When God's Word Calls You Out
2 Corinthians 7:2-16

For one week before Advent begins, we're back in 2 Corinthians. In fact, we're going back to 54AD.

And Paul was in Ephesus, where he'd heard reports of things going badly at the church in Corinth. So he sent Timothy, his co-worker, across to check things out. And Timothy came back and confirmed just how bad things were. So, in response, Paul went to try and sort things out. But that visit went badly, with one individual in particular being openly hostile to him. Worse still, the rest of the church failed to back Paul. And so Paul withdrew, wounded, back to Ephesus. And from there he wrote them a letter, that's now been lost. But it was a letter Paul says he wrote in tears and that clearly, forthrightly, set out the problem and called on them to repent - to turn away from the path they were heading down. And Titus, another co-worker took the letter. And Paul and Titus agreed that if Titus could get away from Corinth before winter, and the close of the sailing season, they'd meet at Troas, and if not in Macedonia.

But Titus never showed at Troas, and so Paul went on to Macedonia. And in today's passage, Paul describes the anxiety and agitation he felt waiting for news from Titus. Verse 5, 'For even when we came into Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were afflicted at every turn - fighting without and fear within.' So, on top of the usual conflicts with those who opposed the gospel, he also faced his own fears about the state of the church in Corinth. Faced with the pull of the culture around them, or these new leaders who had pitched up, had they compromised, or even abandoned the faith completely? Or, had they held fast to the truth about Christ? In short, had they listened to his letter, and changed course, or were they still heading down the wrong road?

Which is great, but what's that got to do with you? Well, it's this: there can be times when you and I, like these Corinthians, are heading down the wrong road, but just like them we don't necessarily want to be told that. Or, there are also times when, like Paul, we can feel discouraged or fearful for the future - for others we care about, or for ourselves. And this passage begins with people going the wrong way, and discouragement and anxiety, but ends with joy. And the question is, what makes the difference, and what can do it for you?

The Challenge of God's Word
Look at v2, 'Make room in your hearts for us.' Now, have you ever experienced a relationship that's become strained? Because when that happens this other person just seems closed off, don't they. Emotionally, they're like a shuttered shop. The door's locked, the lights are off and the shutters are down: 'we're closed'. And that's what these Corinthian Christians felt like to Paul. And he's asking them to open up.

But this wasn't simply a personal issue between Paul and them. Paul's not responding the way he is because he's like some jilted boyfriend whose pride has been hurt, because they prefer other leaders to him. It's much deeper than that. You see, to receive or reject any of the original apostles, including Paul, was to receive or reject the gospel, the true, original message of Christianity. So, if in Corinth, they're saying, 'well frankly Paul, we don't like what you're teaching, we prefer more of a feel-good message' or, 'we've moved on to other more motivational speakers' that wasn't simply a matter of personalities. That was them saying, 'Paul, we want a different gospel, a different Jesus.' To bring down the shutters on Paul was to bring down the shutters on Christ.

Which is why Paul wrote to them as firmly as he did. Look at v12: ‘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.’

And most commentators agree that when Paul talks of ‘the one who suffered the wrong’ he’s talking about himself. And ‘the one who did the wrong’ is the person who opposed him and was undermining both him and the gospel. And yet, Paul’s saying he didn’t write that letter to get even with that guy. He wrote it so that, as a church, all of them could see where their loyalty really lay. That ultimately, it wasn’t with the celebrity or spin of a false gospel, a false version of Christianity, but with Paul and the unglamorous true gospel.

So this was about how they would respond to the truth, even when it challenged them.

So, let me ask you, how do you respond when you’re challenged by God’s word? You see, when God’s word, either directly or through a friend, or maybe even through the circumstances of your life, challenges you over some behaviour or attitude, maybe over your lifestyle, like how you use your money, or your sex life, or your speech, or your thinking, do you make room for it and welcome it, or like the Corinthians, do the shutters tend to come down and subtly you’re saying to God, ‘sorry, we’re closed’?

Now, of course, one of the things you have to think about is why would you be open at all? I mean, why should you be receptive to God addressing areas in your life? Well, one of the interesting things Paul does here is to reassure them about his motives. Verses 2-3, ‘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.’ And he does that because when a relationship’s strained it’s easy to question the other’s motives, isn’t it. Why did she say that? Why did he do that?

But the truth is, we can do that with God, when his word or the circumstances of our lives challenge us. 'Why would you let this happen to me?’ Or, ‘God’s supposed to be a God of love, and no God of love would ask me to stop doing that or start doing this, it’s for me to decide.’

And Paul’s saying, ‘I know what I wrote was hard to hear, but it wasn’t to condemn you. *You’re in my heart*. I love you.’ And when you genuinely love someone, sometimes you have to say the hard stuff to them, don’t you? And it’s precisely because God loves you, more than anyone ever can, that God will say the hard stuff to you.

The question is, how do you respond when he does?

The Response of our Hearts

I saw a press article this week that described how the Head of News at the BBC had told LGBTQ staff that they were going to have to get used to hearing points of view they didn’t like.

But it’s not just pressure groups that don’t like that, none of us do. Just ask yourself, how do you like it when someone critiques your life, or your choices? And how do you respond when God does it, through his word, and confronts you with some sin, some area that’s out of whack in your life?

And Paul gives us two ways we can respond. Verses 9-10, ‘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.’ So the Corinthians responded to Paul’s confrontation with godly grief. But they could have responded with worldly grief - and so could you and I. But that, Paul says, leads to death.

Think how that works. You read something in the Bible, or a Christian friend says something to you, or you hear a sermon, or your conscience pricks you, and you immediately feel challenged, maybe even got at, because you know it’s telling you you’re wrong. You’re being called out on something. And a worldly grief is to feel upset or annoyed by that: ‘No one has the right to say I’m wrong. It’s for me to decide what I do with my life.’ Or, maybe you get caught doing something you shouldn’t be doing, and you get really down as a result. But the reason you’re down is that now you’ve got to give this thing up; or you realise it reflects badly on you, and people won’t think so well of you. But of course, when that happens, what we’re really grieving over is not our sin, but our pride, our image, that’s taken a knock. Or we can be upset when challenged because we think, ‘listen, no one understands what my life is like’. But what’s that, if not self-pity.

And Paul says that kind of grief has a very negative outcome: death. Something dies on the inside: the slow death of conscience, or receptivity to God’s word or other people. But also, if you’re not yet a Christian, the danger of eternal death. Because if you close your heart to God and his voice now, who’s to say your response is going to be any better in the future?

And yet, Paul says, there is a better way. And these Corinthians take it. That when we’re challenged by God’s word, or faithful friends, and they tell us things we don’t want to hear, we respond with godly grief. A grief that leads to repentance - a turning away from the wrong and embracing the right. Verse 9, ‘You were grieved into repenting.’ Verse 10 again, ‘Godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret.’

Now, sometimes you might hear people say something like, ‘God would never want us to feel unhappy, and if stopping doing this makes me unhappy, it can’t be of him.’ Or, because of current culture, we can think we should be free to do whatever we want to do, and no one has the right to say otherwise. And Paul is saying, no, there is such a thing as godly grief. There are times when our Creator challenges us and the only right response to past or present choices is grief. It’s to realise, ‘That was wrong. I’m wrong. And I grieve that I’ve done it.’

And as they digested Paul’s letter, that’s how these Corinthians responded. They saw the way they had badly treated Paul and the gospel, which seemed right at the time, and they grieved it.

But, if worldly grief has an outcome - death, godly grief does too - repentance: this turning away from what’s wrong. And Paul says it leaves no regrets. Because far from leaving you sinking in self-pity, or dented pride, godly grief creates the circumstances where good things really begin to happen. Verse 9, ‘You felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us.’ Because godly grief helps you realise, ‘While I didn’t want to hear this, that I’m wrong and the way I’ve been living is wrong, now I see this was for my gain, not my loss.’

The Power of Repentance

Look at v8-9 again: ‘For even if I made you grieve with my letter, I do not regret it - though I did regret it, for I see that the 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.’

So Paul had had regrets about sending that letter. And if you’ve ever had to have a hard conversation with someone, you’ll understand: Have I just made everything worse? Was that totally counter productive?

But as Titus fills Paul in, it confirms to him this was absolutely the right thing to do, not simply because what he wrote was true, but because he can see all the good flowing from it. And sometimes, in the mountains, you have to take the hard path if you want to get the great view, don’t you. Sometimes a parent has to say hard things, or a leader take tough decisions, or a surgeon cause temporary pain, if they want to see good come. And so God will sometimes show us stuff about ourselves that we don’t want to see, precisely because he wants the best for us.

And here, Paul describes some of that best, some of the fruit growing out of their repentance.

Verse 10, ‘Godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation.’ So worldly grief brings death, but godly grief leads to life - to salvation. Why? Because it’s the doorway into the life Christ came to give us. Right at the start of his ministry Jesus proclaimed, “*Repent* and believe in the gospel.” (Mk 1:15), because if we’re heading down the wrong path in life, the first step to getting on the right one is to turn around. And if Jesus, who knows us better than we know ourselves, calls us to turn, we’d be foolish not to, wouldn’t we?

And the reason we’d be foolish is that God doesn’t tell us hard things out of spite, but out of love. You see, if Paul could say of these Corinthians in v3, ‘You are in our hearts, to die together and live together’, how much more can the Lord Jesus say that of you? That you’re in his heart. And he doesn’t just die *with* you, he loved you so much he died for you. And of all people, he knows about tough, painful moral decisions, where the good lies on the other side. As the Writer to the Hebrews says, ‘Who for the joy that was set before him, [he] endured the cross’ (Heb 12:2). And he took the hard, infinitely costly decision of the cross, not because of his sin, but ours, that in his death we might find life.

And yet, repentance doesn’t just turn us around and set us on the path of salvation, but of transformation. Because repentance isn’t a been there, done that, got the T-shirt, once and for all experience at the start of Christian faith. It’s an every day thing. That whenever the Lord puts his finger on something where we’re wrong, and we begin to get uncomfortable, we don’t pull down the shutters, instead we listen and receive, and with his help, turn from our sin, and towards him. And as we do, step by step, we become more like him.

Verse 11, ‘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 these Corinthians read Paul’s letter and felt indignation. Not an indignation, an anger, of ‘how can Paul treat us like this?’, but an anger that they had treated him the way they had. Then Paul says they experienced fear - a fear of God and a fear to now do what’s right. Then he says they experienced longing: they wanted, really wanted, to put things right with Paul. And then there was

zeal - ‘zeal for me’ he says in v7, not a zeal for their injured pride, but for Paul and the gospel he represented.

But notice how ‘others-focused’ all that energy released by repentance is. They’re not the focus now, are they? And that’s because repentance takes our eyes off ourselves, and what we want, and puts them on God and what he wants.

And, it puts them on those we may have hurt. And as we do that, we become just that bit more like Jesus, because he always chose what his Heavenly Father wanted. Because he came, not for himself, not to be served, but to serve and to give himself a ransom for many. And it’s knowing the Son of God served us by giving himself for us, that gives us the power to humble ourselves in repentance. Because you realise, he humbled himself, not for those he’d sinned against, because there aren’t any, but for those who’d sinned against him. He humbled himself for me. And that is deeply humbling.

But godly grief that leads to repentance has one final effect: ‘What punishment!’ You see, when you realise your own sin, and how you, or those you’ve enabled, have wronged others, it makes you much more sensitive to the injustices of sin - because your eyes have been opened to it. And so you’ll work for justice and long for justice to be done.

So, are there any areas in your life which the Lord is calling on you to address? And if there are, how are you responding? Are you allowing his word to do its work and see all the fruit that comes from that, or are you tempted to pull the shutters down?

But to finish, repentance doesn’t just produce fruit in *your* life. It does the same in those around you. Verses 5-6, ‘We were afflicted at every turn - fighting without and fear within. But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus.’

The Source of Encouragement

So Paul was fighting discouragement and fear, and then Titus arrives telling him all the good that was happening down there in Corinth. And what does that do for Paul? It encourages him. Verse 6, ‘But God, who comforts the downcast…’ comforted him. But how does God do it? Through Titus. And who had encouraged Titus? These repentant Corinthians.

You see, maybe for you you’re not resisting God’s correction. Maybe for you it’s that you feel discouraged, or fearful for the future. Maybe you’ve got regrets over the past, or feel like you don’t deserve God’s love. Well, look what turned it around for Paul: it was talking to someone.

Verse 13, ‘Therefore we are comforted. And besides our own comfort, we rejoiced still more at the joy of Titus, because his spirit had been refreshed by you all.’ You see, it’s not just COVID that’s contagious is it? Encouragement and joy are too. And it began with these Corinthians hearing and obeying God’s word. And that encouraged Titus, and then Titus encouraged Paul. Because encouragement just has this power to spread.

So if you’re feeling down, don’t withdraw, which is always the temptation. Lean in and talk to a friend who can remind you of the gospel. That God loves you, not because you’re perfect, but because Jesus is. That he has you safe in his hands, not because you’re getting everything right, but because Jesus did. Find your Titus and let them remind you of all that God has and is doing for you.

And for the rest of us, who can you do that for? Titus sees God at work and goes and tells Paul. So, ask yourself, do you tend to talk more about what God isn't doing, and you see everything that's wrong at work, or home, or church? Or, like Titus, do you see all the evidences of Jesus' grace, all the places He is at work, and encourage those around you with that?

Choose the first, and you'll be a super-spreader of gloom, choose the other and you get to be a part of the 'But God…' A super-spreader of Jesus' comfort and joy.