

Godly Grief

2 Corinthians 7:2–16

June 14, 2026

Pastor Trent Eastman | New Baptist Church, Huntington, WV

Opening: How Can Grief Be Good?

Growing up, my favorite Sunday-morning newspaper comic was *Peanuts* — Charlie Brown, Snoopy, and the whole cast of characters that seemed to know something true about ordinary human life. If you have spent any time with the strip, you know that Charlie Brown’s defining characteristic was his constant bad luck and misfortune. And whenever something went wrong — and something always went wrong — Charlie Brown’s response was nearly always the same: “*Good grief.*”

Which, when you think about it, is a rather odd thing to say. How can grief be good? Unfortunately, *Peanuts* never answers that question. Charlie Brown’s grief never actually becomes good. It just keeps coming.

But there is a good grief, and that is what our passage is about today. Paul, in chapter 7, describes what he calls godly grief — a grief that becomes good. That is what we are going to explore this morning.

The Story Behind 2 Corinthians

Since Easter, we have been working through the book of 2 Corinthians, and chapter 7 marks the halfway point of the letter. It is here, at this midpoint, that we finally get the broader context that makes the whole letter make sense. Before I read our passage, I want to tell you the story behind 2 Corinthians, because when you hear it, this chapter will open up in a way it cannot without that background.

Of all the churches Paul planted, the church at Corinth gave him the most grief and caused him the greatest problems — which may be why, of all the churches he wrote to, he wrote to Corinth the most.

Based on archaeological finds, we can date Paul’s first arrival in Corinth and the founding of the church there to around AD 50, a little over twenty years after the cross and resurrection. Paul stayed in Corinth for more than a year and a half, possibly longer. After leaving, he

returned to his home church in Antioch and soon began his third missionary journey, which took him to Ephesus, where he remained for three years. While he was there, word reached him that things were not going well in Corinth. He responded by writing letters to them — we have one of them, 1 Corinthians — and in that letter we encounter all the struggles the church was facing: competing factions, sexual immorality, lawsuits between members, disorder in worship, and confusion about the resurrection. And alongside all of this, false apostles had arrived in Corinth, teaching a works-based righteousness and doing everything they could to discredit Paul and the gospel of grace.

Soon after sending those letters, Paul traveled from Ephesus to Corinth, clearly hoping to see how the church was doing. I think he was expecting to be warmly welcomed. He was not. Not only did the church fail to receive him well, but he was publicly wronged and humiliated — his authority challenged, his physical appearance mocked, his speech dismissed as unimpressive, and his refusal to accept financial support from Corinth twisted into evidence that he did not truly love them. And through all of it, the congregation did not defend him. Paul left Corinth without resolving the crisis, deeply hurt and in much pain.

Back in Ephesus, Paul wrote another letter — one he describes as “severe” — designed both to demonstrate the depth of his love for the Corinthians and to call them to accountability. This severe letter has not survived.

Sometime near the end of AD 56 or the beginning of AD 57, Paul was severely persecuted by citizens in Ephesus and driven out of the city (Acts 19). He had planned to travel directly to Corinth, but given what had happened on his last visit, he went instead to Macedonia in northern Greece. It is there, in Macedonia, that Titus found him and delivered a report on the church in Corinth — specifically, how they had responded to the severe letter. Titus reported that the church had grieved and repented. The people were longing for Paul to come to them. Paul heard this news and out of him overflowed relief and joy. It was a profound comfort.

And it is there, in Macedonia, filled with that relief and joy and thankfulness, that Paul sat down and wrote the letter we know as 2 Corinthians.

2 Corinthians 7:2–16

With that story in mind, let me read our passage. I hope it opens up for you.

“Make room in your hearts for us. We have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have taken advantage of no one. 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. 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.

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

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

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. 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.

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. 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. And his affection for you is even greater, as he remembers the obedience of you all, how you received him with fear and trembling. I rejoice, because I have complete confidence in you.”

Did you notice all the ways Paul describes his feelings toward this church? He is filled with comfort, overflowing with joy, refreshed, thankful, and confident. He even says, back in verse 4, that he has great pride in them. And behind all of it — the comfort, the joy, the confidence — is the answer found in verse 9: *“I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting.”*

It is because of their repentance that Paul can now call the grief they experienced *godly*. Godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death.

Godly Grief and Worldly Grief

So notice the distinction Paul is drawing. There is a good and godly grief, and there is a worldly grief. Which brings us back to the question: how can grief be good?

The grief Paul is describing here is clearly sorrow over sin — and I am sure that mixed into that grief are feelings of shame and guilt. Have you ever felt this kind of grief? If you are a human being, you have. We have all grieved over a wrong done or left undone. We have all felt sorry for something said or left unsaid. We have all felt deep sorrow for damage done to others, or to ourselves. So what makes godly grief godly, and what makes worldly grief worldly? The answer is not found in the feeling itself, but in what that feeling does to you — and what you do with it.

Worldly sorrow over sin tends to do one of two things. It either lives in the past, rehearsing the wrong over and over, always beating up on the self, producing further feelings of worthlessness. Or it turns outward and attacks anything or anyone perceived as the source of that guilt and shame. Simply put: when worldly sorrow is confronted with sin, it does not repent — it self-justifies, and attacks whoever dared raise the issue. And if God himself is the one making a person feel guilty and ashamed, then the most natural response of worldly sorrow is to get rid of God. We live in a culture that works very hard to box God out of everyday life precisely for this reason — so that one does not have to face the discomfort of sorrow over sin. The consequence, as Paul says, is death, because life without God is death.

But this very uncomfortable feeling of sorrow over sin can be transformed into something godly. Grief can be good. Here is how: grief over sin becomes good and godly when that grief, through repentance, draws you near to God. Worldly grief leads you away from God. Godly grief draws you near to him.

Paul does not rejoice merely at the Corinthians' act of repentance, but at what repentance brought them: a repentance that leads to salvation. That is repentance — one of the great gifts of the gospel. Grief over sin becomes godly when sin is recognized, confessed, turned away from, and the sinner turns toward the Lord. And the salvation Paul speaks of here as the outcome of repentance is God's forgiveness leading to life — a changed self, a restored fellowship with God, and a greater love for Christ. The power of the gospel transforms grief over sin through the work of repentance.

So if you are carrying a weight of guilt and shame this morning — if you have tried to ignore it, explain it away, justify it, or bury it beneath busyness and distraction, and it is still there — do not run from that grief. Do not harden your heart against it. Do not silence it. Let that grief do its God-given work. Let it drive you to repentance. Bring your sin into the light of a holy and righteous God. Confess it to the Lord. Turn from it, and turn toward Christ. For the same God who convicts is also the God who forgives. And when grief leads you to Christ, what once felt like a crushing burden becomes the doorway to grace, forgiveness, restoration, and life.

That is why Paul can say that godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret. The grief is painful, but the destination is glorious.

A Broader Principle: Godly and Worldly Emotions

Now, building on this distinction between godly grief and worldly grief, I want to press the principle a bit further. If the emotion of grief over sin can be lived in either a godly or a worldly way, the same can be said of nearly every human emotion. There is a godly anger and an ungodly anger. A godly grief over the death of a loved one and a worldly grief. A godly response to disappointment and an ungodly one. Nearly every feeling or emotion you have carries that same potential — to be godly or worldly — depending on what it does to you, what you do with it, and how it is experienced in light of God’s word. Does that emotion direct you toward the Lord — toward his strength, his power, his comfort — or does it direct you toward the world, or inward upon yourself alone?

There is a godly response to felt emotions, and there is a worldly response. Our passage today illustrates this beautifully with two examples I want to draw out.

Godly Love and Worldly Love

The first is love. The word itself does not appear in chapter 7, but the chapter is saturated with it. Godly love is visible on nearly every line. Let me walk through the passage and show you what I mean, contrasting what Paul demonstrates with what worldly love tends to do instead.

“We have taken advantage of no one.” Godly love seeks the good of the other and maintains integrity. Worldly love exploits — it uses access, trust, and intimacy as leverage.

“I do not say this to condemn you.” Godly love corrects without condemnation. Worldly love corrects in order to wound.

“You are in our hearts, to die together and to live together.” Godly love is covenant love — committed and faithful regardless of circumstances. Worldly love is contractual, and it ends when the terms are no longer favorable.

“I am acting with great boldness toward you.” Godly love speaks truth. Worldly love flatters.

“We were afflicted at every turn — fighting without and fear within.” Godly love endures hardship for the sake of the beloved. Worldly love loves when it is easy and leaves when it is not.

“For even if I made you grieve with my letter, I do not regret it.” Godly love seeks the good of the other even when doing so risks the relationship — it will confront sin. Worldly love enables sin, because it will not risk the relationship by telling the truth.

“I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting.” Godly love rejoices in the beloved’s flourishing. Worldly love keeps score and rejoices at being proven right.

“Whatever boasts I made to him about you, I was not put to shame.” Godly love speaks well of others. Worldly love tells others of a person’s failures.

“His affection for you is even greater.” Godly love grows deeper through difficulty. Worldly love withers under it.

“I rejoice, because I have complete confidence in you.” Godly love always moves toward reconciliation. Worldly love remains suspicious.

Taken all together: godly love seeks the good of the other, corrects without condemnation, is faithful, speaks truth, endures hardship, rejoices in the beloved’s flourishing, speaks well of others, seeks reconciliation, and grows deeper through the years. Worldly love corrects in order to win, exploits intimacy for advantage, leaves when things get difficult, flatters rather than tells the truth, enables sin to preserve comfort, keeps score, broadcasts failures, and ultimately withers and dies.

Godly Pride and Worldly Pride

The second example I want to draw from this passage is pride. Notice what Paul says back in verse 4: *“I have great pride in you.”*

Did Paul not know Proverbs 16:18 — *“Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall”*? Throughout Scripture, pride is identified again and again as one of the great sins that leads to ruin. So how can Paul say without any apparent hesitation, *I have great pride in you*?

The answer is that there is a godly pride and a worldly pride.

Worldly pride always produces spiritual blindness, because it looks at everything good in a person’s life and attributes it entirely to the self. *Look at what I have done.* Worldly pride cannot see God’s hand in anything. And in the same way, it cannot acknowledge its own failures. When life goes wrong — when suffering comes, relationships fracture, or failures mount — worldly pride has a ready answer: it was someone else’s fault. It always plays the victim, blind to its own sin and need.

But Paul's pride is something altogether different. Look carefully at what he is proud of. He is not congratulating himself on his apostolic success. He is marveling at what God has done in broken people. The Corinthians were a mess — Paul knew it better than anyone. And yet God worked. Grace prevailed. They repented. That is what fills Paul with pride.

Godly pride is spiritual sight — a wonder at the work of God that cannot stay quiet. It is gratitude that overflows into worship. Godly pride looks at what has been accomplished and says, not *look what I have done*, but *look what God has done*.

There is a godly pride and a worldly pride, just as there is a godly love and a worldly love, and a godly grief and a worldly grief.

Bringing Every Emotion to the Lord

Are you getting the point? Under the guidance of God's word, our emotions and feelings can draw us toward the Lord, or they can lead us away. It is that movement — toward God or away from him — that makes an emotion godly or worldly. And this principle can be applied to nearly all of your emotions, including the ones that are most painful: anger, sadness, grief over loss, fear, worry, frustration, disappointment, loneliness.

Having such emotions does not represent a failure of faith. These are not signs that something has gone spiritually wrong with you. Rather, these are the very places in us that, when coupled with faith and directed by God's word, lead us into the strength, comfort, and power of the living God. What turns an emotion into a godly one is not positive thinking or willpower. It is taking that emotion — whatever it may be — and bringing it to the Lord, asking for his help.

“Lord, someone I love has cancer, and I am filled with worry and dread. Help me. Draw me near to you.” And he will. For he is the God who “comforts the downcast” (2 Corinthians 7:6), and even as you walk through the valley of the shadow of death, *“your rod and your staff, they comfort me”* (Psalm 23:4). You will not walk that road alone.

“Lord, I worked so hard for that position, and it was not given to me. I am so frustrated. Help me. Draw me near to you.” And he will. For he has promised that *“for those who love God all things work together for good”* (Romans 8:28), and that *“a man's heart plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps”* (Proverbs 16:9). What feels like a closed door is still in his hands.

“Lord, I have lost a loved one, and I feel so alone. Help me.” And he will. For Jesus himself has said, *“I will never leave you nor forsake you”* (Hebrews 13:5), and *“Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age”* (Matthew 28:20).

“Lord, I have sinned, and in that sin I have hurt others, hurt myself, and dishonored your name. Help me.” And he will. For *“if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness”* (1 John 1:9).

So whatever you are carrying this morning, carry it to him. Let him do what only he can do. The God who met Paul in Macedonia and sent Titus to him at just the right moment is the same God who meets you here, now. He is not far from you.

Closing Prayer

Lord, we confess that we have not always handled our emotions in godly ways. We have let grief harden us. We have let anger consume us. We have let worry pull us away from you rather than drive us toward you. Forgive us for the times we have taken the pain you meant to draw us near and used it instead as a reason to pull away.

And now, Lord, some of us are carrying a weight of guilt and shame this morning — a sin we cannot seem to put down, something we have tried to ignore, explain away, or bury, and it is still there. We bring it to you now. We name it before you in the silence of our hearts.

Lord, meet us in this grief. Do not let us stay in worldly sorrow — rehearsing the wrong, beating ourselves up, or running from you. Turn this grief into something godly. Lead us to repentance. And remind us that the same God who convicts is the God who forgives, and that the same Savior who exposes our sin has already borne our sin on the cross.

For those of us who are afraid this morning — carrying worry over someone we love, or dread about what lies ahead — Lord, meet us here. You are the God who comforts the downcast. Remind us that we will not walk this road alone.

For those of us who are frustrated, disappointed, or feeling the sting of a door that has closed — Lord, meet us here. Remind us that what feels like a dead end is still in your hands, and that you are working all things together for good for those who love you.

For those of us who are grieving a loss and feel the silence of an empty place that will not be filled — Lord, meet us here. You have promised that you will never leave us, never forsake us. Let that promise be more real to us today than the ache we are feeling.

And Lord, as we go from this place, teach us to love the way Paul loved — courageously and honestly, without exploiting, without enabling sin, without keeping score. Give us love that speaks truth, endures hardship, and grows deeper through difficulty. Give us cross-shaped love, rooted not in what we can get but in what you have already given.

We thank you that you are not far from any one of us. That just as you met Paul in Macedonia — exhausted, afraid, afflicted at every turn — you meet us here, now, in this room. You sent Titus at just the right moment. You will send what we need at just the right moment too.

So we trust you. We bring you our grief, our fear, our frustration, our guilt, our loneliness, and our love. Take all of it. Do with it what only you can do.

In the name of Jesus, who bore our grief and carried our sorrow, and who rose so that our grief might become godly, and our godly grief might become glory — Amen.