

"What the Gospel Feels Like When Your Stomach Is In Knots"

2 Corinthians 7:5-7

6 June May 2021

Have you ever emailed someone and later on began to second-guess what you said in the email? Or, you sent a text message to someone and you began wondering if the person you sent it to would *hear your heart* behind the text message? Have you ever done that and then began to wonder how they would receive what you said? Would they be hurt? Would they get angry? Will this be the end of the relationship? And then what happens? All that wondering gets your stomach all in knots, right?

That happened to the apostle Paul once. He fired off an email to the church in Corinth and then he began to wonder how they would receive it. Actually, he sent his friend Titus with a letter. And after he sent Titus, Paul began to wonder: "*Was I too harsh with them in my letter? Are they angry? Is this going to cause a church split? Will they hear my heart behind my letter?*" And all of these swirling thoughts and questions led Paul to panic a little. He began chewing his fingernails. Pacing the floor. His stomach was all in knots. It was stressing him out, so much so that he couldn't even do ministry!

I'm sure none of you have ever been in a situation where you were stressed about a relationship and you started chewin' your nails and pacing the floor and your stomach was all in knots. I'm sure this is just relegated to apostles in the first century, right? But it's not, is it? It's a timeless problem. But the good news is that God is not indifferent to us and the things that concern us. He actually cares. And He loves us so much that He responds when His children's stomachs are all in knots.

And what we'll see today is that-

GOD LOVES TO SHOW HIS KINDNESS FOR HIS KIDS THROUGH HIS KIDS.

That's what we'll see in our text today. God's kindness- in the form of encouragement and comfort-moving from God, to the Corinthian church, then to Titus, and then finally to Paul. So, turn in your Bibles to 2 Corinthians 7 and we'll see what happened to Paul that time his stomach was all in knots over an email that he sent. And as you turn there, turn also to 2 Corinthians 2:12. We're gonna start in chapter 2 and then jump over to chapter 7. But first, let me explain the context a little more before we read the passage.

There was some guy in the Corinthian church who had been in some unrepentant sin. We don't know who or what it was. Some scholars think it is the man in 1 Corinthians 5 who was involved in an inappropriate relationship. Maybe it was. I personally think it was a man who was publicly undermining Paul's ministry and apostleship. We'll look more at this situation next week.

So, Paul sent a "painful letter" to the Corinthians. He talks about this in 2 Corinthians chapter 2. After Paul wrote 1 Corinthians, and before he wrote 2 Corinthians, he wrote this "painful letter," which we don't have any copies of, where he rebuked the church and was stern with them. Then, he sent his good friend Titus to deliver this "painful letter" letter to the church.

And then Paul had to wait. And wait. And wait. He didn't have email. He couldn't text Titus to see how the church responded to this letter. He couldn't call Titus after Titus got checked into his hotel room. Paul just had to wait. And while he waited, Paul started thinking, "*I wonder how they'll respond? Will my letter just cause even more division? Maybe I shouldn't have sent that letter? Maybe I was too harsh?*" These are the thoughts that are going through Paul's mind as he waited for Titus to come back from Corinth with a report on the church.

So, we're gonna start in chapter 2 and then jump over to chapter 7, okay?

LOOK AT CHAPTER 2, VERSE 17...

When I came to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ, even though a door was opened for me in the Lord, my spirit was not at rest because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I took leave of them and went on to Macedonia.

LOOK AT CHAPTER 7, 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. 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.

In chapter 2, Paul started to tell the Corinthians what his life was like as he waited to hear back from Titus, but Paul got distracted. This was a Holy Spirit-inspired, "*Squirrel!*" Paul gets distracted, and he goes off on this "theological goldmine" in between ch. 2 and ch. 7. We have benefitted greatly from this

"Squirrel!" moment, because the Holy Spirit has inspired Paul to take this long detour and what he says in between is some of the most profound things in Scripture.

But Paul picks up the story again in chapter 7. Notice that in chapter 2, Paul says that he had no rest for *his spirit* and then in chapter 7, he says that he had no rest in *his body*. In other words, he was completely wiped out. Body and soul. Stressed. Exhausted. Worried. Concerned. Depleted. He had a door open up for the Gospel when he was in Troas, but he was so concerned about the Corinthians, that he took off for Macedonia hoping to find Titus.

And when he arrived in Macedonia, everywhere he turned, there was affliction. So, ministry in Macedonia could be boiled down to: *fighting without, fears within*. Body and soul taking a toll. And yet, right in the middle of all this drama and affliction and suffering and anxiety and pressures, God sends Titus to recalibrate Paul's heart. We see that in verse 6: "*But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus...*"

"*But, God.*" Those are some of the most beautiful words in Scripture! "*But, God.*" No matter what you are going through in your life, there is always a "*But, God*" that is coming your way. God has a way of coming in on His own timing to reassure and comfort our hearts.

Paul is suffering. And God comes to him, not in some mountain top experience, but in the everyday stuff of life and ministry. He comes to him in the hard stuff of life.

So, the pain and suffering that you are experiencing, and the weakness that it reduces you to, that is the very place where God meets you, to comfort you. That's the place where His grace meets you. Not in your self-sufficiency, but in your weakness, in your "*fighting without, fears within*," in your "*I just don't think I can go on.*"

That means that weakness is our home base. It's the platform in which we experience everything else in life. Weakness, affliction, suffering, stomach in knots, feeling the blahs-and-the blues, smack dab in the middle of "*I just can't got on*," is **where** we receive grace, power, encouragement, comfort.

So don't run from this because this *the* place where Jesus meets you.

The language of suffering and affliction is where Paul does his theology. And it's true for us too. It's the context in which Paul writes this, "*But, God.*"

So, if what you're experiencing right now sounds a lot like what Paul was experiencing- *tribulations, trials, pressures, hardships, troubles, persecutions, sufferings, distresses, and anxieties*- if that describes your life right now, then take heart. If you read what Paul was going through and you can look at Paul and say, "*I feel ya, bro. Knuckles.*"- if that's you, just know that at some point, in God's timing, there's a "*But, God*" coming your way.

Hang in there and hang onto God's promises. There's a "*But God*" coming your way to help recalibrate your heart in the middle of all your troubles. One day, you will be able to say along with Paul, something like:

"I was so stressed out. I couldn't eat. I couldn't sleep. I didn't see how any of what I was going through could end up being some Romans 8:28-good, but God..."

"I was so hopeless. Down in the dumps. I could barely get out of bed. I didn't think I'd make it another day, but God..."

"I was so overwhelmed. There was so much to do. I felt paralyzed, but God..."

There's a "*But God*" coming your way, some day, to help recalibrate your heart in the middle of all your tribulations, trials, pressures, hardships, troubles, persecutions, sufferings, distresses, and anxieties.

How do I know this? 1) Because I have experienced this throughout my entire life! I could fill books with all the "*But, God's*" I've enjoyed in my life! And, 2) I know this because this is who our God is! God's word tells me. Earlier, Paul described God as "*the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction...*" (2 Corinthians 1:3-4). This is who our God is and this is His job description! He is the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, stress, drama, sorrow, pain, trials, troubles, etc.

The word translated here as "comfort" sometimes is translated as "encouragement." It means to "cheer up, to console, to speak in a friendly manner." In fact, it's the word that Jesus Himself used to describe

the Holy Spirit! In John 14, Jesus uses the noun form of this word. He said that He was returning to the Father, but that he would send "The Helper"- the Holy Spirit. That's the same word here for "comfort." This is what the Holy Spirit does for God's children! He helps us.

And the simplest prayer that you can pray is, "*Help me, Holy Spirit!*" And when you pray that, you are not going against the desires of the Spirit. You are asking Him to do His job description. You are asking Him to do what He loves to do!

Understand this: The Spirit of God helps us and comforts and encourages us in a myriad of ways. He uses the ordinary means of grace- the preaching of God's word, the Lord's Supper, baptism, and prayer. Those are the ordinary means of His grace. That's the way He normally helps us. But, the Spirit also uses friends, and books, and phone calls, and text messages, and blog posts, and *Instagram* stories, etc. He uses whatever it takes to bring you comfort and encouragement. He's committed to your comfort! The Holy Spirit is committed to your encouragement! Believe that!

This is what the Holy Spirit does. His "to-do" list looks like this:

1. *Comfort.*
2. *Comfort.*
3. *Comfort.*

The Holy Spirit is ready to persuade you of God's love today. He longs to comfort you and encourage you and tell you that your Father in Heaven loves you, and delights in you, and is well-pleased with you, and has thoughts of tenderness and kindness toward you. And He wants you to feel it and sense it overwhelmingly. The Holy Spirit is cheering you on today!

This is what the Holy Spirit does. He comforts, He helps, He encourages, He consoles, He cheers God's children on and He cheers them up. And He does all of that "helping" for the *downcast*, Paul tells us in verse 6. The Greek word that gets translated here as "downcast" typically gets translated as "humble" in the New Testament. The idea here is one of destitution or being knocked down to the ground by life.

Interestingly, it's the same word used in Matthew 11 where Jesus tells us that He is gentle and lowly. We'll come back to how Jesus uses this word *lowly* a bit later.

So, God comforts the downcast, those who feel like they have been knocked down by life. He comes alongside and consoles, and encourages, and strengthens, and refreshes. God is the God of all comfort who comforts the downcast. He's the God of all, "*come alongside you and refresh you.*" The God of all "*I'm with you, right beside you, holding your hand, with My arm around you, helping you, encouraging you.*"

In other words, He's cheering you on! Wow! Picture God the Father on the sidelines of your life, running up and down, cheering you on, and encouraging you! Picture Him saying, "*You can do it, buddy! I'm with you. Don't be discouraged. Lift your head high. Don't fear. I'm with you!*" What a picture of God! Cheering His kids on saying, "*Y'all can do it! I'm with you!*"

Listen, God loves to cheer His kids on! He loves to encourage us. And-

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God loves to use His own kids to encourage His kids. And Paul experienced that first-hand from his friend Titus.

LOOK AT VERSE 6 AGAIN...

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.

Paul and Titus finally met up at the *Starbucks* in Macedonia, and Titus had some good news: the Corinthians received Paul's letter with open arms! They weren't mad at Paul for his "painful letter." They actually longed to see Paul again. They missed him, after all, he planted the church in Corinth. As we'll see next week, they responded appropriately to his letter. There was Gospel-repentance.

And all of this brought joy and encouragement and comfort to Paul! This whole situation is proof that God loves to show His kindness for His kids through His kids. The Corinthians encouraged Titus. They refreshed his spirit. And Titus took all of that comfort and encouragement and refreshment and he passed it on to his good buddy, the apostle Paul.

This is a picture of what a church family should be like. I really love what Ray Ortland says about the ministry of encouragement spreading like wildfire in a church family:

"I have never met anyone suffering from too much encouragement in Christ. Have you?... Our biblical authenticity is at stake here — whether we are overflowingly encouraging to one another. Encouragement is what the gospel feels like as it moves from one believer to another. The ministry of encouragement, therefore, isn't optional or just for people with a knack for it. Real encouragement has authority over us all. It deserves nothing less than to set the predominant tone of our churches, our homes, our ministries. So, let's think it through. And then, let's get after it..."

The one thing gospel encouragement isn't is average, mediocre, ignorable. The ministry of encouragement is surprising, captivating, energizing. It does require effort and intentionality, but it also leaves us feeling exhilarated and uplifted. Is that how we walk out of our churches on a typical Sunday: exhilarated and uplifted?

When the ministry of encouragement is allowed its actual authority, and it takes over and sets the tone in a community, that is how people do walk out of church. They leave thinking, "Man alive, I needed that! It makes me want to live for Christ this week! And I can't wait for next Sunday!" And the word for that is revival.

Isn't that good? *Encouragement is what the gospel feels like as it moves from one believer to another.* Wow. If that's true, then let's think it through and then let's get after it! And you know what awaits us? Revival. Imagine that! Who wants to see revival? Perhaps the Spirit would start ushering in seasons of revival if we simply started encouraging one another? Hmmmm. Something to think about and then get after!

We want to be a church where encouragement is the norm. Where it's part of our DNA. Where people feel it and sense it often. And this is where God designed you to primarily get your encouragement. Here at Grace. So, get involved. Meet people. Serve. You need the comfort and encouragement of God that comes not just on Sunday through His word, but also through people. I love what Sam Crabtree says about affirming and encouraging people:

"If it helps you, think of it this way: geese honk encouragement and fly in formation. Skunks travel alone." (Practicing Affirmation: God-centered Praise of Those Who are Not God, p.81)

We want to be a church of geese, honking encouragement one to one another, and flying in formation. We do not want to be a church of skunks. So, let me *encourage* you today, if you've been living like a skunk, alone, isolated, then get involved. Be a part. And the Holy Spirit will meet you here, through other people, and then you can take that encouragement and pass it on to others.

And I think we do this well at Grace. We are a church of encouragers. We really care for one another. We do come alongside one another. But let's keep at it. Let's continue to come alongside one another, when our stomachs are in knots, and let's cheer one another on. Let's share the Gospel, share God's promises with each other when we have a case of the blahs and blues. And we all need it at some point, right? None of us are so mature that we don't need encouragement. None of us reach a place where we don't need encouragement any more.

And here's the thing about encouragement- *you can never be too encouraged!* You will never reach a place where you're like, *"No. I'm good. I've been encouraged so much lately, that I need you to take back that encouraging word. I've got no more room for encouragement in my heart. So, please, for the love of God, take back that encouraging word, don't send that uplifting email, quit texting me comforting words. Geesh, buddy! Stop encouraging me, okay?"*

We can never be too encouraged. God never sets a limit on encouragement in the Bible. Isn't that great? Encouragement is what the gospel feels like as it moves from one believer to another. And Paul felt the Gospel as it moved to him from his good friend Titus. It's a reminder to us that-

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So, let's think it that through. And then, let's get after it!

Maybe you feel *downcast* today? Maybe you feel destitute and knocked down by life? Maybe you have a case of the blahs and the blues? Maybe your stomach is in knots this morning? As I mentioned earlier, the word "downcast" that Paul uses in verse 6 is the same word used in Matthew 11 where Jesus tells us that He is gentle and *lowly*.

When Jesus says that He is *lowly*, He doesn't mean that He himself is *downcast*, or that He somehow is destitute, or that He has been knocked down by life. What He means that He is *humble*, that He gets down on the ground to help those who are downcast. He humbles Himself and gets down low to help those who have been knocked down by life. Jesus doesn't sit on a throne and say, "*I'm too high and lifted up to get down and help you.*" No, He Himself comes to the downcast, to lift them up. In other words, He gets down on His hands and knees to help us up. And isn't that what you're looking for in a Savior?

Let's close with some words from Dane Ortlund's book "Gentle and Lowly"-

Meek. Humble. Gentle. Jesus is not trigger-happy. Not harsh, reactionary, easily exasperated. He is the most understanding person in the universe. The posture most natural to him is not a pointed finger but open arms.

For all his resplendent glory and dazzling holiness, his supreme uniqueness and otherness, no one in human history has ever been more approachable than Jesus Christ.

No prerequisites. No hoops to jump through. The minimum bar to be enfolded into the embrace of Jesus is simply: open yourself up to him. It is all he needs. Indeed, it is the only thing he works with...

You don't need to unburden or collect yourself and then come to Jesus. Your very burden is what qualifies you to come. No payment is required; he says, "I will give you rest." His rest is gift, not transaction. Whether you are actively working hard to crowbar your life into smoothness or passively finding yourself weighed down by something outside your control, Jesus Christ's desire that you find rest, that you come in out of the storm, outstrips even your own.

"Gentle and lowly." This, according to his own testimony, is Christ's very heart. This is who he is. Tender. Open. Welcoming. Accommodating. Understanding. Willing.

If we are asked to say only one thing about who Jesus is, we would be honoring Jesus's own teaching if our answer is, gentle and lowly.

Are you downcast? Do you long for rest? Would you like to come in out of the storm? All you have to do is come. Come with the empty hands of faith. Come with your mess. Come with your fears. Come with your baggage. Come with your sin. Come with your stomach in knots. And you will find a Savior who really *is* meek. Who really *is* humble. Who really *is* tender. Who really *is* open. Welcoming. Accommodating. Understanding. Willing. Who really *is* gentle and lowly.

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And God showed His kindness for His elect kids by sending a kid- if you will- His Son, to die for us. God showed His kindness for His children by sending His one and only Son.

And that's what we're gonna celebrate at the table today: God's kindness for His kids through His Son Jesus.