GODLY SORROW; WORLDLY 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.”

Thank God for granting us a foundational principle for Christian conduct in this world, “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers.” For this, God’s people who have been made holy in Christ Jesus should watch out for any contamination of the world, particularly fleshly desire and materialism in our time of sexual revolution and mammonism. According to an article by Michigan State University Department of Science, on the internet there are 4 million pornographic websites which are accessed daily by 80 million people. This is more than the combined number of those who access NEFLIX, Twitter and Amazon. We should really pray for the holiness in matrimony and keep the blessing of sex in God’s given boundary within a Christ-centred marriage. We also know that we cannot serve both God and Money. We must give to God what is God’s without compromise, which is the way to overcome materialism of this world and experience God’s material blessing more and more in our lives of faith. May we really purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.

Today’s passage is a narrative section, not a doctrinal or theological one. It’s not polemical or argumentative. It is personal, regarding Paul’s relationship to the Corinthian church: How he could receive comfort out of conflict and how his joy was restored greater than ever in an otherwise difficult relationship. Paul’s restored relationship with the Corinthian believers is an example of all relationships. It teaches what it means to have a relationship restored from a broken state. This passage gives us hope in our relationships in Christ. Let’s study this passage with the title, “godly sorrow; worldly sorrow.”

**First, God who comforts the downcast (5-7).** Paul says in verse 5, “For when we came to Macedonia, this body of ours had no rest, but we were harassed at every turn—conflicts on the outside, fears within.” What a life situation! The description, “when we came to Macedonia,” is related to 2:12-13, “Now when I went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ and found that the Lord had opened a door for me, I still had no peace of mind, because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I said good-by to them and went on Macedonia.” We see that Paul picked up here in chapter 7 what he dropped purposely in chapter 2. In 2:13, the narrative stops with the words, “I went to Macedonia.” And then from 2:14 all the way 7:4, Paul talks about his ministry. This is a long digression with a large and substantial insertion of doctrines regarding the ministers of a new covenant with gospel preaching, and the ministry of reconciliation and Christian living in this world.

In 2:13-14 Paul said that he had no peace of mind in Troas despite the blessing of an open door for gospel preaching, because he could not find Titus whom he had sent to Corinth and would supposedly meet in Troas after being sent back from the Corinthian church. So he went to Macedonia in hopes of meeting him there. Then here in chapter 7:5, he wrote, “When we came into Macedonia, this body of ours had no rest, but we were harassed at every turn—conflict on the outside, fears within.” When he and Timothy came into Macedonia, his human condition did not become better worse, harassed at every turn. He was afflicted both from outside and within. We remember what had happened when Paul was in Macedonia several years ago. In Philippi, he was bitten severely and imprisoned after preaching the gospel and rescuing a girl from a possession of an evil spirit. Then God delivered him miraculously through a violent earthquake that shook the foundations of the prison. After being released from the prison in Philippi, he came to Thessalonica. There was a powerful work of the gospel there, yet he was persecuted, regarded as one who caused trouble all over the world and so was sent away to Berea. Paul described in 2 Corinthians 8:2 the situation of the Macedonian churches as he under the most severe trial, with a great deal of affliction. So when Paul came back to Macedonia, the people there must have remembered what they experienced with Paul. No doubt he got hit with the same persecution there. Here Paul, described the situation with the words, “no rest being harassed at every turn—conflict on the outside.”

Paul also said, “fears within.” Surely fears and anxieties were out of his concern for the churches, particularly for the Corinthian church. At this point, his relationship with the Corinthians became so bad that he did not want to make another painful visit. He was reluctant to meet them in that broken state. He did not know how the Corinthians would respond to his severe letter sent with Titus. Surely, he worried about Titus, what would happen to him on a dangerous road, dejected and disheartened, if he had been rejected by the Corinthians. That was why Paul was downcast and depressed in Macedonia.

Then Paul says in verse 6, “But God, who comforts the down cast, comforted us by the coming of Titus.” Comfort out of conflict and fear came from God. Wow! Paul speaks without hesitation, “God who comforts the downcast.” In this world, there is no true comfort for the downcast and the depressed. There can be human comfort in a certain degree, but just momentarily. In the time of distress, many people try to seek for human comfort and can become more frustrated. Or others just pretend to be happy as if they have no discomfort or distress. However, doing so is losing an opportunity to receive divine comfort.

How did God comfort Paul? God comforted him by the coming of Titus. Paul did not know what was going on with Titus, whom Paul called “my brother” in 2:13 and “my partner and fellow worker” in 8:23. But God brought him before Paul’s presence, and Paul was comforted with a relief that Titus securely returned. However, God’s comfort for Paul was more than that. Verse 7 says, “and not only by his coming but also by the comfort you had given him.” Paul’s comfort was greater, because Titus was comforted and encouraged by the Corinthians in addition to his safe and secure return.

Verse 7 continues, “He told us about your longing for me, your deep sorrow, your ardent concern for me, so that my joy was greater than ever.” At this time, Paul especially used the singular word, “me” instead of “us.” It shows that the fundamental problem was a personal matter between the church and Paul. And the restoration was also very personal. Three things are mentioned, “your longing for me”, “your deep sorrow”, and “your ardent concern for me.” They longed for Paul. They longed to see Paul face to face and surely to study the Bible with him again, hear his message continually, pray together, and deepen fellowship with him. They had deep sorrow. They were deeply sorrowful over their sin against Paul, over their breach of that relationship, over what they had done to bring him pain. In their deep sorrow, they recognized their wrong doing toward him and repented about it before God. They expressed their ardent concern for him (in other translations, their zeal for him). Zeal is a combination of love and hate, hating anyone that harms those we love. So, their zeal for Paul can mean their love for him and at the same time their hatred toward those who harmed him, including false teachers with whom Paul fiercely fought. All these indicated that their relationship with Paul was genuinely restored. Paul was greatly comforted and encouraged that he said that his joy was greater than ever. It doesn’t mean that there were no problems in Corinth. The false apostles were still there, and he addresses them in chapter 10, 11, 12, and 13. But according to the report, the vast majority are reaffirming Paul, and that’s what brought him the joy greater than ever.

No one could give such comfort to Paul, but God did. Paul must have written 2 Corinthians after receiving this report from Titus. So at the beginning of this epistle Paul, lost no time to say, “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion, and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles.” There are many examples of how God comforted the downcast and the needy. In 1 Samuel, Hannah was barren and was provoked by her rival. Then in the bitterness of her soul she wept much and prayed to God, pouring out her soul out of great anguish and grief. God heard her prayer and gave her a son, Samuel. In Luke 1, Zechariah and Elizabeth were childless. Zechariah prayed for a son to be given him until they became seniors. He must have prayed throughout his life, probably more than 30 years. Then one day, he heard God’s message through an angel, “Your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son and you are to give him John.” Indeed, God gave them an amazing son who grew up to be John the Baptist. At the time of pregnancy, Elizabeth confessed, “He has taken away my disgrace among the people.” In 1 Samuel, David and his men found out their city destroyed by the Amalekites and their wives and sons and daughters taken captive. David and his men wept aloud until they had no strength left to weep. On top of that David’s men were talking about stoning him in their bitterness. David was greatly distressed, but he found strength in the LORD. Then in this God’s comfort and strength he and his men went to fight back and recovered everything. May we know that our God is God of all comfort, who comforts the downcast and can comfort us in all our troubles. May we come to him in any troublesome and distressful situation and receive his divine comfort, one after another.

**Second, godly sorrow; worldly sorrow (8-16).** Paul says in verses 8-9, “Even if I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret. Though I did regret—I see that my letter hurt you, but only for a little while...” What a battle in the heart of a shepherd! As a shepherd, he surely wanted to make his flock of sheep happy in all possible ways. He must have grappled a lot whether he had to write and send such a severe letter to them. Finally, he wrote and sent it to them, not being sure of how they would respond. Even after sending it, there was regret in the corner of his heart, thinking, “Maybe it was too harsh.” Finally, he entrusted everything to God. It turned out that God had accepted all his tearful struggle and anguish of heart and prayers and worked in their hearts. He had said in 2:4, “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.”

Paul said, “yet now I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance.” Their sorrow was the right kind of sorrow. It was not the sorrow of selfish sympathy, self-pity. It was not the sorrow of interrupted iniquity; it was not the sorrow of weak sensitivity, the sorrow of despair, the sorrow of bitterness, or the sorrow of wounded pride. It was not the sorrow that’s often expressed with manipulative remorse. It was the real thing, the sorrow of real change. No victimization mentality, no resentment, no self-vindication, no self-justification, no self-defence. Just sorrow unto repentance. Paul was so happy to see the Corinthians’ sorrow that led them to repentance.

We see that being sorry and sorrowful for what one has done wrong is beautiful leading to repentance. Jesus said in Mathew 5:4, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted” and in Luke 6:21, “Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh” and 6:25, “Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep.” And on the way to be crucified some women mourned and wailed for him. Jesus turned and said to them, “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children” (Lk 23:28). It was because of the impending judgment to come. People usually think that weeping is a weird thing and to be disliked, while laughing is liked and welcomed. In our culture, mourning or weeping is the emotion of losers and unsuccessful people, whereas laughing is the emotion of victors and successful people. But weeping over one’s sin is really beautiful and blessed by God.

Paul continues in verse 9, “For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us.” What an understanding of their being sorrowful! To Paul it was not as men intended, but God intended. Truly, Paul’s understanding is fundamental and deep. We remember what Joseph said to his brothers in Genesis 50:20, “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.” God is sovereign and all things take place under his sovereignty. God intends that people may have grief and repent and turn to God though all happenings.

In verse 9, “so were not harmed in any way by us” is in other translations, “so that you might not suffer loss in anything through us.” It is a painful thing that people end in suffering loss through us, despite all good intentions and serving. If people do not come to repentance, all the effort and serving can feel fruitless. But repentance compensates everything. We should really pray for the work of repentance, holding to God’s good intention. According to 2 Peter 3:9, “God does not want anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”

Subsequently Paul says in verse 10, “Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.” Now Paul makes this conclusive remark, which is really true. Here godly sorrow and worldly sorrow are contrasted. Godly sorrow is in other translations the sorrow that is according to the will of God. It is consistent with God’s will for us. Again, it is not self-pity or human remorse, which leaves God out all together. It is the healing, transforming, uplifting sorrow over sin that is God-centred. Godly sorrow and repentance and salvation go together as one, and repentance has no regret at all. Repentance that leads to salvation is repentance to or unto salvation. Salvation is the most important in life. This repentance that follows godly sorrow is in the sphere of salvation, transcendent above the human psychological level. It is spiritual. Thus, godly sorrow brings salvation and life – redemptive, healing, saving sorrow. But worldly sorrow brings death. It devastates and kills. It is indeed a killer, bringing guilt, shame, bitterness, despair, depression, self-pity, hopelessness, fatalism, anguish, resentment. Many people live in worldly sorrow, even to the ends of their lives. We should guard our hearts from worldly sorrow, which is deceptive. We thank Jesus who carried out sorrows and died on the cross bearing all our sins and grief. Looking up this Jesus, we may come to God at each time of sorrow, for he can turn our human sorrow into godly sorrow, leading to repentance and salvation.

In verse 11, “See what this godly sorrow has produced in you, what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice be done.” The repentance was so manifest that Paul could not resist saying, beginning with this exclamatory statement, “see” or “behold”, which is a kind of “wow”. In the following seven elements there are seven “what’s” written together, adding greater intensity. “What earnestness, what eagerness…”. Before, in their unrepentance, they were lukewarm not clearing themselves between Paul and false teachers. But repentance produced in them earnestness and eagerness with spiritual fervor in serving the Lord. It also produced in them indignation, a holy anger toward falsity and evil. What alarm is what fear, what reverence toward God. Their irreverence turned to reverence. A new healthy fear of God arose in them, fearing the one who chastens and judges. They wanted to worship God appropriately, honouring God as God. They came to have a deep longing for God and deeper knowledge of God and longing for a godly and orderly Christian community. They had concern or zeal, loving God and disliking what God dislikes. They also had vindication that punishes injustice, avenges wrong and seeks justice to be done. They became true living Christians and instruments to be used by God for the fulfillment of his will.

Verse 11 says more, “At every point you have proved yourselves to be innocent in this matter.” They were not deceptive and devious, but pure and innocent before God. Their repentance proved this.

Paul writes further, “So even though I wrote to you, it was not on account of the one who did the wrong or of the injured party, but rather that before God you could see for yourselves how devoted to us you are.” The purpose of Paul’s writing was not just on a human level, who did wrong or right, but for themselves to see their devotion to God and God’s servants buried in their deep hearts and displayed through their repentance. Their fruit of repentance included also their devotion. By all this, Paul was greatly encouraged.

And then Paul says, “In addition to our own encouragement, we were especially delighted to see how happy Titus was, because his spirit has been refreshed by all of you.” Another fruit of their repentance was the refreshment of Titus in his spirit, that brought special delight to Paul. And then in verse 14, “I had boasted to him about you, and you have not embarrassed me. But just as everything we said to you was true, so our boasting about you to Titus has proved to be true as well.” They became reliable; their accountability was proven. And in verse 15, “And his affection for you is all the greater when he remembers that you were all obedient, receiving him with fear and trembling.” Their obedience was an obvious fruit of their repentance, that enabled them to receive Titus with fear and trembling and so Titus could have greater affection for them in return. Finally Paul says, “I am glad I can have complete confidence in you.” Trust relationship was fully restored which made Paul so glad.

Thank God for teaching us that our God is the God of comfort who comforts the downcast in any troubles. He is also the God of restoration in any broken state and broken relationship, doing the work of repentance in the people’s hearts. Let’s remember that godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, while worldly sorrow brings death. May we grow in godly sorrow, being able to help others to have godly sorrow, turning from worldly sorrow. Amen.