

## Sorrow That Leads to Joy

2 Corinthians 7

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*Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.*

*<sup>2</sup> Make room in your hearts for us. We have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have taken advantage of no one. <sup>3</sup> I do not say this to condemn you, for I said before that you are in our hearts, to die together and to live together. <sup>4</sup> I am acting with great boldness toward you; I have great pride in you; I am filled with comfort. In all our affliction, I am overflowing with joy.*

*<sup>5</sup> For even when we came into Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were afflicted at every turn—fighting without and fear within. <sup>6</sup> But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, <sup>7</sup> and not only by his coming but also by the comfort with which he was comforted by you, as he told us of your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced still more. <sup>8</sup> For even if I made you grieve with my letter, I do not regret it—though I did regret it, for I see that that letter grieved you, though only for a while. <sup>9</sup> As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting. For you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us.*

*<sup>10</sup> For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death. <sup>11</sup> For see what earnestness this godly grief has produced in you, but also what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing, what zeal, what punishment! At every point you have proved yourselves innocent in the matter. <sup>12</sup> So although I wrote to you, it was not for the sake of the one who did the wrong, nor for the sake of the one who suffered the wrong, but in order that your earnestness for us might be revealed to you in the sight of God. <sup>13</sup> Therefore we are comforted.*

*And besides our own comfort, we rejoiced still more at the joy of Titus, because his spirit has been refreshed by you all. <sup>14</sup> For whatever boasts I made to him about you, I was not put to shame. But just as everything we said to you was true, so also our boasting before Titus has proved true. <sup>15</sup> And his affection for you is even greater, as he remembers the obedience of you all, how you received him with fear and trembling. <sup>16</sup> I rejoice, because I have complete confidence in you.*

- 2 Corinthians 7, ESV

The path to true joy often leads through the valley of sorrow. In Pilgrim's Progress, Christian could not get to the Celestial City without passing through the Valley of Humiliation and the Valley of the Shadow of Death. And when he tried to take shortcuts, like walking on the soft

ground of By-Path Meadow, he was captured by the Giant Despair and locked in Doubting Castle.

If you want the joy of a good grade on an exam or paper, you have to endure the sorrow of the hard work of studying or careful editing. Being in good physical shape requires regular exercise and watching what you eat. Having children requires the pain of labor and the sleep-deprivation of dealing with a newborn baby.

But not all sorrow leads to joy. Some sorrow just wears us down and burns us out, bearing no good fruit in our lives or in the lives of those we love. In today's passage, Paul talks about his own sorrow and about the grief he caused the Corinthians by a letter he had written them. But both his sorrow and the Corinthians' sorrow led to real and lasting joy for both of them. So, let's dig in and find out how . . .

### **The Call to Holiness, v. 1**

First of all, chapter 7 opens with a transition verse, which both summarizes the main point Paul has been emphasizing and which sets up what he is saying in chapter 7:

*Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.*

What promises does Paul mean? Well, he's referring back to the promises that ended chapter 6:

*"I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them,  
and I will be their God,  
and they shall be my people.  
<sup>17</sup> Therefore go out from their midst,  
and be separate from them, says the Lord,  
and touch no unclean thing;  
then I will welcome you,  
<sup>18</sup> and I will be a father to you,  
and you shall be sons and daughters to me,  
says the Lord Almighty." – 2 Cor 6:16-18*

These verses are quoting three different promises of God from the Old Testament. Paul was using them to urge the Corinthians not to be unequally yoked together in ministry partnership with unbelievers. And now he saying it's not enough to just separate from partnership with unbelievers, but we must also "*cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.*"

The promises of God give us hope and fill us with a zeal to live for God in every area of our lives, repenting of our sin and growing in the holy fear of God, that awesome and trembling reverence that comes from knowing God’s holiness, power, and grace. Because Paul loves the Corinthians so truly and deeply, he wants to see their lives shaped by the grace of God and by confident hope in His promises, which will shape their lives in holiness and the fear of God.

### **True Love Risks Hurting, vv. 2-9**

We can see the deep love Paul had for the Corinthians in verses 2-9:

<sup>2</sup> *Make room in your hearts for us. We have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have taken advantage of no one.* <sup>3</sup> *I do not say this to condemn you, for I said before that you are in our hearts, to die together and to live together.* <sup>4</sup> *I am acting with great boldness toward you; I have great pride in you; I am filled with comfort. In all our affliction, I am overflowing with joy.*

<sup>5</sup> *For even when we came into Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were afflicted at every turn—fighting without and fear within.* <sup>6</sup> *But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus,* <sup>7</sup> *and not only by his coming but also by the comfort with which he was comforted by you, as he told us of your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced still more.* <sup>8</sup> *For even if I made you grieve with my letter, I do not regret it—though I did regret it, for I see that that letter grieved you, though only for a while.* <sup>9</sup> *As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting. For you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us.*

Out of love, Paul had to write a painful letter to the Corinthians. To remind you of the background, the church on Corinth had a member who was openly sleeping with his father’s wife. And many of the Corinthians were proud of their tolerant, accepting stance toward this professing Christian. Paul wrote to them in I Corinthians 5 very strong words urging them to expel the immoral brother and have nothing to do with anyone who professes to be a Christian and lives a sexually immoral life. With the letter of I Corinthians, Paul sent Timothy to bring his greeting and teaching to the church, and it’s likely that Paul himself made a visit to the Corinthians (the “painful visit” referenced in chapter 2). But the letter of I Corinthians, Timothy’s visit, and even Paul’s visit did not succeed in bringing the church to repentance for her tolerance of this sexual immorality. So, Paul evidently wrote to them again, a letter that grieved them. With this more recent grief-causing letter, Paul sent Titus.

During much of this time, Paul was ministering in Ephesus in Asia Minor, present-day Turkey. Well, after over two years in Ephesus, Paul came back to present-day Greece and was ministering in Macedonia, northern Greece, where Philippi and Thessalonica were. But Paul was in great distress. As he says, “*our bodies had no rest, but we were afflicted at every turn—fighting without and fear within.*” He was heavily burdened for the Corinthians. He knew his letter would probably cause them pain, but he wasn’t sure if it was going to be good or bad.

In the end, Paul was able to rejoice and was greatly comforted by the report he got from Titus of the Corinthians' longing, mourning, and zeal.

### **Two Kinds of Grief:**

Paul makes it very clear that he wasn't happy that his letter caused the Corinthians' grief. He wasn't rejoicing in their distress. But he was happy because of the kind of grief his letter produced – not a worldly grief that leads to death but a godly grief that leads to repentance:

*<sup>10</sup> For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death. <sup>11</sup> For see what earnestness this godly grief has produced in you, but also what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing, what zeal, what punishment! At every point you have proved yourselves innocent in the matter. <sup>12</sup> So although I wrote to you, it was not for the sake of the one who did the wrong, nor for the sake of the one who suffered the wrong, but in order that your earnestness for us might be revealed to you in the sight of God. <sup>13</sup> Therefore we are comforted. – vv. 10-13*

### **Worldly Grief Leads to Death, v. 10**

Grief, in and of itself, does not do us any good, just as pain and trials, in and of themselves, do not really do us good. As we observed last week, it's not true that whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger. Rather, it matters tremendously what kind of grief is caused, and the kind of grief is judged by the fruit of that grief.

Worldly grief is ultimately hopeless. It is grief isolated from God and the Gospel, grief focused on self and life in this world. Worldly grief just seeks a relief from pain, some way to feel better temporarily, to make the situation causing the grief more bearable. When we're accused of wrongdoing, worldly grief will often fake repentance in an attempt to "make the problem go away." Worldly grief responses to bring confronted in our sin can vary: anger, denial, blame-shifting. Just look at Adam's response in the Garden of Eden after he sinned, and you'll get a good outline of worldly grief's typical responses to sin:

1. First, Adam hid from God in shame.
2. Then, Adam angrily blamed Eve, and in the process even blamed God Himself – "*The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate.*"

So, hiding in shame and then blaming in anger are very common, as is making excuses and outright denial. None of these things can lead to comfort or joy, because worldly grief has no path to redemption, no way of effecting true repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation, and the joy of salvation. Worldly grief is too narrow, too self-centered; it leaves us without God and without hope in the world. Thus, worldly grief ultimately produces death by keeping us from the only source of true life.

## **Godly Grief Leads to Repentance, v. 10-11**

How different godly grief is! While worldly grief wants to make the problem go away, godly grief longs to make things right and whole again. But the key distinguishing difference between worldly grief and godly grief is right there in the names: worldly grief is limited to solutions that might be found in this world, cut off from God, whereas godly grief is grief oriented toward God and the Gospel. Godly grief produces “*a repentance that leads to salvation without regret.*”

Repentance is, quite simply, a change of mind and a change of direction. It's when we stop thinking in a selfish and worldly way and start thinking in line with God's character and will, and this turns us from our sin to our Savior.

How do we know if we're repenting out of godly sorrow or if we're just feeling sorry for ourselves and wallowing in shame? What is the evidence of this true repentance? The first thing godly grief produced in the Corinthians was “*earnestness.*” This earnestness is a kind of diligence, a true and heartfelt diligence to do the right thing and make things right, no matter what.

And then godly grief leading to repentance produced: *eagerness to clear themselves, indignation, fear, what longing, what zeal, what punishment!* The Corinthians wanted to clear themselves with Paul, to remove the obstacles that hindered their relationship and his ministry among them. They acted with indignation toward the offensive conduct, with fear toward God, with a longing for righteousness, with zeal for obedience, and with swift punishment of the man who had brought disreputable sin into the church.

Paul is satisfied with their actions, and apparently their punishment of this immoral man had led him to swift repentance, too, for Paul encouraged his restoration in chapter 2. All of this information was in Titus' report. Once they fully understood the gravity of the situation and God granted them sorrow leading to repentance, they too swift action. They did not delay or drag their feet.

Sin is a cancer, a liar, and a thief. It grows insidiously, corrupting all around it, and it deceives us into thinking it's “no big deal,” even as it steals our joy, our relationships, our peace of mind, and the integrity of our witness. When someone loves us enough to confront us in our sin and call us to repentance, we need to receive their love for what it is and be grieved over our sin.

Godly grief is grieved over sin itself, whereas worldly grief is only grieved by the inconvenient consequences of sin. As my mom used to say, “You're not sorry; you're just sorry you got caught.” But godly grief grieves over sin itself first as an offense against God and then as an offense against those made in His image, those we are called to love.

## **Repentance Leads to Restoration and Joy, v. 12-16**

The repentance that comes from godly grief leads to reconciliation, restoration, and joy. We see the joyous fruit of this repentance in verses 13-16:

*<sup>13</sup> Therefore we are comforted.*

*And besides our own comfort, we rejoiced still more at the joy of Titus, because his spirit has been refreshed by you all. <sup>14</sup> For whatever boasts I made to him about you, I was not put to shame. But just as everything we said to you was true, so also our boasting before Titus has proved true. <sup>15</sup> And his affection for you is even greater, as he remembers the obedience of you all, how you received him with fear and trembling. <sup>16</sup> I rejoice, because I have complete confidence in you.*

Just as many were hurt by the Corinthians' sin – the immoral man was coddled and remained in his immorality, Paul's heart was broken, Timothy was rejected, the Corinthians' worldliness deepened – so now, in their repentance, comfort and joy spread to many. The immoral man was led to repentance and freedom from his sin. The church moved away from its corrupt compromise with worldliness. Titus was comforted by seeing the church respond so well to Paul's letter. He now had a deeper affection for the Corinthians. Paul himself was comforted and was able to rejoice again in this church he had planted and cared for in its infancy. Even Timothy was blessed, as he would go on to serve as the pastor of the church in Ephesus.

Because of the Gospel and the work of the Holy Spirit, forgiveness and reconciliation can come from repentance even more swiftly and beautifully than alienation and pain comes from sin. God's grace applies the righteousness and peace of Christ and works powerful and eternal healing in our hearts when He turns us from our sin to His grace.