

GODLY GRIEF**2 CORINTHIANS 7:5-16**

Here's a question I want to ask you. Can anything good ever come out of feeling bad? During the Olympic Games this past summer, we watched the fascinating story of how Simone Biles, arguably the greatest female gymnast of all time, took herself out of the competition because she temporarily lost the ability to perform her routines safely. She believed the reason was the intense anxiety she felt caused by the overwhelming pressure to perform perfectly as one of the world's greatest athletes. Despite not winning all the medals she had originally hoped to win, Simone Biles said the bad feelings she experienced has led to some very good things in her life. Another world class athlete, Naomi Osaka, pulled out of the French Open tennis tournament this year because of ongoing struggles with anxiety and depression. She wrote an article for TIME magazine entitled "It's OK Not To Be OK." Do you agree? The question this morning isn't whether we enjoy or like bad feelings. No one does. The question is can anything good ever come out of feeling bad?

I believe the Bible's answer to that question is a resounding "yes." There is such a thing as good grief. There is such a thing as godly grief. I want to use the word "grief" this morning to cover any and all bad feelings. Now, I know we usually use the word "grief" to refer to the sadness we feel when someone we love dies. But if you look in a dictionary, you'll find the word "grief" can be used to refer to a wide assortment of bad feelings: sorrow, pain, annoyance, anxiety, distress, despair, depression, and trouble.

This morning we return to a study of Paul's second letter to the Christians in the Greek city of Corinth. We began this study last fall, took a break for Advent, and now return to it today. I've entitled the series, "Cruciform: Living the Cross-Shaped Life – The Message of 2 Corinthians." You may recall the word "cruciform" refers to anything shaped like a cross. It can be a building, a work of art, or a piece of jewelry. But a person's life can be cruciform, too. In other words, your life and mine can have about it the shape of the cross spiritually. When you have a cruciform – or a cross-shaped life – it means you resemble, or you look like, or you remind other people of Jesus in some way. Your actions, your attitudes, and your approach to life are Christ-like.

The great Christian leader, Paul, founded the church in Corinth. He left after 18 months to continue his ministry of evangelism and church planting elsewhere. Corinth was a major city in the Roman Empire. It was a big, prosperous, and immoral place. The Corinthian believers – mostly non-Jews or Gentiles – were only five years old spiritually when Paul wrote this letter. They acted their age spiritually! Because they were still spiritually immature, they struggled to understand what it meant to follow Jesus while still living in the overwhelmingly corrupt culture of Corinth. They had to learn what it meant to have a cross-shaped - a cruciform - life. Their teacher was their spiritual father – Paul – who had introduced them to Jesus in the first place. So, let's dive into our text for today and see how it answers the question: can anything good ever come out of feeling bad? Please observe with me that...

GOD'S PEOPLE EXPERIENCE GRIEF.

What we just read together underlines that fact. Some people are very resistant to the idea that God can ever use grief to accomplish good things. God is only about positivity. God is only about what makes you feel happy, feel good about yourself, or feel sunny about life. Not true! The fact is God often allows – and even deliberately sends - bad feelings into our lives. But He does it for a good purpose. God can bring good things out of bad feelings. There is “good grief” and “godly grief.”

Let’s think this through. We live in a world afflicted by sin and evil. This is the ultimate cause of any and all bad feelings. But God takes grief and redeems it in the lives of His people. Nevertheless, sin and evil are the ultimate cause for grief over loved ones who die. Of course, even God’s people feel intense sadness when people we love pass away. We know death is not what God intended or ever wanted for us. But, we also know God has forever changed death for those who follow Jesus. For that reason, the Bible says, “We want you to know what will happen to the believers who have died so you will not grieve like people who have no hope.” (1 Th. 4:13 NLT) In addition, sin and evil are the ultimate cause for grief over broken relationships with people we love. Paul clearly had a very troubled relationship with these people in Corinth he had led to faith in Jesus. In fact, it was in danger of being broken beyond repair. It was in desperate need of restoration and reconciliation. The silly assumption that godly people – people who live to please God every day – don’t ever suffer broken relationships completely fails when you take Paul’s life and ministry into account.

Sin and evil are the ultimate cause for grief caused by anxiety and fear. Again, it was Paul - maybe the greatest Christian who ever lived - who admitted here, “We faced conflict from every direction, with battles on the outside and fear on the inside.” (2 Cor. 7:5 NLT) Paul was worried about his relationship with the Corinthians. He said elsewhere in this same letter that he was constantly worried about the churches he had founded. Were they still following Jesus faithfully? Sin and evil are the ultimate cause for grief caused by depression. Again, Paul – this very godly, good man – admitted in this letter, “We were crushed and overwhelmed beyond our ability to endure.” (2 Cor. 1:8 NLT) And later on, he wrote, “We are pressed on every side by troubles, but we are not crushed. We are perplexed, but not driven to despair. We are hunted down, but never abandoned by God. We get knocked down, but we are not destroyed.” (2 Cor 4:8-9 NLT) Paul was always deeply concerned if his work for the Lord would have eternal results. He got discouraged by the demands and sacrifices he endured to be God’s instrument in sharing the gospel.

But what’s encouraging is the fact God brings good out of my grief – those bad feelings we all endure from time to time. For example, God’s presence can build my trust in Him. Paul himself experienced this fact. He wrote to the Corinthians about a tough situation he had endured. “We expected to die. (I’m sure that caused some bad feelings!) But as a result, we stopped relying on ourselves and learned to rely only on God, who raises the dead.” (2 Cor. 1:9 NLT) Then again, God can grow me spiritually through grief. God doesn’t alleviate all the bad feelings we might encounter in our lives. Instead, He often redeems them. In other words, he uses those experiences to grow us spiritually. Paul might have been the living embodiment of what we read in

Psalm 34:18-19 NLT, “The LORD is close to the brokenhearted; he rescues those whose spirits are crushed. The righteous person faces many troubles, but the LORD comes to the rescue each time.” It’s not wrong to ask Him to take away bad feelings from our lives. But if God doesn’t take them away – or He doesn’t remove the cause of them – it’s likely God is using them to grow us spiritually. Now, let’s consider two causes of bad feelings addressed in our text today and see if we can learn anything from them for our lives. I learn here that...

GOD’S PEOPLE EXPERIENCE THE GRIEF OF CONFLICT WITH OTHERS.

On any earlier visit to Corinth, Paul had been personally attacked by someone at the church. If we read between the lines, it’s apparent an influential member of the church had attacked Paul verbally in a very public way. We don’t know what prompted this attack or what was said by this man. Whatever happened, Paul – the founder and father of this congregation – was publicly humiliated. The members of the church didn’t rush to his defense. They did nothing to discipline the man who attacked Paul. They failed to acknowledge Paul’s leadership as an apostle of Jesus Christ. Paul was crushed by their lack of support.

Rather than getting into a verbal fistfight with this man then and there, Paul withdrew. He left town. But later on, he wrote a very pointed and strong letter of rebuke to the church at Corinth. He demanded they take appropriate action against this man who attacked him. If not, any continued relationship between Paul and the church was unlikely. This letter was hand delivered to the Corinthian Christians by Paul’s friend, Titus. Paul admitted here to being very anxious whether his letter of rebuke would prompt a change in the Corinthians’ attitudes and whether it would compel them to take action. Fortunately, Titus returned to Paul with the happy news the Corinthians had realized their error. They had disciplined the man. He had ultimately repented and was restored to the church’s fellowship. Most importantly, they wanted to restore and renew their spiritual relationship with Paul, their spiritual father.

So, here are some lessons I glean from this passage for my life. Yes, to be sure, God’s people experience the grief of conflict with others. But let’s be more specific. First, I must avoid unnecessary conflict with people. Sometimes people think Paul was this highly combative personality who just loved to pick a fight. Not true! Paul knew God is never honored when we run roughshod over the feelings of others. He took no pleasure in wounding anyone. For that very reason, he wrestled with even sending his letter of rebuke. He was anxious about how it was received. If you enjoy conflict and think it’s fun to win while seeing other people lose, God will have to correct you. If you’re easily offended and eager to pick a fight, you’re out of whack spiritually. Right now, we see a lot of people in our culture in conflict over things that have no eternal significance whatsoever. God’s people should only get into conflict over what matters eternally. Otherwise, just let it go. It’s not important.

But here’s the other side of the coin. Paul’s dealings with the Corinthians are a good example I must avoid an unhealthy peace with people. Paul just couldn’t ignore or

overlook what had happened to him and the Corinthians' non-response to it in the name of "peace." He had to address it directly because too much was at stake. It's possible to seek an easy, but unhealthy peace with people with whom we're experiencing conflict that ends in nothing but trouble. By trying to avoid conflict, we can bring greater trouble on ourselves. Trouble is like cancer. If you deal with it early and in the right way, it can often be cured, but if you ignore it and allow it to grow, it can become incurable. That was exactly Paul's point when he wrote, "I am not sorry that I sent that severe letter to you, though I was sorry at first, for I know it was painful to you for a little while. Now I am glad I sent it, not because it hurt you, but because the pain caused you to repent and change your ways. It was the kind of sorrow God wants his people to have, so you were not harmed by us in any way." (2 Cor. 7:8-9 NLT)

Parents have to learn this lesson when disciplining our kids. Wise parents learn to avoid unnecessary conflict when possible. Not every last battle with our kids has to be won. By the same token, a wise parent knows when a conflict can't be avoided because it will only result in an unhealthy peace with Junior or Juniorette. At times good parents have to rebuke their kids strongly and discipline them for their own good. Good parents never enjoy this, but they do it because they know it ultimately benefits the child. These principles apply to all of our personal relationships. Conflicts with others are inevitable this side of Heaven. Even for God's people. They're going to happen. Let's ask God for the wisdom to discern whether it's a conflict I can and should avoid or whether I need to avoid an easy, but unhealthy peace.

At the end of the day, this passage teaches us that anytime I'm in conflict with others I must pursue reconciliation and God's glory above all. Paul's concern wasn't about winning here. He wasn't going to find personal satisfaction in seeing anyone put in their place. By the way, pagan Greco-Roman culture in that day and time was all about absolutely defeating and destroying people with whom you had a conflict. Show no mercy! Rub their noses in it! Kind of like some sectors of American culture currently! Paul wanted to glorify God by getting he and the Corinthians on the same page spiritually and relationally. He wrote here, "My purpose, then, was not to write about who did the wrong (the man who attacked him) or who was wronged (Paul himself). I wrote to you so that in the sight of God you could see for yourselves how loyal you are to us. We have been greatly encouraged by this." (2 Cor. 7:12-13 NLT) Paul mentioned another kind of good grief or bad feeling God wants us to experience.

GOD'S PEOPLE EXPERIENCE THE GRIEF THAT'S A PART OF REPENTANCE.

I believe the most important verse in our passage today in terms of personal application is verse 10. "For the kind of sorrow God wants us to experience leads us away from sin and results in salvation. There's no regret for that kind of sorrow. But worldly sorrow, which lacks repentance, results in spiritual death." (2 Cor. 7:10 NLT) Notice here Paul contrasted godly sorrow and worldly sorrow, godly grief with worldly grief, bad feelings sent by God and bad feelings prompted by the world.

Here's what I need to know about godly sorrow. It's caused by knowing I have displeased God and harmed others and myself. You feel bad because you know you have failed God, others, and yourself in some way. You're filled with remorse over how your actions or attitudes have impacted others negatively. You blame no one but yourself. It's a part of authentic repentance because it results in changed attitudes and actions. It motivates me to do what's right and drives me to God. I believe it's an essential part of truly being born again. If you've never felt bad, never filled with remorse, or never humbled by the distance between you and an absolutely holy God, I doubt you've ever truly been saved. But it doesn't just stop with feeling bad. It results in some kind of positive action. You stop doing what you know offends God and hurts others. Or, you start doing what you know pleases God and blesses others. Repentance is only real to the extent it's demonstrated in our lives.

There's an example of this in our text today. What did Paul observe about the Corinthians' godly sorrow? "Just see what this godly sorrow produced in you! Such earnestness, such concern to clear yourselves, such indignation, such alarm, such longing to see me, such zeal, and such a readiness to punish wrong. You showed that you have done everything necessary to make things right." (2 Cor. 7:11 NLT) And then, godly sorrow results in spiritual life. It's the inevitable result of being born again and I will continue to experience it as I follow Jesus. If you think about it, the only value to bad feelings is getting rid of sin and its effects in our lives. Grief over lost money doesn't restore the money. Grief over the loss of a child doesn't bring the child back to life. Grief over sickness doesn't cure or heal. But sincere sorrow over my sin can lead to repentance which leads to life and being spiritually healthy.

Wabush, a town in a remote portion of Labrador, Canada, was completely isolated for some time. But recently a road was cut through the wilderness to reach it. Wabush now has one road leading into it, and thus, only one road leading out. If someone would travel the unpaved road for six to eight hours to get into Wabush, there is only one way he or she could leave--by turning around. Each of us, by birth, arrives in a town called Sin. As in Wabush, there is only one way out--a road built by God himself. But in order to take that road, one must first turn around. That complete about-face is what the bible calls repentance, and without it, there's no way out of town.

By way of contrast, here's what I need to know about worldly sorrow. It's caused by the loss or denial of something I want for myself. Perhaps I didn't receive the recognition I think I deserved. I didn't have enough money to buy what I wanted to buy. I didn't get something I really wanted. It's self-centered and self-pitying. I feel bitter now because I didn't get whatever I wanted or I feel humiliated because someone took advantage of me. It just feels bad because I'm embarrassed or I must endure the painful consequences of something that happened to me. It never prompts or promotes positive action. It just paralyzes me from doing what's right.

Students from Strayer University in New York City set up a chalkboard on the sidewalk in a public square for one day. At the top of the board was written, "Write your biggest regret." They provided a supply of colored chalk and set up a video camera to record

people writing on the board. The chalkboard attracted many people walking by and was soon filled to overflowing with written regrets that were poignant and thought-provoking. Here's some of them: "Burning bridges... Never speaking up... Not being a good husband... Should have spent more time with family... Staying in my comfort zone... Not saying "I love you"... Never applying to med school... Not making the most of every day,.. Not being a better friend." As the board filled up with so many different stories, they noticed that almost all of these regrets had one thing in common. Nearly all of them involved the word "not." They were about chances not taken. They were about words not spoken. They were about dreams never pursued.

Worldly sorrow drives me away from God. It has nothing to do with God actually and. It results in spiritual death. Two biblical examples come to mind. The first is Esau, Jacob's older brother, who Jacob swindled out of his birthright and his blessing as the first born son. The Bible says he was bitter and resentful about what happened but never truly faced his own lack of godly priorities that prompted his stupid, selfish act. The other example is Judas, the disciple who betrayed Jesus. What was the result of the sorrow he felt over what he did? The Bible says he committed suicide by hanging himself. That's what worldly sorrow produces. I want to end my message today on a positive note. Our passage reminds me that even though God allows or sends bad feelings our way –, godly grief or good grief – His last word is always about comfort.

GOD'S PEOPLE EXPERIENCE GOD'S COMFORT.

We need to remember God's comfort often comes through other people. We see that truth in our text today. God brought comfort to Paul through his good friend, Titus. "But God, who encourages those who are discouraged, encouraged us by the arrival of Titus. His presence was a joy, but so was the news he brought of the encouragement he received from you." (2 Cor. 7:7 NLT) That's one of the great benefits of belonging to a local church, becoming a part of one of our Bible classes, or participating in a discipleship triad. If you're kind of out there on the margins of our church, I encourage you to take a big step further in this new year of 2022. Get better and more connected with God's people here. God comforts and encourages us through His people.

God's comfort also happens when we see God working in people's lives. It wasn't just Titus who encouraged Paul. He shared encouraging news of how the Corinthian believers had received him gladly, how badly they felt about what had happened to Paul, and how much they wanted to reconnect spiritually with Paul in a healthy way. Paul was now confident he could return to Corinth and experience a joyful reunion. He had the growing assurance that all his ministry efforts in Corinth hadn't been in vain. God was finishing the work He had begun in their lives through Paul's ministry. Was that ever good and much needed comfort for Paul's heart and mind!

God's comfort is always more enduring than my grief. I like how Paul put it here. "But God, who encourages those who are discouraged, encouraged us...." (2 Cor. 7:6 NLT) "But God." It reminds me of something Paul wrote about in his letter to the Romans, "If God is for us, who can ever be against us?" (Rom. 8:31 NLT) You might say the

answer to that rhetorical question is, "A whole lot can still be against us!" True, but the fact is when we belong to God, no enemy in this life or the next can ultimately defeat us or have the last word. We are more than conquerors through Jesus who loved us and gave Himself for us.

Thousands of Christians in North America have sung Don Moen's praise song, "God Will Make a Way," which affirms God's sovereign involvement in our lives. Most who sing his lyrics don't know their origin. Several years ago, Don was awakened in the middle of the night. His mother-in-law called to tell him of a tragic car accident involving his wife's sister, Susan. Susan and her husband, Craig, and their four little boys were on a trip when the tragedy occurred. Jeremy, age eight and the oldest of the four boys, was killed instantly. The others were seriously injured. As Don and his wife grieved and poured out their hearts to the Lord, they felt helpless at communicating hope and grace to Susan and Craig. Don recalls how God helped him through the tragedy by giving him the words to that song. "God will make a way when there seems to be no way. He works in ways we cannot see. He will make a way for me. He will be my guide; hold me closely to his side. With love and strength for each new day, he will make a way."

Are you cruciform? Do you have a cross-shaped life? Our answer to those questions might depend on how we respond to the griefs that are a part of life. Yes, God can bring good out of feeling bad. There is such a thing as good grief or godly grief. And, regardless of the cause or the circumstances, the encouragement and comfort that matters most comes through our Heavenly Father