Good reasons for joy (2 Corinthians 7:5-16)

People search for happiness in the wrong places and find nothing that truly satisfies. Some are simply discontent. Others face true struggles. Christians are not immune to being discouraged, depressed or downhearted, as is seen in the life of the apostle Paul. But in the midst of discouragement, two words stand out in the present text: comfort (or encouragement) and joy. Insights from Paul's encouragement can help each of us battle the discouragements that come in life.

1. **Paul knew God to be the source of comfort (7:5-7).**

Verse 6 emphasizes God as comforter. This is not a new theme for Paul in this letter, cf. 1:3-7. This conviction led Paul to anticipate comfort from God in His timing.

a. Concern for the Corinthians and for Titus had caused Paul great distress (v 5). There were serious problems in the church and Titus had not returned from his trip to Corinth when Paul expected.
b. God used specific factors to encourage Paul (vv 6-7): the eventual safe arrival of Titus, the positive reception of Titus in Corinth, and the changing attitude in the Corinthians. As a result Paul's distress was turned to great joy.

Note that God does not prevent discouragement. He allows discouragement but also provides the comfort and encouragement which we need, when we need it. No temptation exceeds the capacity which He gives to endure, and He provides a way to bear up through such times. Therefore, look for the comfort which God offers.

2. **Paul's joy was based upon a conviction that godly sorrow leads to repentance and life (7:8-12).**

Paul's joy at the response of the Corinthians did not come from selfish motives, but from a conviction that they needed to change <u>for their own good</u>. Since they had shown such change, he could truly have joy.

a. Paul's previous letter had worked in them the right type of sorrow (vv 8-10).

There is much debate as to the identity of this letter, which is often called the "severe letter". Although it is not important for understanding this text, I personally prefer to understand it as the letter we know as First Corinthians.

Paul knew that strong corrective words could produce two kinds of sorrow: a sorrow in accordance with God and a sorrow in accordance with the world. Like the contrast between earthly and heavenly wisdom (James 3:13-18), worldly sorrow is associated with envy, selfishness, and pride, but godly sorrow is pure, submissive, and sincere. Worldly sorrow grieves at getting caught or being made to look bad. Godly sorrow mourns grieving God. Worldly sorrow leads to death. Godly sorrow produces true repentance which leads to salvation.

Paul had joy because he knew that his letter had produced godly sorrow. He did not regret that his "severe letter" was hurtful, because God had used his letter to produce the change that was needed in the lives of the Corinthians.

b. This change in the Corinthians was a part of Paul's purpose in the previous letter right from the start. His corrective words went beyond the immediate issue (vv 11-12.)

This does not mean, that Paul had no interest in correcting the offender. This is a Hebraism, like "I desire mercy, not sacrifice", which emphasizes the priority of one item (mercy or the change in the Corinthians) over another (sacrifice or the correction of a single offender). The greater issue in Paul's thinking was the change in attitude in the Corinthians.

God had used Paul's letter to produce in the Corinthians a number of positive results. Their attitude showed that the body as a whole was healthy and hence was able to deal adequately with a sick member.

Paul's distress had to do in large part with his concern for the Corinthians. He could have avoided confronting the sin issues in the church. But if he had done so, there would have been no basis for true joy. He ultimately had true joy only because he initially hand done what was right.

Doing what is right establishes a basis by which we can have true joy. If we avoid doing what is right in order to avoid distressing ourselves, then we are also robbing ourselves of a source of true joy.

3. **Godly obedience blesses others** (7:13-16).

a. The obedience of the Corinthians encouraged Titus and gave him joy (verse 13), which in turn encouraged Paul and gave him joy. Cf. 3 John 4. We certainly want good things for people. But their choice to follow Christ and be solely obedient to Him gives more joy than anything else.
b. For Paul the response of the Corinthians also proved his confidence in them to be right. He had boasted to Titus about the them and was thrilled that he had been proven right. By responding well to Paul's instructions, the Corinthians demonstrated that they had the Spirit of God in them. Their response was proof that they truly were children of God. For that reason Paul rejoiced that he could have such confidence.

When a person consciously disobeys a clear command of Scripture, then they are either fighting against the Spirit and inviting God's judgment, or they do not have the Spirit and are therefore not a child of God.

We are left with two special challenges: (1) Consider the greater principle behind Paul's joy, i.e., he put others before himself. Only by putting others before ourselves can we anticipate having true joy. Are we doing things for the sake of others or for ourselves? (2) Remember that God is the source of all comfort. When we need comfort, when we lack joy, turn to God. Turning to anything else for comfort is idolatry. Turn to God for comfort and He will produce the fruit of joy in your life.

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