

2:12 A Door Opened for the Gospel

NOT THE TIME TO SAY MORE.

DIDYMUS THE BLIND: In Acts [16:9] it says that a man of Macedonia appeared to Paul in a dream and asked him to come over and help them. Paul does not mention this incident in his letter, evidently because he realized that this was not the right time to say such things about himself. PAULINE COMMENTARY FROM THE GREEK CHURCH.²

THE FRAGRANCE OF LIFE AND DEATH.

AUGUSTINE: And again, in his second letter to the Corinthians, the same apostle says, “When I had come to Troas for the gospel of Christ, and a door was opened to me in the Lord, I had no rest in my spirit, because I did not find Titus my brother, but bidding them farewell, I went into Macedonia.” To whom did he declare farewell except to those who had believed, that is to say, to those in whose hearts a door was opened for him to preach the gospel? But note well what he adds: “Now thanks be to God, who always makes us triumph in Christ and manifests the aroma of Christ to God, in those who are saved and in those who perish; to some indeed the odor of death to death but to others the fragrance of life to life.” Behold why this most intrepid soldier, this most invincible defender of grace, gives thanks. Behold why he gives thanks— that the apostles are the good odor of Christ to God, both in those who are saved by his grace and in those who perish in virtue of his judgment. PREDESTINATION OF THE SAINTS 20.41.³

2:13 Going On to Macedonia

TITUS’S ABSENCE.

CHRYSOSTOM: Paul did not say that the absence of Titus hindered the salvation of those who were about to convert, nor that he neglected them for this reason, but that he continued to be concerned for Titus, showing thereby how serious a matter a brother’s absence is. HOMILIES ON THE EPISTLES OF PAUL TO THE CORINTHIANS 5.1.⁵

2:14 Christ Leads Us in Triumph

THANKS BE TO GOD.

CHRYSOSTOM: Paul was in constant affliction everywhere he went, but this did not draw him into despair. On the contrary, he rejoiced and gave thanks, because although persecution might seem like a disgrace, in fact it was a very great honor. HOMILIES ON THE EPISTLES OF PAUL TO THE CORINTHIANS 5.1.8

SWEET-SMELLING SERVICE.

CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA: By washing the feet of his disciples with his own hands as he sent them forth to noble deeds, the Savior manifested in an excellent way their journeying to bestow graces upon the nations. ¹⁰ He purified that journeying in anticipation by his own power. The perfume left its aroma after it and suggests the sweet-smelling accomplishments that reach everyone. The suffering of the Lord, indeed, has filled us with its fragrance. CHRIST THE EDUCATOR 2.7.63.¹¹

2:15 The Aroma of Christ

A SWEET AROMA OF CHRIST.

ORIGEN: Put an altar of incense in your innermost heart. Be a sweet aroma of Christ. HOMILIES ON EXODUS 9.¹²

THE GOSPEL HAS A SWEET SAVOR.

CHRYSOSTOM: Whether a person is saved or lost, the gospel continues to have its own power. The light, even when it blinds someone, is still light. Honey, though it is bitter to those who are sick, is still sweet. So also the gospel has a sweet savor to all, even if those who do not believe it are lost. HOMILIES ON THE EPISTLES OF PAUL TO THE CORINTHIANS 5.2.¹⁵

A MINISTRY OF DEATH.

AUGUSTINE: Why, then, if the law is good, is it called a “ministry of death”? Because “sin, that it might be shown to be sin, worked death for me through that which is good.” Do not marvel when it is said of the preaching of the gospel, “We are a sweet aroma of Christ to God, in them that are being saved and in them who perish, to the one an aroma of life to life, to the other an aroma of death to death.” Now the law is called a “ministry of death” to the Jews, for whom it was written on stone, to symbolize their

hardness of heart. But this does not apply to those who fulfill the law in charity. For charity is the fulfillment of the law. TO SIMPLICIAN—ON VARIOUS QUESTIONS 1.17.16

THE SAME FRAGRANCE, DIFFERENT RESPONSES.

ORIGEN: For, as the apostle says, “We are a good aroma of Christ,” but he adds, “To some a fragrance of life to life, but to others an odor of death to death.” So also the prophetic word is “a sweet fragrance” to those who believe, but to the doubting and unbelieving and those who confess that they are Pharaoh’s people, it becomes a detestable odor. HOMILIES ON EXODUS 3.17

2:16 Fragrance of Death or Life

TO CORRECT AND TO DESTROY.

CHRYSOSTOM: If anyone is lost he has only himself to blame. Soothing ointment is said to suffocate pigs. Light is blinding to the weak. It is in the nature of good things not only to correct what is close to them but also to destroy the opposite, and in this way their power is displayed. HOMILIES ON THE EPISTLES OF PAUL TO THE CORINTHIANS 5.3.19

PUNISHMENT AND COMFORT.

AUGUSTINE: Through an evil man divine providence can both punish and comfort. For the impiety of the Jews was the Jews’ downfall and yet provided salvation for the Gentiles. Again, divine providence through a good man can both condemn and help, as the apostle says: “To some we are the scent of life to life, but to others we are the scent of death to death.” But every tribulation is either a punishment of the impious or a testing of the just. . . . Further, peace and quiet from disruptive times can both profit the good and corrupt the evil. QUESTIONS 27.20

2:17 Commissioned by God

SPEAKING IN CHRIST.

CHRYSOSTOM: Paul will not imitate the false apostles, who claim rewards for themselves. For corruption occurs when one sells for money what one ought to give freely. Paul speaks in Christ, not by his own wisdom but by the power which comes from him. HOMILIES ON THE EPISTLES OF PAUL TO THE CORINTHIANS 5.3.22

3:1 *Needing Commendation?*

COMMENDING OURSELVES?

DIDYMUS THE BLIND: Paul gently expresses his surprise that the Corinthians are still unaware of the implication of his apostleship. PAULINE COMMENTARY FROM THE GREEK CHURCH.¹

3:2 *A Letter of Recommendation*

A LIVING LETTER.

CHRYSOSTOM: "If we needed to be commended to others," he says, "we would have produced you before them rather than a letter." HOMILIES ON THE EPISTLES OF PAUL TO THE CORINTHIANS 6.1.5

3:3 *Written on Human Hearts*

HUMAN HEARTS.

CHRYSOSTOM: Here Paul bears witness not only to their love but also to their good works, since by their behavior they can demonstrate to everybody the high worth of their teacher. What letters would have done to gain respect for the apostle, the Corinthians achieve by their life and behavior. The virtues of disciples commend the teacher more than any letter. They are an epistle of Christ, having the law of God written in their hearts. God wrote that law, but Paul and his companions prepared them to receive the writing. For just as Moses hewed stones and tables, ⁸ so Paul shaped their souls. HOMILIES ON THE EPISTLES OF PAUL TO THE CORINTHIANS 6.1-2.⁹

GRACE HIGHER THAN LAW.

SEVERIAN OF GABALA: Paul shows how much better the grace of the Spirit is than the law and how much higher the preaching of the apostles is than the dispensation of the prophets. PAULINE COMMENTARY FROM THE GREEK CHURCH.¹⁰

THE LAW OF GOD ON HUMAN HEARTS.

AMBROSE: But with the Word of God before us we are able to formulate opinions on what is good and what is evil. One of these we naturally understand we should avoid as evil, and the other we understand has been recommended to us as a good. In this respect we seem to be listening to the very voice of the

Lord, whereby some things are forbidden and other things are advised. If a person does not comply with the injunctions which are believed to have been once ordained by God, he is considered to be liable to punishment. The commands of God are impressed in our hearts by the Spirit of the living God. We do not read these commands as if they were recorded in ink on a tablet of stone. Hence, in our own thought we formulate a law. . . . There is something, therefore, like the law of God which exists in the hearts of men.
PARADISE 8.39.12

THE FINGER OF GOD.

AMBROSE: By this finger, as we read, God wrote on the stone tablets which Moses received. For not with a finger of flesh did God make the forms and elements of those letters which we read; by his Spirit he gave the law. And so the apostle said: "For the law is spiritual, which indeed is written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone but in fleshly tables of the heart." For, if the letter of the apostle is written in the Spirit, what stands in the way of our being obliged to believe that the law of God was written not in ink but in the Spirit of God, which surely does not stain the secrets of our heart and mind but illuminates them? THE HOLY SPIRIT 3.3.13.13

THE SPIRIT AS SCRIBE.

BASIL: As the pen is an instrument for writing when the hand of an experienced person moves it to record what is being written, so also the tongue of the just man, when the Holy Spirit moves it, writes the words of eternal life in the hearts of the faithful, dipped "not in ink but in the Spirit of the living God." The scribe, therefore, is the Holy Spirit, because he is wise and an apt teacher of all. And the Spirit writes swiftly, because the movement of his mind is swift. The Spirit writes thoughts in us, "not on tablets of stone but on fleshy tablets of the heart." In proportion to the size of the heart, the Spirit writes in hearts more or less, either things evident to all or things more obscure, according to the heart's previous purity. Because of the speed with which the writings have been finished, all the world now is filled with the gospel.
HOMILY 17 ON PSALM 44.14

THE TABLETS OF THE HEART.

CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA: These are the laws of reason, words that impart inspiration, written by the hand of the Lord, not on tablets of stone but inscribed in the hearts of men, provided only that those hearts are not attached to corruption. Therefore, the tablets of the hard of heart have been broken, that the faith of little ones might be formed in impressionable minds. Both laws served the Word as means of

educating humanity, the one through Moses, the other through the apostles. But what a means of education is the one given through the apostles! CHRIST THE EDUCATOR 3.12.94.15

THE PENCIL OF CHRIST.

ORIGEN: Now we have not received this longing from God on the condition that it should not or could not ever be satisfied. . . . So when even in this life men devote themselves with great labor to sacred and religious studies, although they obtain only some small fragments out of the immeasurable treasures of divine knowledge, yet [they gain this advantage, that] they occupy their mind and understanding with these questions and press onward in their eager desire. Moreover they derive much assistance from the fact that by turning their mind to the study and love of truth they render themselves more capable of receiving instruction in the future. For when one wishes to paint a picture, if he first sketches with the faint touch of a light pencil the outlines of the proposed figure and inserts suitable marks to indicate features afterward to be added, this preliminary drawing with its faint outline undoubtedly renders the canvas more prepared to receive the true colors. So it will be with us, if only that faint form and outline is inscribed “on the tablets of our heart” by the pencil of our Lord Jesus Christ. . . . It is clear, then, that to those who have now in this life a kind of outline of truth and knowledge there shall be added in the future the beauty of the perfect image. ON FIRST PRINCIPLES 2.11.4.16

3:4 Confidence Through Christ

THE DIVINE SUFFICIENCY.

JEROME: The apostle Paul, after describing in a few words the benefits of God, states in conclusion: “And for such offices, who is sufficient?”¹⁸ Whence he also says in another place: “Such is the assurance we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think anything, as from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God. He also it is who made us fit ministers of the new covenant, not of the letter but of the spirit; for the letter kills, but the spirit gives life.” Do we still dare to boast about the free will and treat with insult the benefits of God the Giver, when the chosen vessel [Paul] also writes very clearly: “But we carry this treasure in vessels of clay, to show that the abundance of our power is God’s and not ours”?¹⁹ AGAINST THE PELAGIANS 3.9.20

3:5 Competence Is from God

NOT FROM US.

SEVERIAN OF GABALA: By “from us” Paul means “from one another.” PAULINE COMMENTARY FROM THE GREEK CHURCH.¹

HUMAN INSUFFICIENCY, GOD’S SUFFICIENCY.

AUGUSTINE: Therefore it rests not in human power but on God’s, that we have the “power to be made the sons of God.”² They receive it from him who inspires in the human heart devout thoughts, through which it possesses “faith which works through love.”³ For acquiring and retaining this good, and for progressing perseveringly in it to the end, “We are not sufficient to think anything as of ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God,”⁴ in whose power are our heart and our thoughts. GIFT OF PERSEVERANCE 8.20.⁵

3:6 Ministers of a New Covenant

MATERIAL AND SPIRITUAL

ORIGEN: The letter means what is material and the spirit what is intellectual, which we also call spiritual. ON FIRST PRINCIPLES 1.1.2.¹²

THE UNNECESSARY PART CUT OFF.

AMBROSE: Rightly, then, does Paul say that “the letter kills, but the spirit gives life.” The letter circumcised a small part of the body, but the understanding spirit keeps the circumcision of the entire soul and body so that chastity might be preserved, frugality loved and the unnecessary parts cut off (for nothing is so unnecessary as the vices of greed, the sins of lust, which did not belong to nature but which sin has caused). Bodily circumcision is the symbol, but the reality is the spiritual circumcision; the one cuts off a member, the other sin. LETTER 68, TO CLEMENTIANUS.¹³

MINISTERS OF A NEW COVENANT.

CHRYSOSTOM: The law was spiritual, but it did not bestow the Spirit. Moses had letters but not the Spirit, whereas we have been entrusted with the giving of the Spirit. HOMILIES ON THE EPISTLES OF PAUL TO THE CORINTHIANS 6.2.¹⁶

THE LETTER FULFILLED.

AUGUSTINE: How does the Spirit give life? By causing the letter to be fulfilled, so that it may not kill.
EASTER SERMON 251.7.17

THE ENLIVENING SPIRIT.

AMBROSE: Moreover, what wonder is it if the Spirit works life, who gives life as the Father does, who gives life as the Son does? Moreover, who would deny that to give life is of the eternal Majesty? . . . Therefore, let us see whether the Spirit is enlivened, or himself enlivens. But it is written: "The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life." ¹⁸ So the Spirit gives life. But that you may understand that the quickening of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit is not divided, learn that there is also a oneness of quickening, since God himself quickens through the Spirit; for Paul said: "He that raised up Jesus Christ from the dead shall quicken also your mortal bodies, because of his Spirit dwelling in you." ¹⁹ THE HOLY SPIRIT 2.4.29, 30.²⁰

FREEDOM, NOT FEAR.

AUGUSTINE: Therefore, you that fear the Lord, praise him, and that you may worship him, not as slaves but as free men, learn to love him whom you fear, and you will be able to praise what you love. The men of the Old Testament, fearing God, because of the letter which terrifies and kills and not yet possessing "the spirit which quickens," ²¹ ran to the temple with sacrifices and offered up bloody victims. They were ignorant of what was foreshadowed by them, although they were a figure of the Blood to come, by which we have been redeemed. LETTER 140, TO HONORATUS 19.²²

GOD GIVES WHAT GOD COMMANDS.

AUGUSTINE: Therefore, God commands continence, and he gives continence; he commands by the law, he gives by the Spirit; for the law without grace makes sin abound, ²³ and the letter without the spirit kills. ²⁴ He commands so as to make us learn how to ask the help of grace when we try to obey his commandments and in our weakness fall wearied under the law, and also to make us grateful to him who helps us if we have been able to perform any good work. LETTER 157, TO HILARIUS.²⁵

FOOLISH ZEAL.

AUGUSTINE: Could it be possible that the law is not of God? None but an irreligious man would think that. But, because the law commands by the letter and does not help by the Spirit, whoever listens to the letter of the law in such wise as to think that it is enough for him to know what it commands or forbids, whoever

trusts in the strength of his own free will to accomplish it and does not take refuge in faith in order to be assisted in his approach to the Spirit that quickens lest the letter find him guilty and kill him, ²⁶ that man has a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge. LETTER 186, TO PAULINUS.²⁷

THE COMMANDMENT ITSELF CANNOT OFFER LIFE.

AUGUSTINE: For, if you take away the Spirit, how does the law avail? It makes a prevaricator. On that account the Scripture says: “The letter kills.” ²⁸ The law orders and you do not obey. . . . Something is commanded, and you do not do it; something is forbidden, and you do it. Behold, “the letter kills.” EASTER SERMON 250.3.²⁹

JOIN THE SPIRIT TO THE LAW.

AUGUSTINE: Let the Spirit be joined to the law, because, if you have received the law and if you lack the help of the Spirit, you do not fulfill what is of the law. You do not carry out what is commanded you. . . . Let the Spirit be added, let him help: that which is commanded is accomplished. If the Spirit is absent, the letter kills you. . . . You cannot excuse yourself on the plea of ignorance since you have received the law. Now, because you have learned what you should do, ignorance does not excuse you. . . . But why does the apostle say: “The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life”? ³⁰ How does the Spirit give life? Because he causes the letter to be fulfilled so that it may not kill. The sanctified are those who fulfill the law of God according to the gift of God. The law can command; it cannot help. The Spirit is added as a helper, and the commandment of God is fulfilled with joy and delight. Certainly many observe the law from fear, but those who keep the law from fear of punishment would prefer that what they fear did not exist. On the contrary, those who observe the law through love of justice rejoice even in that respect because they do not consider it hostile to them. EASTER SERMON 251.7.³¹

THE LORD GIVES US HIS SPIRIT IN HIS TEACHING.

BASIL: The difference between the spirit and the letter the apostle explains succinctly in another place by comparing the law and the gospel, saying: “For the letter kills, but the spirit gives life.” ³² By the “letter” he means the law, as is evident also from what precedes and follows. By the “spirit” he means the Lord’s doctrine, for the Lord himself said: “My words are spirit and life.” ³³ CONCERNING BAPTISM 1.2.³⁴

THE NEED FOR SPIRITUAL PERCEPTION.

ORIGEN: For even in the Gospels, it is “the letter” that “kills.” Not only in the Old Testament is “the letter that kills” ³⁵ found; there is also in the New Testament “the letter that kills”— that one who does not

spiritually perceive what is said. For, if you follow according to the letter that which is said, "Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood," this "letter kills." Do you want me to bring out of the gospel for you another "letter" that "kills"? He says, "Let the one who does not have a sword sell his tunic and buy a sword." Behold, this is the letter of the gospel, but "it kills." But, if you take it spiritually, it does not kill, but there is in it "a spirit that gives life." For this reason, receive spiritually what is said either in the law or in the Gospels because "the spiritual one judges all things but that one is not judged by anyone."

HOMILIES ON LEVITICUS 7.5.5.36