



POWER IN WEAKNESS | GODLY GRIEF

November 2, 2025

We are continuing to make our way through the Apostle Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, and in the particular passage that is before us today, Paul helps the Corinthians deal with their past. Everyone has a past. It might be longer or shorter depending on how long you have lived, but everyone has a past, and the question that I want to pose to you today is: When you look at your past, what do you see?

I don't know about you, but when I look at my past, I don't like everything that I see. So when you look at your past, what do you see? Regret? Failure? Sin? Broken relationships? Lost opportunities? Moments that will never come back? Some words that should have been said but were never spoken? Or perhaps words that should never have been spoken in the first place? And if you could go back and do it differently, you would. But there is no going back. A done deed cannot be undone. There simply are things that we can never take back, we can never change, we can never undo.

Everyone has a past. And so the question is, what are you going to do about it? What do you do with your past? Well today we come to one of the most famous passages in the New Testament, and here the Apostle Paul shows us that once God brings to light our shortcomings and our transgressions, our failures and our sins, there are only two paths available to us. One is the path of guilt, and the other is the path of grace. One leads to death, and the other leads to life. So during our time together today, I'd like us to explore this passage and consider three things: 1) *The source of our tears*, 2) *The direction of our hearts*, and 3) *The outcome of our lives*.

²Make room in your hearts for us. We have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have taken advantage of no one. ³I do not say this to condemn you, for I said before that you are in our hearts, to die together and to live together. ⁴I 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.

⁵For even when we came into Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were afflicted at every turn—fighting without and fear within. ⁶But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, ⁷and 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. ⁸For 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. ⁹As 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.

¹⁰For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death.

2 Corinthians 7:2-10

Background

Before turning to the heart and center of this passage, let me quickly remind you of the background. The Apostle Paul's relationship with this church in Corinth spanned about seven years, and over the course of that time, he made three trips to Corinth, and he wrote four letters. The first letter and the third letter have been lost to us, and we know the second and fourth letters as 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians respectively.

So first, the three trips. Trip number one was the initial visit that Paul paid to Corinth. That's when he founded the church there. He spent about a year and a half in that Greek city before sailing across the Aegean Sea to Ephesus, located on the western coast of what we now know as Turkey. Trip number two was an unplanned emergency trip that Paul took across the Aegean Sea back to Corinth to deal with some kind of disciplinary issue. Paul refers to this trip in 2 Corinthians 2:1 as his painful visit, because it didn't go very well. During the intervening time when Paul had left Corinth, there was a group of people who slipped in and tried to discredit Paul and turn the church against him. And so when Paul comes back to Corinth for this emergency visit, things go south. He ends up going back to Ephesus feeling somewhat humiliated and defeated, but then eventually he returns for trip number three, which is his final visit to Corinth. So those are the three trips.

As to the four letters, letter number one is referred to as "the previous letter" in 1 Corinthians 5 because it preceded letter number two, which is the letter we know as 1 Corinthians. Then after that second painful visit, Paul writes letter number three, which has since been lost. But this is the letter that Paul refers to here in 2 Corinthians 7:8. Paul wrote a severe letter from Ephesus back to Corinth in order to try to set things straight. But he refers to it as "the sorrowful letter" because it caused them sorrow; it caused them to grieve. And earlier Paul told us that he had written this letter out of much affliction during his time in Ephesus, with anguish of heart and with tears literally streaming down his face and falling on the parchment. But he wrote that letter not in order to cause them pain but to reassure them of his love and his commitment to them. Now Paul writes his fourth and final letter, which we know as 2 Corinthians, and he writes that letter in preparation for that third and final visit.

Now as I've mentioned before, when you're reading New Testament letters — especially 2 Corinthians — you have to remember that you're reading somebody else's mail, and you're only privy to one side of the conversation. So we have to try to piece together what was happening. This background, therefore, helps us understand what's happening in this particular section of 2 Corinthians 7. You see, when Paul wrote that third sorrowful letter from Ephesus, he sent his colleague Titus not only to hand deliver the message to the church in Corinth, but also as his trusted colleague to try to set things straight in the church there. And then Titus was supposed to travel and meet Paul, not in Ephesus, but north of Ephesus, in Troas, near the ancient city of Troy.

So there's Paul, waiting for Titus to deliver the message, to sort things out, and then to meet him in Troas to tell him how things are going in Corinth. How did they respond to the letter? Did they turn things around? And as he's waiting and waiting and waiting, Titus never shows up. So Paul fears the worst. Eventually Paul has to move on, so he travels from Troas to Macedonia, probably to the Greek city of Philippi. And that's why, in verse 5, he tells us that when they arrived in Macedonia, he couldn't sleep. Paul and his companions, he says "our bodies had no rest, but we were afflicted at every turn—fighting without and fear within." Not only were they dealing with external conflicts and challenges, but they had to wrestle with internal anxiety, and specifically the anxiety about the church in Corinth.

Isn't it interesting that in his letter to the Philippians, Paul writes, "have no anxiety about anything," and yet Paul had anxiety for the churches, especially for the church in Corinth? So what does that mean? I think that means that it wasn't that Paul was immune to anxiety, but rather that he took all of his anxiety, and each and every day he poured it out before the Lord. That is the only way that he could experience the peace of God that passes all understanding. So he's deeply worried and anxious about the church in Corinth. And it's striking that all this time Paul is anxious and worried that the church in Corinth is upset with him and therefore is going to reject his leadership, but meanwhile the Corinthians are anxious and worried that Paul is going to be upset with them because of the way in which they mishandled the situation in the church.

But God brought about reconciliation. Paul writes in verse 6, "But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus," (Titus eventually meets him in Macedonia and brings good news.) "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." Not only does Titus arrive safe and sound, but he brings the good report that Paul's letter had done the trick and that the church in Corinth had recommitted themselves to Paul.

The Source of Our Tears

This whole discussion sets up the first point that I'd like to bring out, which is the source of our tears: worldly sorrow or godly sorrow. Paul goes on to write, beginning in verse 8,

⁸For 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. ⁹As 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. ¹⁰For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death.

If you take an honest look at your past, what do you see? It may cause tears. But Paul explains that there are two kinds of tears. There are two kinds of sorrow. There are two kinds of grief. One he calls worldly, and the other he calls godly. The question is, how do you tell the difference between the two?

A few years ago, a very famous actor who would be known and recognized by us all gave an interview. In that interview, he opened up about his divorce from his wife and the impact it had on their broader family. He talked about how he began drinking more and more as his marriage was falling apart, but that only created more problems. And so in this interview, he says,

You're trying to make yourself feel better with eating or drinking or sex or gambling or shopping or whatever. But that ends up making your life worse. Then you do more of it to make that discomfort go away. Then the real pain starts. It becomes a vicious cycle you can't break. That's at least what happened to me.

And even though several years had already passed, during this interview, he said, "This divorce is (present tense) the greatest regret of my life." And he went on to talk about the internal collateral damage that it caused. He said,

Shame is really toxic. There is no positive byproduct of shame. It's just stewing in a toxic, hideous feeling of low self-worth and self-loathing.

Now, I'm purposely not going to tell you the name of this actor because I don't want to pick on him. I actually want to commend him for honestly dealing with himself and seeking out the help that he needed. But the reason why I share this story is because I think it helps illustrate the difference between worldly sorrow on the one hand and godly sorrow on the other.

Ultimately, worldly sorrow is self-centered grief, because what worldly sorrow leads you to say is, "I hate what my sin has done to me." And that is what actually leads to feelings of not only shame but low self-worth, self-loathing, and even self-pity. But godly sorrow, by contrast, is not self-centered grief; it is God-centered grief, and it leads a person to say not "I hate what my sin is doing to me," but rather, "I hate what my sin is doing to God." And that's altogether different. Rather than leading to feelings of shame or self-loathing or self-pity, this is a sorrow that's born out of love. It's not a sorrow that results from feelings of fear or guilt, but rather it's a sorrow that arises out of the realization that you have displeased the One who loves you so much.

Let me give you a striking example of this. Think of King David, the greatest of all of Israel's kings, and think of him writing Psalm 51, which is perhaps the greatest of all the psalms of repentance. We're told that David wrote this song after he was confronted by the prophet Nathan. Nathan confronts him because of his adultery with Bathsheba, and for then sending Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, into battle where he knows he certainly will be killed. We rightly wonder, how could David, the greatest of all of Israel's kings, the man who's described as a man after God's own heart, be so blind? How could he be guilty of such incredible offenses? Then we're reminded of Jeremiah 17:9. "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?"

So why was he so blind? We don't know. We don't know why he did what he did. We don't know what was going through his head, so this is only conjecture. But if I had a guess, when David sent for Bathsheba, I don't think he felt like an adulterer. My guess is that he felt like a man. He felt like a lover, and this is what lovers do. And when he

sent Uriah into battle, I don't think David felt like a murderer. My guess is that he felt like a king. He felt like a general, and this is what generals do. They send men into battle.

But I would suggest that this is the problem with self-pity. This is the problem with low self-esteem. When we feel sorry for ourselves, we feel entitled. We feel entitled to do whatever we want with whomever we want. We say, "Well, life is so hard. I deserve this," whatever it is, regardless of how wrong it might be. We tell ourselves things like, "Well, my anger, my lust, my habits, they're not hurting anybody else. So what difference does it make? What's the big deal?"

You see, self-pity blinds us. But in God's inexpressible grace, he pursues David in love through the prophet Nathan in order to wake him up to the reality of his situation. And David responds. And as a result, he can pen Psalm 51, and then he can write verse 4: "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight."

Now hold on. Wait a minute. How could David say, "Against you [Lord], you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight"? Has he lost his mind? What about Bathsheba? What about Uriah? What about the child that was born, whom they lost? What about them? Of course David sinned against all of them. And he knows that. Of course he knows that. When he says, "Against you, you only, have I sinned," he's not shutting others out, but rather he's putting God first. In other words, David is not limiting sin's reach; rather he's identifying sin's root. It begins with God. Before David ever committed adultery with Bathsheba, he had already committed spiritual adultery against God. Something else was first place in his heart and first place in his life, and everything else is the result of that.

The Direction of Our Hearts

So worldly sorrow leads you to say, "I hate what my sin has done to me," but godly sorrow says, "I hate what my sin has done to God." And once we identify the source of our tears, it leads to the direction of our hearts. Here's what I mean by that: Worldly sorrow leads to a false form of regret, whereas godly sorrow leads to true repentance.

So what's the difference between false regret on the one hand and true repentance on the other? Well, false regret is nothing more than a shallow remorse. You feel remorseful, but for what? Not for your sin. No, you're sorry for yourself. You're sorry for the consequences that you have to now deal with. You're sorry because you got caught. You're sorry because you've made your life a mess. Now it's more difficult to manage. So you're not sorry for your sin; you're sorry for yourself.

And when you experience false regret, you're not sorry for the causes of your sin; you're only sorry for the consequences of your sin. If you hadn't gotten caught, if there weren't consequences, you'd probably still be doing it. You would do it again. All of which goes to show that the direction of your heart hasn't changed at all. You're looking for relief, not renewal. When you experience that false form of regret, you're simply looking for relief from the consequences but not renewal in your life. So a false

regret is superficial rather than substantial, and it's only temporary as opposed to permanent.

But if that's false regret, what is true repentance? Worldly sorrow leads to false regret; godly sorrow leads to true repentance. It's interesting that in our popular vocabulary in the media, repentance is usually described as a feeling word. We assume that repentance means to feel really, really bad about yourself or about what you've done. But actually, in the Bible, repentance is not primarily a feeling word; it's a thinking word. To repent means to think again. It means to change your mind. It means to pull a u-turn in your thinking, which sets you down a new path.

Let me give you a very simple but clear example of this from Matthew 21. Jesus tells the parable of the father and the two sons. And the father says to the one son, "I would like you to go and work in the vineyard today." And the one son says, "Yes, I will," but he never does. The father says to the second son, "I want you to go and work in the vineyard today." And he says, "No, I will not. I don't wanna do it. I'm not going to," but later Jesus says that he repented. He changed his mind, and he went and worked in the vineyard.

And so Jesus asks the question, which of the two sons did his father's will? And based on this parable, he warns us that there are going to be all kinds of people who are less moral, less virtuous, less godly than us, who are going to enter the kingdom of God before us. Why? Because unlike us, they were willing to repent, to change their mind, and to set a new path.

Now, Paul will go on to explain in the following verses that that's exactly what happened with the Corinthians. Paul writes this severe letter to wake them up to the situation, and though it initially caused them sorrow, it was a godly sorrow because they took it to heart and it produced repentance. So then in verse 11, Paul can say, well, look at you now. What earnestness, what eagerness, what longing, what indignation, what fear, what zeal. And so the Corinthians actually model for us what true repentance looks like. You thought it over in your mind, you felt it in your heart, and you did something about it in your life. That's what it means to repent.

Worldly sorrow is just a false form of regret, but godly sorrow leads to true repentance. And when you truly repent, you undergo this shift. No longer do you love your sin and hate God, but now you love God and hate your sin. Now, repentance is not just a one-time occurrence, but repentance actually is the ongoing key to living the Christian life.

Many people know this past Friday as Halloween, but at least for some, we know this past Friday as Reformation Day. Because as the story goes, on October 31, 1517, Martin Luther nailed the 95 Theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, kicking off the Reformation. The 95 Theses are pretty important. He posts them on the door and kicks off the Reformation. Let me ask you: What was thesis number one? Anybody remember? Surely European history wasn't so long ago, was it? Thesis number one: All of life is repentance.

See, repentance isn't just once and you're done. It's actually the key to living the Christian life. But how could that be? Because when you first read those words of Luther, "All of life is repentance," it sounds a little bleak, doesn't it? It sounds like you never actually make any progress. You're just always repenting. But no, he's not saying that all of life is repentance because you make no progress. Rather he's saying that repenting *is* the way you progress in the Christian life. That's the way in which you grow. That's the way in which you change.

So here's the difference, then, between a merely religious person and a Christian when it comes to repentance. A moral, upright, religious person will be willing to repent of the things that they have done wrong, but only a Christian will also repent for all the reasons why they ever did right. A moral, religious person is willing to repent of the bad things that they've done, but only a Christian will also repent of the good things that they've done for all the wrong reasons.

Now, what are the good things that we would do for all the wrong reasons? Well, sometimes we try very, very hard to be good in order to prove our value or our worth to God, to other people, or even to ourselves. Or sometimes the reason why we try very hard to be good is so that God then is obligated to bless us and to make our life go well. And so only a Christian will repent of even the good things they do for all the wrong reasons, because they realize that all of this is just a form of self-justification. All of it is just a form of self-salvation. We're trying to save ourselves through our good actions, but no good action will ever be enough. Therefore, to be a Christian means that you repent not only of the bad things that you do, but you even repent of the good things that you do for all the wrong reasons to try to put God in your debt, because you cannot justify yourself. Only Jesus can do that.

The Outcome of Our Lives

That brings me then to my third and final point, which is the outcome of our lives. Worldly sorrow leads to a false regret, which results in death. Godly sorrow produces true repentance, which leads to life. And the gospels actually provide us with a poignant example of both kinds of sorrow. Consider two of the central characters: Judas on the one hand, and Peter on the other. The gospels tell us that both Judas and Peter spent the better part of three years with Jesus. They lived with him. They learned from him. They knew him better than anybody else. They were among Jesus' closest friends, his closest confidants.

But what happens in the end? Judas betrays Jesus. He gives him up. He reveals Jesus' identity as well as his location to those who are seeking to destroy him. And he does it for what? For 30 pieces of silver. And after it's done, he plunges into a worldly form of sorrow. It's only a false regret, because the gospel of Matthew goes on to tell us that he takes those silver coins and he throws them before the feet of the chief priests, and then he goes out and he hangs himself. See, Judas chooses the way of guilt, and it leads to death.

But then on the other hand, there's Peter. Now Peter, unlike the other disciples, was bold. He was willing to follow Jesus into the courtyard of the high priest. He dares to follow Jesus into the courtyard after Jesus has been arrested. And then while he's there

in the courtyard, he's asked three times: "Do you know him? Do you know him? Do you know him?" And every time he denies it. He says, "I swear I do not know the man." And no sooner do the words escape his lips than he hears the rooster crow, and he realizes what he's done. He's denied Jesus. And so he goes out, and he weeps like a baby. But this is not a worldly sorrow. No, this is a godly sorrow. It doesn't lead to false regret; it leads to true repentance. His tears set his heart in a new direction that leads to life, because he doesn't choose the way of guilt; he chooses the way of grace.

And his tears are just the beginning, because the risen Jesus will then appear to him in John 21 and will proceed to ask him the same question over and over again. At first Peter doesn't realize why Jesus keeps asking him the same exact question, until he realizes that, oh, Jesus is asking me this question not for him, but for me. "Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me?" One question for each of Peter's denials. And he has the chance to say three times, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." So he chooses the way of grace, which leads to life, because he embraces not a worldly sorrow but a godly sorrow that produces true repentance rather than false regret.

So the way of guilt leads to death, and the way of grace leads to life. But let me let you in on one other small, open secret. If you turn to Luke 24:47 or Acts 5:31, you learn that the reason why God raised Jesus from the dead — the reason why he exalted him to the highest position — is so that he might proclaim repentance — and even more, so that he might give repentance. Do you hear that? So that the Lord might *give* repentance. We can't take credit for it. Even our repentance is a gift.

So what's the key to lasting change in the Christian life? How do we grow? How do we become the people that God has called us to be? It's not the way of guilt. It's not by wallowing in guilt. When we do something wrong, it's not a matter of beating ourselves up and telling ourselves, "This is wrong. I shouldn't have done that. I'm gonna get in trouble. There are gonna be consequences." No, the way to experience lasting change in our lives is not to wallow in guilt but to experience grace — to get a sense in our hearts of the depth of Jesus' love for us, which would lead us to say, "Why would I want to do this thing? Why would I want to live this way in light of all that Jesus has done for me, as showcased by his work on the cross?"

You see, God's love not only precedes our repentance, God's love not only comes first, but God's love enables our repentance. God's grace empowers our repentance. God's grace makes it possible to repent. Repentance is a gift. So when you experience sorrow as you look at your past, let the source of your tears be not a worldly sorrow but a godly sorrow that leads to true repentance and produces life.

Let me pray for us.

Father, we thank you for these words from the Apostle Paul and for the interchange between Paul and the Corinthians, so that we might learn the difference between the sources of our tears. Help us to know that there are two kinds of sorrow: worldly and godly. One leads to false regret, the other to true repentance. One is the way of guilt that leads to death. One is the way of grace that leads to life. Help us to choose the way of grace now and always. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.