

# The Incense-Bearer (2 Corinthians 2:14-16)

by T. Austin-Sparks

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*The minister's role is to embody the knowledge of Christ and bring it near to those who are open to it, with the possible outcomes of death unto death or from life unto life.*

**Scripture:** 2 Corinthians 2:14

**Topics:** "Ministry", "The Knowledge of Christ"

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## Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the role of the minister as an incense-bearer, illustrating how the knowledge of Christ is diffused through their lives, impacting people in two distinct ways: leading some to life and others to death. He draws from the imagery of a triumphal procession, where the fragrance of incense signifies both liberation and judgment, depending on the heart's response to Christ. Sparks highlights that true ministry is costly and requires the minister to embody the knowledge of Christ, rather than merely convey it through words. The sermon calls for self-examination among believers, urging them to remain open to the transformative power of Christ, lest they fall into spiritual stagnation. Ultimately, the message is a solemn reminder of the weighty responsibility of ministry and the necessity of a responsive heart towards God.

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## Transcript

"...and by me sends forth the knowledge of Him, a stream of fragrant incense, throughout the world. For Christ's is the fragrance which I offer up to God, whether among those in the way of salvation, or among those in the way of perdition; but to these it is an odour of death, to those of life." (2 Corinthians 2:14-16, CONYBEARE.)

### THE MINISTER AND HIS MINISTRY

The Apostle Paul is setting forth one of his conceptions of what the minister of Christ is, and then what the effect of the ministry. He is thinking here of the minister of Christ as an incense-bearer. The picture at the background of these verses is one with which we are well-acquainted.

Verse 14 of 2 Corinthians 2 brings into view the triumphal procession of the victorious war-lord as he moves from place to place with his captives behind him, celebrating at many points his victory, and using them for the purpose of evidence as to his victory. But also in the procession there are those who carry vessels of incense, and the incense being diffused everywhere speaks in two ways, to two different classes of people.

There are some who are going to celebrate this day of victory by being slain. It was a custom to hold certain notorious or distinguished captives in bondage until the day of the great celebration of the victory, and then that day was marked by their being slain. On the other hand, there were those who were appointed to be released as a distinguishing mark of the day. To the one the incense brought death near, and made them know that their hour had come. To the other the same incense made known that the hour of emancipation, of liberation, was drawing near. The same incense proclaimed death and life, life and death.

In the second part of the picture the Apostle himself passes from the first, where he has been viewing himself as one of those prisoners, led in the triumphal procession, as an object of public exhibition as to the triumph of the great Warrior. He has seen himself as in the train of the triumph of the Lord, being on full view as a demonstration of the greatness of that victory.

Now he passes himself into the second part, and takes the place of an incense bearer in the procession, and says that he passes on through the world bearing incense, and that incense is saying two things, having two effects, speaking to two different classes of people. It relates to life and death.

But the Apostle carries that thing inward, and he does not regard himself as simply carrying a censor of incense. He regards himself as that vessel, and as - in a strange, deep, inward way, so as to become a very part of his own being - the incense itself. He thinks of himself as being, not only the giver forth of the sweet savour, but that sweet savour itself; that he is the means by which this effect is registered upon these two different classes of people.

In that presentation of the servant of the Lord there is a deep, strong and solemn word for all of us who stand in that position as the Lord's servants. The thing which is going forth from us, the thing which is the effect of our lives, according to these words, is the knowledge of Christ. Everywhere, not just by us, but because of us, men are coming to a knowledge of Christ. The very object of our being is that Christ should be known because of us. The Divinely appointed way of men coming to know Christ is by our being here, moving amongst men.

#### THE VITAL ELEMENT IN MINISTRY

That is simple, and perhaps we recognize and accept it, but the extra point which has to be noticed is this, that it is something more than our giving out knowledge concerning Christ; it is that we are to men the knowledge of Christ. There is a very big difference between giving out the truth concerning the Lord Jesus - even in large measure, in a great fullness, truth which cannot be denied because it is the truth - and that strange, deep, indispensable element that we are that truth, that that truth itself takes its power, its strength from the fact that here are those who are the living expression of it; who have gone through the depths, been tested, been tried, been taken from place to place, been subjected to experiences of intense severity, and in the fires have learned Christ, and are therefore themselves the embodiment of the knowledge of Christ.

Wherever they go it is not that they have truth to give, but it is that men and women learn Christ because of them, and of them it can be said: It is not what they say only; there is something coming from them. There is an indescribable "something" which is an extra element to what they say. That thing has its reality in their being, and you feel that it is not only the words but the very virtue that comes out when they speak, or by reason of their presence. It is that of which the Apostle is speaking. That is the real value of any knowledge of Christ which we can give, which others may come to possess by us. It is not that they come

through us to know more about Christ, but that there is a ministration of Christ. That is the thing for which we should seek the Lord very earnestly.

## THE COSTLINESS OF TRUE MINISTRY

We should recognize that this represents the costliness of ministry. Ministry of this kind is an intensely costly thing. It is so different from being a preacher as a preacher. There may be a glamour about preaching, a fascination about gripping a congregation, and all that sort of thing, which is not costly but gratifying to the flesh; the snare of the limelight, the snare of publicity, the snare of that satisfaction, feeling power over other people, which has robbed preaching of that essential blood, and passion, and anguish. Paul was not a preacher of that kind. It is all very well to talk about Paul as the great preacher and orator, and to try to be another Paul along that line. But to be a Paul is a desperately costly thing, and to minister Christ is a thing into which our very blood will be poured.

This kind of ministry can bring no satisfaction to the flesh. This kind of ministry is not something for which to reach out for ourselves. This kind of ministry is something that we should plead to be delivered from unless our life and heart passion is that Christ Himself - not ourselves, but Christ Himself - should be known. Suffer that word thus to you who minister in the Name of the Lord.

That is the true value of ministry. It is indeed a costly thing, it is a thing of suffering, but it is the thing which goes beyond words, far beyond clever thinking and clever expressing, far beyond that acute needle-like brain that grasps truth and then begins to give it out. It is something which is an extra factor, without which the very best equipment in nature will fail to reach the Divine end. It is, in a word, Christ ministered, not Christ ministered about, but Christ ministered.

Paul saw that there was no doubt about it, that this ministry was effective, although effective in two directions. Not always did it result in people leaping into life, but it always resulted in something. If it plunged some people more deeply into death it was a proof that it was effective. If it brought death home to some consciences that proved its power. To have real spiritual effect demands that this shall be the kind of ministers that we are. The living knowledge of Christ brought near to us in vessels which have been shaped and wrought through the fires will, in the first place, discover our state and then intensify our state. It is bound to do those two things. The two states are here presented as: In the way of life, and, In the way of death.

## THE EFFECTS OF THIS MINISTRY

### 1. FROM DEATH UNTO DEATH.

(A) As to the unsaved.

Let us get quite clear on this matter. This does not for one moment suggest - let alone support - the idea that some are elected to death and perdition and some are elected to life and salvation. That is not the thought. What is here is this, that there are those who are refusing life, and therefore put themselves in the way of death. There are those who are open to life, and therefore may be in the way of life. It is really a matter of the attitude of the heart. It has nothing to do, in the first place, with the Divine predestination. It has to do with our attitude toward Christ, our attitude toward the knowledge of Christ brought near to us in a living way. It is very simply explained. It can be possible that there are those who are not open to Christ. They have no intention whatever of giving their lives to the Lord. It is far from their meaning that they shall

be saved or shall become Christians, however they would put it. It is not their thought or intention. They are not open, they are quite closed. It is quite a settled matter with them that they are not going to be Christians, or religious, or converted, or however they express it. For them the situation is as bad as any situation could be. Christ in a living way is being brought near, and they are not open to Him, and they cannot remain as they are. They are going to be intensified in their position, and more definitely and positively shut up to where Christ has brought death by being near, unless they change their attitude.

They may not be any more conscious that they are more set, but they are. The coming near of Christ is going to be according to the Word, and according to truth, death unto death, from one measure of death to an intensified measure of death, from one point of distance from Christ and salvation to a removed point, further away from Christ and salvation. If ever the day comes when they do turn and desire the Lord, they will have a tenfold more difficult time than they would have had, and their salvation will be fraught with the most terrific suffering. The infinite peril of that sort of thing is that: "He that being often reprov'd hardeneth.... shall suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy." "Today if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts." Pharaoh hardened his heart once, twice, thrice at the call of God, and then God came in and shut his heart, and Pharaoh was incapable of opening it, though he may have wanted to. That is the danger of being where Christ is livingly brought nigh and our hearts being closed, unresponsive.

(B) As to the saved.

That does not only operate in the matter of our salvation in the first instance. That operates in the case of believers. It was not only Pharaoh who fell into that awful and tragic and disastrous state; but Israel in the wilderness, who had been saved from Pharaoh, fell into it. The words of Hebrews 3 were addressed to Israel in the wilderness, and that whole generation failed to come into God's full purpose and thought. Why? Because there was brought near unto them the purpose of God, the will of God, and they stopped short in their response. They had gone so far, they had come out, and had moved to a certain point, and then they went no further. For some reason or another they ceased to go on with the Lord from a certain point. Do you think they remained the same? The Word of God makes it perfectly clear that they did not just stop there but, having stopped, there set in an intensifying process which eventually made it impossible for them to come into what God had appointed.

The door had been opened to them and set before them. Their hearts had been imperfect in response and abandonment. That led to the issue that when they wanted to enter and made an effort to do so they had not the spiritual life necessary, and the consequences were disastrous. "Too late" is a terrible reality to face. This may apply to the unsaved sinner; but it may also relate to the full object of salvation - the inheritance, the fullness of Christ. Truth received and not responded to means spiritual declension and loss of capacity. It is just possible that we should belong to the Lord, and have gone so far, and then stopped; and yet from the day that we stopped, when we ceased to be obedient, to follow the Lord, to respond to His revealed will, Christ has been brought near to us again and again in a living way, all with a view on the Lord's part to getting us to move from that position, to move on; but, No! Every time there has been the recoil instead. There has been a failure to rise up and say: I am going on with God! Those people do not remain in that condition. All the time, perhaps unconsciously, there is a hardening within, which presently will be manifested as a situation which is impossible of overcoming.

There is a passage in the Word which speaks of those who even touch the fire and are not conscious of it; of those upon whose heads there are gray hairs and they know it not: the marks of lost vitality, lost life;

time going and not conscious of it. It is a terrible thing to suddenly wake up and find that your life has gone, all that could have been for God no longer possible.

As we become older, and are naturally more occupied with the past than with the future (spiritually we do not do that), life holds a great deal more in the past than in the future; we see how much more there might have been, and we regret that we have not made more of the opportunity and of the years. We wake up to the fact that no longer have we the powers for mastering, no longer is it possible for us to make good. Think of that in relation to eternal things! Christ constantly coming near in a living way, and yet all that that means never being entered into. But, more; that only strengthening our position in death. Oh! terrible thought! That which is meant for life working out in death.

Is this not a very strong appeal to our hearts, that we should rise up and go on, that we should consider our state and say: Am I locked up? Am I becoming incapable of moving? Whereas at one time it might have been difficult, but if I had resolved in the grace of God to move I should have moved, I should have been in a different place from what I am in today, today I am finding it less possible than ever to move, and, as things are brought to me, as Christ is brought to me, the truth is brought to me, and appeals are made in my presence, I find myself less inclined to respond! That is a terrible situation, the knowledge of Him meaning death unto death.

Oh! do shake yourself from the dust, if you should be in that position! If you have had Christ brought near in a living way for years, and you have not come into the living value of that, now is the time for you to get before God and say: This must stop; this death regime must end; this bondage must be brought to a conclusion; I must break and go on with God! Seek the grace to fight that thing through, lest all that was meant for you by the Lord coming near again and again should be eternally missed.

There is no getting away from the fact that Christ is effective. If He is not effective unto life, He is effective none the less. It is impossible for the Holy Spirit to bring Christ near without a result. There is no such thing as God's Word returning to Him void. It will accomplish a purpose, and the purpose of Christ is not to leave people where they were, but, if possible, to lead them into life; and, if they will not, to intensify their state, so that in The Day they will have no ground whatever on which to stand. If God condemns He condemns thoroughly, and leaves no room for argument.

## 2. FROM LIFE UNTO LIFE.

The life may be in very simple forms. It may not be in a large measure. It may only require openness of heart, willingness of spirit, but that is toward life, life in its simplest form reaching out, incapable of doing very much, yet open and stretched forth. Ah, yes! the very heart open to the Lord, ready for the Lord. The coming near of the Lord means a ministration of more life. Increase of life requires that the life that is, should be active. Even though it be in its simplest and smallest forms, yet to be active. It is only a state of heart. Are you dead, or are you alive? Are you indifferent, or are you reaching out? The Lord draws near to minister more of Himself in life to every heart open to Him. It is wonderful and blessed to see what happens when the heart is open and the spirit is pure. There may not be a great deal of energy, a great deal of understanding, a great deal of instruction, a great deal of truth and teaching, but the most blessed results are not always in the realm where there is a great comprehending of truth, but more often in the realm where there is a simplicity, honesty, and openness of spirit. Some people are far too well informed to live. Some people's heads are the great obstruction to their spiritual enlargement. It is noticeable today that the Lord is not particularly active amongst the people who know such a lot, and He is not seeming to

be working to lay hold of the clever people, the well informed people, the people who are recognized as the authorities. The Lord is moving in a wonderfully blessed way amongst people whose hearts are open, whose spirits are simple, and who have little to throw off in order to go after Him. Are we active to the Lord in heart? Are we really going on, or have we come to a standstill? Have we never started?

Here is Christ brought near, and there can be an increase of Christ, an increase of Divine life. It will depend upon whether you are open, whether you are not very concerned, not particularly interested, passive, perhaps antagonistic; or whether - not that you have a great deal of ability, or knowledge, or understanding of the meaning of it all - but whether your heart is open and reaching out to the Lord. Marvellous things can happen if you are in that state. It is not that you should have a perfect understanding of everything, not that you should have confidence in yourself, that having moved you can keep going, but it is that your heart is livingly toward the Lord; then everything is possible. That is the way of life (and to be in the way of life may only mean at its beginnings, that you are reaching out for the Lord), that is the direction of life. That you are in that state is the way of life; that you are obeying whatever light the Lord has given you; that you are obedient to everything that He has made known to you as His will, that is the way of life, and the way of an increase of life.

The way of death may be, at its beginning, no intention whatever of being the Lord's; or, at some point further on, where the Lord has said in your heart: That is My way for you; that is My will for you! you have perhaps not said, "No, Lord" in as many words, but that is what your life is saying. That, No! has now been hanging over your life for perhaps five, ten years. perhaps longer. It is not that you have never said positively: I will never be obedient; I am not going that way! It may be that you are simply doing nothing. That is a negative! That is, No! It is not Yea! to the Lord. The issues are tremendous. When we think that there may never be a presentation of Christ without one of two results: we may either increase or decrease; we may be more positive or less so; we are either in a fuller way of death or a fuller way of life; it is a tremendous thing. It is impossible to get away from the alternatives.

The Apostle felt the solemnity of this, and surely we feel the solemnity of it! The Apostle was so deeply conscious of, and moved by, the solemnity of this position that he said: "Who is sufficient for these things?" Think of it, that wherever I go the effect of my life is more life or more death! It is serious to be bound up with anybody's life. So we would entreat, and would plead, lest it should be death unto death. Open the heart! Reach out to the Lord! Move in obedience to every bit of light which He has given, and it shall be a savour of life unto life.

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