same feature that makes blessing possible makes woe equally possible. All analogy teaches it. Startling as it may seem, we cannot deny it if we would. The thoughtful mind finds endless illustration of this principle both in the realm of matter and of mind.

Water is a liquid that moves easily upon itself. This fact adds immeasurably to its utility. It flows in streams and rivers, and becomes a mechanical power to men. It buoys up the navies of the world, and yet lets the swift coursers of the deep sweep through its tides at wonderful speed. It moves so easily that the slightest breath of air stirs it, and it keeps pure by perpetual motion. But this very quality that makes it so essential a blessing to man, also enables it to respond to the touch of the hurricane and lift its hoary waves to the sky,

and toss the largest ships as so many chips on its billows, and hurl them with the shock of an earthquake upon the rocks, and burst dams and carry everywhere desolation and death.

The expansive power of steam enables it to drive our trains and run the levers and wheels and spindles of our factories, and to do the work of more than a billion of laboring men. But this same quality also enables it to blow up our boilers and hurl multitudes to sudden death.

Fire as a physical servant of man is a thousand times more helpful than steam. He who discovered how to produce it by artificial means, was by far the most beneficent discoverer the race can ever know. However, the same power that enables fire to feed upon fuel and heat water and fuse metals and cook our food and warm our homes, also enables it to consume our dwellings and lay our cities in ashes.

The quality which enables electricity to light our cities and move our cars and turn our engines and flash our thoughts around the world, also causes it to kill the poor lineman and rive our dwellings with the thunderbolt.

When we leave the material realm and view the nature of man, we find along the whole range of his faculties the same double possibility of blessedness and woe. The stomach that can enjoy food can suffer hunger.

The nerves that can thrill with pleasure can throb with pain. The refined taste that can appreciate the beautiful in art and nature is perpetually tortured by the ugly and the unsightly. The ear that is sensitive to tone and keenly observant of every delicate modulation of sound, and able to drink in ecstatic delight from rich harmonies of music is tortured by the harsh, shrill, discordant tones that pierce it perpetually.

The refined and tender sensibilities that fit a man to receive transcendent joys from human friendship and society, also rend his very soul with anguish over the treachery of friends and the cruel heartlessness of man.

That freedom of the will, that self-sovereignty and self-control which give a man the possibility of character and manhood, and make him godlike and fit for Heaven, also enable him to be depraved and sinful and devilish and a child of Hell. Over against every denizen of earth there is an Ebal. Pleasure and pain, blessing and woe, life and death seem to be essential and inseparable attendants of each other throughout the empire of God.

Let us not, then, turn away from this truth that the faithful ministry of the Gospel brings life to some and death to others. Solemn and awful though it be, it is analogous with God's truth everywhere. To deny it is to blur our spiritual perception and do violence to our mental and moral being.

We are compelled, then, to face the awful fact that the very preaching of God's blood-bought salvation is going to hasten the ruin of some who hear. The aim is to save men. The object of all the zeal and sacrifice and toil and prayer is to bring men into reconciliation to God. The tendency of the Gospel is to save men. For that purpose it was devised with all the skill of an all-wise God. There is sufficiency in the Gospel for all men, and it is as really fitted to save one as another. However it may be received, it is always in itself the same pure and glorious system of truth, full of benevolence and mercy. Its bitterest enemy cannot point to one of its provisions that is adapted or designed to destroy men, or make them miserable. All its powers and influences are those which are fitted to save. Even though it is the means of death to men, yet the Gospel is what it is in itself -- a pure and holy and benevolent gift of a benevolent God.

To use the beautiful language of Theodoret: "We indeed bear the sweet odor of Christ's Gospel to all; but all who hear it do not experience its saving effects. Thus to diseased eyes even the light of Heaven is noxious; yet the sun does not bring the injury. And to those who are in a fever honey is bitter, yet it is sweet nevertheless. Vultures, too, it is said, fly from sweet odors 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, though some disbelieve and abuse it, and die."

Serious, awful truth! The minister gives himself to the most blessed of all possible Christian service. His heart's desire and prayer to God is that men may be saved. He goes to homes of trouble and sorrow and offers Gospel consolation. He goes to hearts of sin and tells of a reconciling Savior; to believers, and tells them of the sanctifying baptism with the Holy Spirit. The reception his message receives makes him the savor of life unto life or of death unto death.

The principle is this -- truth resisted deadens the soul. Hearts that do not break under the hammer of the Gospel grow harder than the nether millstone. The sensibilities that are not melted by the story of Calvary are frozen into obdurate impenitence. The will that does not bow to the motives of the cross grows gigantic in its mighty rebellion against infinite love. The mind that will not be enlightened by the streaming radiance of an atoning Savior will become impenetrable dark in its wilful blindness. The believers that will not enter the Canaan of sanctification when it is offered them, turn back into the wilderness to die.

By every principle of moral and spiritual gravitation the man that falls from the highest pinnacle of exalted Christian privilege falls to the deepest abyss of guilt and woe.

This is a startling echo of the words of the Son of God: "Woe unto thee, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works which were done in you, had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. And thou, Capernaum, which art exalted to heaven, shall be brought down to hell. It shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for thee."

IV. It still remains for me to consider for a moment the solemn responsibility which this truth lays upon us all.

1. To those of us who are, or ever expect to be, ministers or religious teachers. Paul felt it, and he cried out: "To the one we are a savor of life unto life, and to the other a savor of death unto death, 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 damnation of the soul, who indeed is sufficient? Who is worthy of so important a charge? Who can undertake it without feeling in himself unfit for it, and that he needs constant Divine grace? A faithful Scotch minister always had a plaid robe lying on the foot of his bed that he might rise in the night and wrap himself in it and pray for his people. One cold winter night his wife chided him for thus exposing his health. He exclaimed, "Oh, woman! I have six hundred souls to give account for at the day of judgment, and I know not how it is with some of them. I must needs rise and pray for them." John Bunyan, preaching one day, said to his people, "When you have your conscience sprinkled with the blood of Christ, when you have an entrance into the holiest and have liberty in prayer remember me." Dr. Alexander Maclaren said to his congregation: "Remember, I have a great work on hand, a great deal upon my conscience. Pray for me brethren, pray."

O, ambassadors of Christ! preach the full Gospel of salvation, the whole counsel of God -- justification, adoption, sanctification and a life of holiness, ever crying, "Who is sufficient for these things?"

2. A word of warning to those who fill the pews and listen to the Gospel. The better the preaching is, and the more truth you receive, unless improved, the more perilous it becomes. By the solemnities of this theme God says to you, "Take heed how ye hear! how you treat the Gospel! what use you make of Christian privileges." Better be born in heathendom and live in utter ignorance of a Savior than to live in a community like this and know Him and reject Him! Better attend the most Christless university in all this land, where teachers are unbelievers and irreligion is rampant, than to attend this Holiness college and be taught by these reverent Christian professors, and leave these halls of learning a hardened rebel against God!

Better listen to the most heaven-defying infidel every Sabbath than to hear the faithful offers of the Gospel of full salvation only to turn from them with scorn. O, the dark fate of that wretched soul who is born of Christian parents, and reared at a family altar, and brought up in a Christian church, and instructed by a serious Christian ministry, and watched over and taught by Christian professors, only at last to despise it all and stagger out into a Christless career!

It is an awful transition to go from the blazing light of holiness into the endless night of outer darkness! O God, teach us! teach us all how to hear the Gospel: how to make a right use of Christian privileges: for "Who is sufficient for these things?"

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