

# Diffusing God's Grace

Valley Center Seventh-day Adventist Church

Written By: Pastor John T. Anderson

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Our study today will lead us to a knowledge of who we are, where we are and why we are. It comes from the New Testament book of II Corinthians, but like many of the themes of the Bible, it has its roots in the first chapter of Genesis.

We call it the book of II Corinthians, but it actually wasn't the second letter that Paul wrote to the people in Corinth. In one of his longer stays at one place, Paul had worked for a year and a half in Corinth, plying his trade as tentmaker as he preached and taught the Gospel. Corinth was a seaside city on the isthmus that separated upper and lower Greece, and had become wealthy through the trade that developed as baggage was carted between the Ionian and Aegean Seas along the 5 mile overland route. Now, since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, a canal connects the two bodies of water.

Later, Paul wrote letters to the believers there. The epistle that we call I Corinthians alludes to the fact that he had previously written to that church, but we have no record of that first letter; God in His providence did not see it appropriate for it to be preserved in the Scriptures. In both letters that we do have in our Bibles, Paul exhorts and reproves the believers, encouraging them into a closer walk with the Lord. There were problems that needed to be addressed, and Paul did speak to them. These were serious challenges, and it is not our purpose to go into them today. But note that despite their failings, God's love was exercised toward them. In both letters he addresses his remarks to "the saints." This in itself should give us courage.

The passage we're going to look at today is found in II Corinthians 2:14-17. It is rich in meaning. "Now thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and through us diffuses the fragrance of His knowledge in every place. For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing. To the one we are the aroma of death to death, and to the other the aroma of life to life. And who is sufficient for these things? For we are not, as so many, peddling the word of God; but as of sincerity, but as from God, we speak in the sight of God in Christ."

We're going to take a look at two phrases in verse 14 which speak of God Who "always leads us in triumph in Christ, and "through us diffuses the fragrance of His knowledge in every place." These words give us a clear picture of what we should be to the world. They tell us what God wants us to be as His children and as His ambassadors. First, notice that He wants you to be successful in your Christian life. God calls us to victory, not to defeat. The devil is a mighty angel, though fallen, but God is stronger. It is not His will that we should be Satan's doormat. He wants us to conquer, and through Him we can be "more than conquerors." Through Him, wearing the armor of God, we can defeat the devil, and "stand."

Paul draws verbal picture with which his audience would have been familiar. He said, "Thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph." When a Roman general returned from a successful battle, he would be paraded through the streets of the capitol, riding in his chariot or on his steed. Crowds would cheer his victory. His triumph would be known throughout the land. Sometimes after a special victory a monument would be erected to commemorate the conquest, as the Arch of Titus testifies to his victory. The Arch of Triumph in Paris is a similar structure. Paul is saying that, in a spiritual way, this is God's picture of the faithful Christian. He is "leads us in triumph."

The difference is that Paul is speaking of spiritual victories, not those won on the literal battlefield. The visible parade of triumph belonged to those who conquered physical enemies. Paul is speaking of something just as real, but not necessarily visible to the naked eye. The victories won against temptation; the lusts denied; the selfish inclinations repressed are silent and as far as the world is concerned, unknown, unrecognized victories. There is no "ticker-tape parade" lavished when someone gains a victory over appetite or a sharp tongue. But this is only because the world is unaware of the real battle that is going on. Every time through the power and Spirit of God you say "No" to the devil, cheers go up in heaven. Hallelujahs ascend when you succeed in this great conflict. Someday soon this will become very real to us. Notice that Paul says that God wants this victory to be our life experience; He "always" leads us in the victory parade. It is His will that we not give in or suffer defeat from the devil, but move from victory to victory. He can give us this triumph! The ear of faith can hear the victory shout sounded above when a weak, mortal sinner clad in the armor of Christ wins the battle.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul spoke of something very similar. Quoting from the 68<sup>th</sup> Psalm, he said, "When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive, and gave gifts to men." He is speaking of the experience of the returning conqueror, coming back to his kingdom after successfully waging conflict against the enemy, returning now with his spoils of war; gods, booty and slaves trailing in his wake. Entering the city, the tumult of his triumph could be heard for miles. The conqueror would generously share the spoils of his conquest with the inhabitants of the city, giving "gifts to men." That was a scene repeated many times in ancient history.

Paul connects this to the victory of Christ, coming from the grave and then ascending to heaven. As He did so, He went not alone. There were “many of the saints” who arose with Him from the grave and ascended with Him to the eternal city. These ransomed ones were the trophies of His triumph. He led them captive, not to become slaves as the generals did in earthly battles, but He led them from the captivity of the grave to the freedom of eternal life, nevermore to be shackled by death. After His ascension He “gave gifts to men,” when on the Day of Pentecost the Spirit was poured out in unprecedented power. Spiritual gifts that would be translated into abilities and talents to win battles against the devil and souls to the kingdom were lavished upon the church, resulting in the “Acts of the Apostles.”

This ascension and victory parade was a foretaste of the greater display which will take place when He comes back the second time and escorts us to the heavenly city. Then, as Victor and Conqueror, He will lead us from the captivity of this life and its body of death with its pull toward sin and chaperone us into the waiting capitol. At that time He will give “gifts” to men and women, including a crown of life placed personally by Christ on every brow and a home in His eternal estate. What a day that will be! But right now this phrase has deep meaning. He “always leads us in triumph in Christ” gaining victories over the enemy through the Spirit. That can be your life; that can be my life.

The second part of our study today contains the phrase, “through us He diffuses the fragrance of His knowledge in every place.” Why is it important that His knowledge be diffused in every place? Because to know Him is eternal life. Jesus said in His high priestly prayer Thursday night, “This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.” John 17:3. To know and appreciate God for Who He is leads to a relationship with Him which results in eternal life. The light of this knowledge brings life. This knowledge is spoken by the voice of nature, according to Psalm 19 and Romans 1, so that all have opportunity, but much more than that, God wants to use you and me to share His love and express it; to “diffuse it in every place.” You and I can have an influence for good that can lead to another’s choice to follow God.

Lucifer, the covering cherub who stood close to the throne lost that knowledge. He came to a way of thinking that did not appreciate God for Who He was and is. He began to think of Him as being unjust and unloving. This lack of knowledge; this darkness he diffused to the angelic hosts and brought confusion, resulting in his eviction from heaven. This darkness he has diffused into this world, with remarkable success. Isaiah reports, “For behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and deep darkness the people.” Isaiah 60:2. I’m interested in the word “the” in this text. It doesn’t just say “darkness shall cover the world”; it says “the darkness.” This is “the darkness” that Satan has developed through “the lie” to hide “the truth” of God’s character. This is the present condition of the world. The light of God’s love has been occluded, eclipsed by the prince of darkness. The vast majority of the world’s population has no true concept of God’s character, of

His plan, or His kingdom or His law. “This is the message that we have heard from Him and declare to you, that God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all.” I John 1:5.

There are two images that come to mind with the illustration that Paul uses. He speaks of the diffusion of God’s knowledge as being a “fragrance,” which reminds us of the action of Mary Magdalene, who purchased that alabaster flask of fragrant oil and bathed the Savior’s head and feet with it the Sabbath before His crucifixion. Though she intended her act to be private, it could not be held in secret. The fragrance filled the whole house; it was diffused till it was “in every place.”

So Christ’s followers are to allow their lives to be a fragrant aroma testifying of His grace and love. When our hearts are broken as was the vessel of Mary, the aroma of His love can be shared. Our lives, as we bear His name, are to be in keeping with His character of agape love, for a “good name is better than precious ointment,” but “dead flies putrefy the perfumer’s ointment and cause it to give off a foul odor.” Ecclesiastes 7:1; 10:1. We are to be Mary wherever we go, diffusing the fragrance of the beautiful aroma of God’s grace.

I want to focus on another application of this image that Paul uses, changing the metaphor from “perfume” to “light.” We can see the “diffusion” of God’s knowledge through the symbol of a beautiful fragrance, as well as by light. The word translated “diffuse” is a word which in the original means “to make appear, to manifest.” It comes from a root which means “to shine.” Our word “phenomenon” comes from this root. It is natural to think of “light” in combination with the verb “diffuse.” Light can be affected or altered in several ways. It can be refracted, which means that it is “bent” by passing through a different medium, as you see a spoon in a glass of water seemingly in two parts. It can be reflected, meaning that it can be thrown back when it is directed at a smooth surface like a mirror, or it can be diffused, meaning that it is broken up and spread about, like a photographer’s umbrella. You’ve seen these, haven’t you, used when a professional photographer takes a portrait? He aims his light source away from his subject and into something like an umbrella, which shines the light back on the one whose picture is being taken. What’s the purpose of this? It is to soften and spread the light. It is so that a beam of light that would otherwise be limited and localized is spread about so that it covers evenly and everywhere. Notice that Paul says that through us He “diffuses the fragrance of His knowledge in *every place*.” It is spread about completely.

Allow your mind to consider how God’s plan for you, to diffuse His light so that it goes everywhere, was modeled in the creation story. I want to construct in your mind a picture of the creation of this world as described in Genesis, and make a comparison of that to what God wants to do through you and me in “diffusing” the knowledge of His love. What God did in the physical world as He prepared this earth for habitation, He wants to do in the spiritual sense through you

and me today. This is very important because the world is covered in darkness, just as the planet was in “the beginning,” but God wants His light to shine everywhere.

How did He accomplish that in the beginning? Go back to the book of Genesis. In the first chapter we read that the earth was without form and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. That corresponds to the world today, enveloped in “deep darkness” or “gross darkness” as the King James says. The absence of physical light in the beginning is matched by the absence of spiritual light in today’s world.

But it is God’s intention that the knowledge of His love and character be diffused through us in every place. The call is given, “Arise, shine; for your light has come! And the glory of the LORD (His character) has risen upon you. For behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and deep darkness the people; but the LORD will arise over you, and His glory will be seen upon you.” Isaiah 60:1-3. That is the modern equivalent of the command, “Let there be light” of Genesis 1.

Notice what Habakkuk prophesied. “For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea.” Habakkuk 2:14. (See also Isaiah 11:9.

Going back to Genesis, we see how God prepared the earth for habitation. We’re going to read some verses in chapter one and think of how they applied in the literal, physical sense as God created, but also how they apply in the spiritual sense to you and me today, as God seeks to “diffuse” the light of His knowledge upon a darkened world. “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good; and God divided the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness He called Night. So the evening and the morning were the first day. Then God said, ‘Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters.’ Thus God made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament; and it was so. And God called the firmament Heaven. So the evening and the morning were the second day.” Genesis 1:1-6.

Notice that God divided, or separated the waters below from the waters above and called the space in between those two bodies of water, the “firmament,” or “Heaven.” We would use the word “the atmosphere,” or “the sky.” There was water on the earth, then the air space or atmosphere, and then there was another quantity of water in orbit in space above the earth, in “heavenly places.” Water below, that became seas and rivers and water above, held in orbit above the atmosphere. Think about this; this is amazing! We’ll address first the physical applications of this, then the spiritual. “The spiritual is not first, but the natural, and afterward the spiritual.” I Corinthians 15:46.

What would the effect of this water in orbit above the earth be? It would be to diffuse or spread the light from the sun so that it was softened and applied uniformly over the globe. It would shelter from harmful radiation. The planet would be like a giant greenhouse. It's obviously not that way now, because this shield collapsed at the time of the Flood. That's what caused so much rain in such a short a period of time. The "windows of heaven were opened" and the "fountains of the deep" were broken up.

We have irrefutable evidence that the world before the Flood was productive to a degree unknown today. The vast coal beds scattered throughout the earth testify of forests and fields of immeasurable size. It's not just the quantity of organic material; it's their location. Scientists are baffled at the fact that when they've done core drillings at the poles, the North and the South pole, that they discover evidence of tropical vegetation buried. Palms and bananas at the poles! Do a Google search and you will find this to be true. How could this be? What you find at the poles today is ice. It's an environment that can't sustain any kind of vegetation, much less tropical vegetation.

Obviously it must been different long ago. One of the reasons why is the water shield above the atmosphere. Another is that God no doubt designed a subterranean heating system, conveying warmth from within the earth to its surface via hidden channels and ducts. Although we see evidence of this in geysers such as "Old Faithful," for the most part these were destroyed when the "fountains of the deep were broken up." The water canopy in space spread the light around so that "in every place" its warmth and energy could be felt, resulting in palm trees at the North Pole. One report discusses a core drilling above the Arctic Circle that went down some 1,000 feet and then hit wood. They discovered a tree 300' in height, in an upright position. Back then, there were no extremes in temperature that are known today. The light was softened and spread by the water canopy in space, resulting in incredible growth and productivity.

As interesting as this is, there is a deep spiritual lesson for us, especially today. First the natural, then the spiritual. The earth is dark, covered in gross darkness. God wants to use us to diffuse the light of His knowledge throughout this earth. Isaiah 60:1 awaits fulfillment. The last message to go to the world will be a revelation of God's character of love.

To do that in the beginning, God had to divide the waters from the waters. A separation of the waters below had to be effected from the waters above. What does "water" symbolize in Scripture? It stands for "peoples, multitudes, nations, and tongues." Revelation 17:15. In the beginning, to diffuse His light, God separated the waters from the waters. In order for Him to diffuse His light through us, there needs to be a separation, a division of the waters "below" from the waters "above."

Christians are called to be a holy and separate people. A Christian will talk, eat, dress, act and think differently than a person of the world, the “water below.” There will be a visible difference between one following the Lord and one living for this life. If this model of light being diffused upon a darkened world is going to be accomplished, Christians are going to have to be willing to be distinct and different, unique and special. The King James used the word “peculiar,” not in the sense of “weird,” but there will be a difference. There will be a separation from the world. Paul began his letter to the Romans by saying, “Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated to the gospel of God.” He wrote to the Galatians, “It pleased God, who separated me from my mother’s womb and called me through His grace, to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles.” Galatians 1:15, 16.

The Christian is called to be separate and to live “in heavenly places.” Isn’t that what Paul said? “And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom also we once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others. But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.” Ephesians 2:1-6.

Do you see the picture? We once were part of the world, like the “waters” on the planet as God first created, but we were separated from the world just as He divided the waters from the waters, and raised up to “heavenly places” like the waters that were elevated into a different sphere. He has done this so that we can “diffuse” the light of the knowledge of His grace “in every place.” When this happens, a spiritual productivity similar to the pre-Flood world will take place as the glory of God shines throughout this planet.

What a calling! What a privilege! Are you willing to be different for Christ? Are you willing to be separated from that which is below and become a diffuser of His light to a darkened world? Are you willing to become a channel of His grace this week to someone?