GODLY SORROW

2 Corinthians 7:5–16

Key Verse: 7:10

“Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.”

Have you ever been clueless about something or somebody? Or known someone around you who is? You or that other person had no idea about the real situation? The Bible says there’s a sense in which we’re all “clueless.” Sin makes us ignorant of God, ignorant about ourselves, ignorant of truth, and ignorant about others. This ignorance is kind of like being asleep, and some kind of stimulus might wake us up. At first we might not like to be wakened. It’s annoying, maybe even painful, but afterwards, we’re glad we woke up to what’s really been going on. In today’s passage Paul is describing a similar condition with the Corinthians. It’s particular to their relationship, but it contains some very important principles for all people. Paul especially contrasts godly and worldly sorrow, and it shows how our lives can really change for the better. May God open our hearts and speak to us personally through his living word today.

Look at verse 5. Here Paul picks up where he had left off back in 2:12,13. He wrote, “Now when I went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ and found that the Lord had opened the door for me, I still had no peace of mind, because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I said goodbye to them and went on to Macedonia.” Just before this trip to Macedonia, Paul had been living in the city of Ephesus for three years teaching the Bible and helping the good news of Jesus spread to many people (Ac20:31; 19:10; cf. 1Co16:7–9). After the ministry in this new Ephesian church had been firmly established, Paul left, feeling the need to visit the churches he’d started in Macedonia on his first missionary journey. The city of Troas was on the coast north of Ephesus on the way to Macedonia.

But why was Paul looking for Titus so urgently? Titus was a promising young leader in the church whom Paul was mentoring. While he was still in Ephesus, Paul had sent Titus to take a letter to the Corinthians. In that letter, which is not in the Bible, Paul was addressing another special situation in the Corinthian church. What was it about? As we’ve seen in our study thus far, the Corinthian church had a number of people who were opposed to Paul and critical of him. Paul’s letter of 1 Corinthians had not been received very well, and Paul’s other assistant, Timothy, who had taken it to them, evidently came back and reported it to Paul. When he heard this, Paul dropped everything and made a quick visit to Corinth in person. But that turned out to be a “painful visit” (2Co2:1). It was painful because evidently somebody in the church stood up to oppose Paul publicly. So after he left the Corinthians, Paul wrote them this other letter and sent it by Titus to address the situation.

Understanding what that letter was about is key to understanding today’s passage. Since we don’t have the letter, we can only infer what Paul was talking about. But in reading 2 Corinthians, two things are clear. First, Paul instructed them in that letter to give the man who’d publicly opposed him some discipline. It seems Paul told them not to allow him to have fellowship with them anymore (2:5–8). Second, it seems Paul also rebuked the church for remaining quiet when the man opposed him, as their silence could be interpreted that they agreed with him (cf. 7:11,12). Paul wanted the Corinthians to be his loyal coworkers who really understood him and his gospel and stood on his side (cf. 1:13,14). And we know a bit more about that lost letter. Paul said in 2:4, “For I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you.” It was a hard letter for Paul to write. He was worried that it might actually break their relationship. When he sent Titus to take it to Corinth, evidently he made arrangements for him to then come back to meet him either in Troas or in Macedonia and tell him what happened. Now we can understand why Paul was so urgent to meet Titus.

Waiting to hear this news was really hard. Paul said in 2:13 that he “had no peace of mind.” Read verse 5. Literally it says “our bodies had no rest.” Paul is admitting honestly in this verse how troubled he was. He says, “we were harassed at every turn—conflicts on the outside, fears within.” Why was he so troubled? If the Corinthian church broke its relationship with him, it could affect all the churches. Paul felt so weak, so helpless, so afraid. In verse 6 he adds that he was “downcast” or depressed. Paul was a very strong man who could endure all kinds of hardships and suffering. But he freely admitted his being afraid and even depressed. It shows Paul was a real shepherd, thinking not about himself but about how all the people he cared about deeply might be led astray from Christ.

Read verse 6. When he finally met Titus somewhere in Macedonia, Paul experienced God’s comfort. God’s comfort is a major theme of 2 Corinthians (1:3–7; 2:7; 7:6,7). Literally the word in Greek means to come along side someone to understand and help. We can experience God’s comfort through the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives (Jn16). But we can also experience God’s comfort through people. The presence and encouraging words of a trusted friend can bring us real comfort from God. Look at verse 7. It says that even Titus experienced comfort, and this time it was through the Corinthians. It says, “He told us about your longing for me, your deep sorrow, your ardent concern for me…” It means they had accepted Paul’s letter very sincerely.

We notice the words “deep sorrow” here. Paul uses another Greek word for sorrow repeatedly in verses 8–11. He uses this same word back in chapter 2 in describing the pain, grief and sorrow of the incident with the man who opposed him (2:1–7). In life many things can fill us with pain, grief and sorrow. It can range anywhere from hurt feelings we quickly forget to a profound loss in our lives that we can’t. Pain, grief and sorrow are not something we typically want to inflict on others. That’s just not normal. We know that Paul who truly cared about the Corinthians really didn’t want to grieve them (2:2,4).

Read verses 8,9. Have you ever said or written something to someone that you later regretted? People can be so sensitive and easily can take things the wrong way. So we need to be careful about not only what we say but also how we say it. Sometimes it’s better not to say anything, but sometimes we really do need to speak up, so we need God’s wisdom. Many people rush to judgment and begin saying things before they really understand. So the Bible says we all need to be “quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry” (Jas1:19). But in this case Paul understood very well what was happening in the Corinthian church. It grieved him and caused him “great distress, anguish of heart and many tears” (2:4). He knew he had to say something to help them spiritually, even though it would be painful. His goal was not to vent his own anger or hurt them; his genuine desire was to help them repent.

Of course we can never force anyone to repent. God has to work in people’s hearts to help them become aware of what’s wrong, to have a sense of problem, to take responsibility for what they’ve been doing wrong. Jesus taught that leading people to this awareness of sin is actually the work of the Holy Spirit (Jn16). But also, just as a real, live person can bring us God’s comfort, so a real, live person can bring us to repentance. We see this in the Book of Genesis, when Tamar helped Judah to repent, or when Joseph helped his brothers to repent. People’s words especially are important in this process. Children have a famous saying, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” But that’s not true. Our words really do have power, either for good or for evil. The Bible says the words we use can be like a spark that lights a terrible forest fire (Jas3:5,6). The Bible praises kind words for their power to heal (Pr15:1,4; 16:24). But it also tells us how important it is to speak truthful words. King David wrote, “Let a righteous man strike me—that is a kindness; let him rebuke me—that is oil on my head…” (Ps141:5a). The Book of Proverbs repeatedly tells us that rebukes coming from wisdom can really help us (Pr1:23; 3:11; 9:8; 17:10; 19:25; 25:12; 27:5; 28:23). The Bible quotes our Lord Jesus as saying, “Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent” (Rev3:19). And the Bible teaches us to be “speaking the truth in love” to one another so that we can help each other become mature in Christ (Eph4:15). Paul had the courage to write truthful words to the Corinthians, then he prayed and trusted God to work in them. We can be afraid of conflict and try to avoid it at all costs. We can think we should always just be nice to people, no matter what. But if we really care, we should choose our words wisely and speak words that might hurt at first but in the long run really help people turn to God.

Paul goes on to state an important principle from this. Read verse 10. How true it is! But what is “worldly sorrow”? It could mean many things. It could be sorrow over losing physical objects we treasured, or over losing our money, our reputation or our friends or loved ones. In any case, it’s a very self-centered sorrow. People who experience worldly sorrow can lose their spirits, become broken, rebellious, or driven to self-destructive behavior. In the Bible, when God rebuked Cain for murdering his own brother Abel, Cain didn’t accept it; he just fell into worldly sorrow about what God’s punishment would cause him to lose (Ge4:13–15). When Samuel rebuked Saul for not listening to him, Saul didn’t accept it, either; he just wanted to use Samuel to help him keep his position and reputation as king among the people (1Sa15:24–26). When Judas Iscariot realized that he had betrayed innocent Jesus, instead of repenting, he was seized with remorse and went out and hanged himself (Mt27:3–5). Worldly sorrow still causes many people today to live a life full of regrets.

Then what is “godly sorrow”? Paul says in verse 9b it’s something “God intended.” The Greek expression literally implies that it’s a sorrow caused by God’s will, or “from God.” In the Old Testament prophets often told the people to mourn due to their sins against God. This gets at the heart of what godly sorrow is. It’s not feeling sorry that we’re caught, or sorry about what’s happening to us, but sorry about what we’ve done to God himself. King David may be the best example. David was known as a man after God’s own heart who had loved and served God all his life. But even he fell into temptation. He committed the sins of adultery and murder to cover it up. When the prophet Nathan rebuked him, David said, “I have sinned against the Lord” (2Sa12:1–13). At that time he even wrote a song, the famous Psalm 51, where he confessed to God, “Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight” (Ps51:4a). But David didn’t just remain in his guilt and self-condemnation; he came to God asking his forgiveness and cleansing. Godly sorrow means both grieving over our sins against God and turning to God for his forgiveness and help to change. So Paul says godly sorrow “brings repentance.” This is why our Lord Jesus said, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted” (Mt5:4). James taught us, “Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom” (Jas4:8,9). When we experience godly sorrow, like Peter when he realized he had failed Jesus, we may need to weep bitterly (Mt26:74,75). But it doesn’t end in death like worldly sorrow does. Paul says it brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret. In Greek the word for “repentance” means “change” or “turn around.” Surely Paul himself experienced this. In his former life he had persecuted Christians even to their death. But when the Risen Christ met him, Paul realized how wrong he had been. He must have grieved over those sins for a long time. But because he experienced the forgiving grace of Jesus, he tasted God’s salvation and felt no remnant of regret.

So how can we experience godly sorrow? We need the Holy Spirit to convict us. But we also need to listen to the people in our lives who may be trying to help us spiritually. We need to humble ourselves to listen to rebukes that come from godly wisdom. We need to listen to the word of God in the Bible, which helps us to recognize our sin as utterly sinful (Ro7:13). We need to realize how much we may have been grieving God himself who loves us so much.

In verse 11 Paul goes on to describe the positive results of godly sorrow: earnestness, eagerness to clear oneself, indignation and alarm at others’ wrongdoing, longing and concern for others, and readiness to see justice done. Godly sorrow transforms us from self-centered persons who are indifferent to others, to God-centered persons who truly care about others. We also see that it leads to comforting and refreshing others, deepening affection and engendering real confidence.

Read verse 10 again. May God help us to newly experience godly sorrow that leads us to him and to genuine repentance. May God also help us learn from Apostle Paul how to help others experience godly sorrow and repentance that leads to salvation.