

Date: November 25-26, 2023

Title: Look Up - "Look Up for Encouragement"

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 7:2-16

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Happy Thanksgiving weekend, and it is baby baptism here as well. And you probably heard the scripture read just a little bit ago and it said repentance. What says Thanksgiving weekend better than repentance? You're like, wait, how does that work? Some of us are repenting for gluttony from a few days ago. Some of us are like it means nothing to me in that way. Actually, as I was planning this fall, I realized that this was Thanksgiving weekend, obviously, and we were going to have our baptisms and dedications. I knew that this chapter fell here, and initially, my thought was that isn't really awesome that repentance is this weekend in this text because you don't really want to talk about repentance after being gluttonous for a few days and a few other things along the way. And so, it didn't make a lot of sense, but as I studied, this is part of the challenge when you teach through books because chapter seven comes after chapter six, and so it's what is here.

But as I studied it a little more, I realized that this passage has some other themes in it, and we'll come to repentance, and repentance is part of it. But one of the themes here is the theme of encouragement, especially the encouragement when we've been experiencing sorrow and hardship. In fact, here's what we see in verse six. "But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by..." Then He talks about how God comforted. And the word downcast here is one word, but the word sorrow that's used throughout this text is a Greek word that has the meaning of pain, distress, grief, and sorrow. In other words, something that isn't the way that you want it to be that causes pain and hardship.

My guess is that in this room, online, and at our different campuses, there are many of us who come to this weekend and say there are some things that aren't the way that I wish they were in my life, that there are some things that have caused pain, hardship, or have been difficult for me to go through. And here what we're told is that the God of comfort comforts the downcast. So how does that happen? The word comfort here, by the way, if you've been here throughout the series, was the word that was used in the first chapter for *God comforts us*, and it's the word *parakaléō*, and it has the same origin as the word *paraclete* that appears in John 4:10. And it's the word that's used for the Holy Spirit as one who comes alongside and comforts and the one who enables and empowers and is an encourager. And so, in this passage, it's used for encouragement and comfort. And I think what Paul is ultimately getting to here is he's saying that even when you're downcast, even when your life is filled with sorrow, there is comfort and encouragement. And that's what we're going to talk about.

But first, let me just tell you about a time when I had a couple of mishaps. This is driving. So I've had two accidents in the last 15, 20, 25 years, whatever it is. And one of them was about a year ago. I had gone with one of my sons to look at a car, and as we were leaving, I pulled out, I was driving, I stopped for the cars that were stopped in front of me, and the car behind me did not stop. I got rear-ended and my car was totaled. I wasn't hurt. So, it wasn't serious to me, but my car was totaled. And at least for me, I get kind of attached to my cars because I drive them for a really long time, usually buy them used, and drive them until they don't run anymore. They're like faithful friends who are just always there. And so, I was sad when my car got totaled and I had no control over it.

Now, I realize that that's not a very encouraging example if you're in real pain. But I purposely didn't choose something real just to make my point. I had no control over that. But about a decade ago I had another mishap with one of my cars. I was pulling into my driveway, and it had been a crazy weekend. My wife had been in the hospital and had surgery, and there were some things going on at church that I needed to get to. I was multitasking, and I pulled into my driveway. I was pulling around to park the car, and I sideswiped a parked car in the driveway. So, I did what any reasonable person would do. I went into the house and said who parked the car there? And of course, it didn't matter who parked the car there. I was at fault because I was the one driving the car. Nobody else could be blamed for that instance, that was on me entirely.

Now they both led to sorrow. One was the sorrow of a lost car. I had no control. The other led to sorrow because I thought how dumb of me to hit my own car. And yet I had no one to blame. Most accidents are somewhere in between. They're usually not, I'm completely absolved of any fault, and/or it was completely my fault. But when we have sorrow, how we respond will make a difference in our lives.

And so today, in Second Corinthians seven, I think what we see is we see two choices that can bring encouragement from sorrow. They're both counterintuitive. The first is this, and that is we can find encouragement in the face of sorrow when we choose relationships over isolation. And this is in verses 5-16. And I say this because if you know the context of Second Corinthians, Paul's the author. He wrote Second Corinthians. He wrote First Corinthians. He had helped plant the church in Corinth. He had invested himself there. Now he's not there, and he's writing a letter. He wrote First Corinthians as a corrective and Second Corinthians as an encouragement. But the people in Corinth had turned on him. Several of the people. They were following the super-apostles. You'll see that a little later if you read through the text. And what he is doing here is he's saying, even though you've turned on me, I am still believing that there's encouragement found in relationships.

Often what happens when we find sorrow is we say I'm going to not connect to anybody. But here's where we see the cycle of encouragement in verse 4. "I have spoken to you with great frankness; I take great pride in you. I am greatly encouraged..." There's the word. "...in all our troubles my joy knows no bounds." Paul was writing to encourage the Corinthians. And then we see this in verses six and seven. I read part of this earlier, but verse six says this. "But God who comforts the downcast..." Comfort is the same word as encouragement that's used earlier. "... comforted us by the coming of Titus, and not only by his coming but also by the comfort you had given him. He told us about your longing for me, your deep sorrow, your ardent concern for me, so that my joy was greater than ever."

So, what you have is the Apostle Paul trying to encourage the Corinthians. The Corinthians are encouraging Titus and Titus is encouraging Paul. Now, why is that important? Well, here's why. Do you know what a lot of us do? We say we'll encourage somebody if they encourage me. But the way encouragement works in the Christian community is when you simply say I'm going to make myself available to be an encouragement to people, then God will bring a source of encouragement into your life that may or may not be the one that you expect. But what a lot of us do is instead we say I'll only encourage if I'm encouraged, and we do kind of a version of a test that's popular on TikTok right now.

Yes, I did some research, and here's the test. It's called the bird test. Have any of you heard of this? Evidently, if you're in a dating relationship and you want to know if the person's worthy of being your like person to keep going, you can give them the bird test according to the wisdom of TikTok. The wisdom of the bird test is you're sitting in your living room or wherever and you simply say look, there's a beautiful bird outside. And if the person you're with gets up and looks out the window and takes interest, they're worthy to be your date. And if they don't, then you say sorry, you failed the bird test. You're out. You're done.

Now, you may say okay, that's ridiculous, or you might think it's wise. I'm not sure. You can decide for yourself. But sometimes people do that with friendships, with spiritual friendships, where they say I'll encourage you if you encourage me. I'll send you something if you send me something. I'll be there for you if you're there for me. And certainly, there's a human element to that that makes sense. And there's a time to say this person hasn't been responsive, but by and large, the way the spiritual community is meant to work is not by trading encouragement, but by simply giving encouragement and then receiving it as God brings it into our lives.

Don Carson, in writing about the church, said that the church is the place that natural enemies become one because they're united by something greater. And what he means by that is people who are on different sides of the political divide, different sides of socioeconomic class, come together and say we're united around something greater. The reason there's encouragement in the midst of our sorrow, sometimes within the context of relationships that take place in the spiritual community, is because we see that whatever is going on in the world, there's hope and a community that's bigger and transcends this world.

C.S. Lewis, in writing about this a couple of generations ago, said that friendships aren't as much cultivated as they are discovered. And what he meant was that you don't get friends because you seek to have friends. You get friends because you discover that you feel the same way about something. You think the same way about something. You see things the same way and the way that happens is by throwing yourself into relationships rather than isolation. When you find yourself in sorrow, that would help, especially when you say this isn't one that I caused, or I had very little cause in it.

But there's a second choice, and this is what I'm going to call repentance, choosing repentance over avoidance. This is in verses 8-10. He says, "Even if I caused you sorrow..." There's that word sorrow. "... by my letter, I do not regret it. Though I did regret it - I see that my letter hurt you, but only for a little while - yet now I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance. For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us. Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death."

Now, my guess is that when I just say the word repentance, it conjures up all kinds of images. Probably some people think about people crying and weeping and having this kind of emotional issue. But what repentance is, is not necessarily emotion. There can be sorrow with it. Recognizing that we went the wrong way. To use my goofy car analogy, I hit my own car. But here's how William Danker describes the word in his Greek lexicon. He says, "It's a serious change of mind and heart about a previous point of view or course of action."

What repentance is, is turning from one course to another course, one way of thinking to another way of thinking. Maybe a way to describe it is it's a little bit like making a U-turn. You know when you're driving somewhere and realize you're going the wrong way, you make a U-turn. You say I've got to go the other way. I've got to turn from this course of action. And if you've ever been driving and come to a place where traffic is stopped, what happens is you say can I get off? Is there an exit? Is there a way to turn even if I have to go the other way entirely to find a different route? And what that is, is it's in some ways life showing you that there are consequences and that there are natural things that you need to say I need to turn away from.

But you know what's even better than being able to find an exit in that moment if you've ever driven with your GPS on, and it tells you to get off and you say why would I get off here? That makes no sense. And you get off and then you drive up and soon you're driving along the highway and you see all the cars stopped and you just zip right by. What that is, is also a sense of a U-turn in my analogy here because what you're doing is saying I'm trusting something besides what I see, what I feel, and what I experience. I'm trusting what God is doing here and what God is saying. Because GPS, to use this analogy to its full, is like hearing the Word of God and saying, even if it doesn't make sense to what I see, think, or experience right now, I'm going to turn in a direction.

Tim Chester writes about this, and he says this. "The problem is not that I sin." Talking about our relationship with God. "Sin itself doesn't keep us from God because God is gracious and has provided a means of reconciliation through the work of his son. The problem is either I keep my distance from God because I'm choosing sin over God, or I keep my distance from God because I feel ashamed." You see, what happens for many of us is we say we don't want God's way because we don't want to be told that the way that we want to go is wrong. I don't want to be wrong. I don't like to admit that I'm wrong, or we've gone down a path so far and now we don't feel worthy. We don't feel like God could possibly forgive us. And as a result, we don't want to make the U-turn.

Tim Chester says that what we tend to do when it comes to our sin is we minimize it, we excuse it, or we indulge it. He even goes so far as to say we need to repent of our temptation. He says temptation isn't sin. But here's how he describes this. He says, "I don't say yes to temptation, but I don't say no either. I delay any decisive rejection. I hedge my bets, and it's very hard to come before God in prayer when you're entertaining a rejection of him." What he's saying is this, and that is when you in your mind are saying well, I may or may not go down this path, I may or may not make the U-turn when I come to it, what you're doing is you're actually putting distance between yourself and God.

Part of our sorrow that doesn't lead to life is when we say well, I may or may not, because then we're not saying at every turn, I'm choosing the good God of the universe who has created me and made humans thrive. I'm not choosing his way. I'm choosing my way, or I'm holding out the possibility of my way.

And what repentance is, is it's that turning and it's saying, I will choose to put myself in a place where I'm in alignment with the God of the universe. And you may think how does this work with coming to Jesus for salvation? Well, you come to God for salvation through Jesus the first time that you recognize your sin, and you say I am repenting, I'm turning, and Jesus

pays the price. But if you're a follower of Jesus, that doesn't mean that you're done repenting, because what happens is you still will make choices, and there will still be a need to turn and say my alignment isn't right. It doesn't take away your standing with God, your salvation, but it does take away your fellowship and your experience of God. And so, what needs to happen for all of us is we need to say every time that I'm out of alignment, I repent. I repent of my temptations. I would go so far as to say that there's a time each day when we sit and say where was I out of alignment? Can I make a turn? And then we repent every week in part by coming to church and just saying, God, I publicly affirm that my alignment wants to be with you, even though this week I've made some choices that have taken me far away.

See, sometimes we'll try to avoid repentance because we'll say it just happened so long ago, or it's a really small thing, or this is really going to cost me, or maybe I'll do it some other day. But what repentance is saying every time I become aware that there's a different path, I will turn away from the path I'm on and toward the path that God has put me on, that he has called me to. And if you're here and you say, look, I've trusted Christ and I don't need to repent very often anymore, can I just say that in all likelihood, that's not an indicator of your spiritual maturity that you've defeated sin, but it's an indicator that you are denying sin and you've stopped progressing in your experience of God. Because the closer you get to God, the more you are aware of all the ways that you can still be aligned with God.

You know, the real problem for many of us, and I'm among this group, is that we tend to see sin not so much as something that is destructive to us, but as a mere small offense. Here's what I mean. We're about to enter the Christmas season. Chances are wherever you live, there will be Christmas cookies all around you. Christmas cookies are a small offense. I know I should not eat three dozen Christmas cookies between now and Christmas Eve, and yet the chances are excellent that I will eat that many. Because in my mind, here's what I know about Christmas cookies. It's not healthy. It's a sugar bomb. It's not great. But if I eat one or three dozen, I'll still be here on New Year's Eve, and I'll deal with my diet in January. Come on. You know what I'm talking about.

We don't tend to see sin like cocaine. Something that can be devastating, addictive, and destructive. We see it more like a Christmas cookie. But if we understood that every time we start down the path of a little bit of gossip, a little bit of pride, a little bit of self-righteousness, a little bit of something that we say well, this isn't that big a deal. I'll turn later. If we said that is destructive to my soul, and it's not just an offense to God, but it's destructive to me and the good God of the universe created me to be someone who thrives if I'll align myself with him. What we would do is we would say, okay, I will make the U-turn every single time. But as long as we say that's no big deal, I'll deal with it later, then it doesn't seem like it will matter.

But what brings encouragement according to Second Corinthians seven is when we have sorrow that leads us to repentance. So, when we've had things happen in our lives that we say oh, that wasn't good instead of saying I'm pushing that sorrow out, I'm avoiding it, you say I'm bringing that in so that I can understand more of God's ways and bring greater alignment in my life. And that will bring comfort and encouragement in the midst of my sorrow. That's where you and I will find life. That's where we'll find relief.

Here's what I'd like to do to close our time together today. I'd like to read a little bit of the prayer of confession that's found in the Book of Common Prayer. And as I do, I just want to

pause and give you a chance to mentally make any U-turns that you might feel like God is prompting in your life today. Will you pray with me? Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in word, in thought, and in deed. We have done this by what we have done and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole hearts, nor have we loved our neighbors as ourselves. God, I ask that you bring encouragement where we feel sorrow, hope where we feel discouragement, and joy where there's been pain because we've looked up and seen what it can be to be in a relationship in the grander Christian community and to be rightly aligned with you. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Thanks for being here. Have a great week.