

GOD'S COMFORT EXPERIENCED AND EXTENDED**2 CORINTHIANS 1:1-7**

Do you know the word “cruciform”? It literally means anything shaped like a cross. The most prevalent architectural design of the old cathedrals in Europe was in a cruciform shape. In other words, they were literally built in the shape of a cross. No doubt it was a way to remind Christians back then of the greatest symbol of our faith – the cross. Many objects have been created in a cruciform shape. Works of art. The bridge there is depicted in a cruciform shape. Artists regularly utilize the shape of the cross. Many ancient swords were cruciform in design. You see the shape of the cross often in both ancient and modern jewelry. I suggest that more than just objects can be cruciform. I believe a person’s life can be cruciform. In other words, your life and mine can have about it the shape of the cross. Not literally or physically. But, instead, spiritually. When you have a cruciform – or a cross-shaped life – it means you resemble, or you look like, or you remind other people of Jesus in some way. Your actions, your attitudes, your approach to life are Christ-like.

Today, I’m excited to begin a new message series on 2 Corinthians. I’ve entitled the series, “Cruciform: Living the Cross-Shaped Life - The Message of 2 Corinthians.” Why that title? In his second letter to a group of Christians living in the Greek city of Corinth, Paul revealed a lot about himself. Scholars say this was the most personal of all Paul’s letters in the New Testament. Part of what we observe is how Paul dealt with a wide variety of issues, problems, and situations. What emerges is a wonderful portrait of what it means to live a life shaped by the cross. To look and act like Jesus authentically. To be cruciform in our attitudes, actions, and approach to all of life.

You might recall I shared a series of messages on 1 Corinthians last fall and the first part of this year. The great Christian leader, Paul, wrote both letters. He spent about 18 months in Corinth sharing the message of Jesus, discipling new converts, and getting a local church set up before he left. Corinth was a major city in the Roman Empire. It’s been described as the New York, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas of the ancient world all rolled up into one city. A trade center. A seaport. A center for the worship of idols. Big. Prosperous. Immoral. The Corinthian believers – mostly non-Jews or Gentiles – were struggling to understand what it meant to follow Jesus living in the environment of Corinth. They were surrounded by corruption and every conceivable sin. They felt the pressure to conform to the culture around them. Some were having a hard time giving up sinful lifestyles. Although they were the Christian church in Corinth, there was still a whole lot of Corinth in these Christians!

Paul birthed the church in Corinth around the year 50 in the first century. Most scholars think he wrote 1 Corinthians three or four years later from the city of Ephesus and 2 Corinthians a year or two after that, so around the year 55. So, these Christians in Corinth were just 5 years old spiritually. And if you read between the lines of both 1 and 2 Corinthians, many of them acted their age! It’s important to remember they were still spiritually immature believers. In addition, most of them had been religious pagans - without even the benefit of a Jewish religious background - before becoming followers of Jesus. They had much to learn about what it meant to have a cross-shaped – a cruciform – life. And they couldn’t have had a better teacher than their spiritual father -

Paul – the man God used to introduce them to Jesus in the first place. So, as we take this journey through 2 Corinthians, this concept of cruciform – living a cross-shaped life – is going to be our over-arching, mega theme. With that in mind let's look at the first seven verses of 2 Corinthians together. A cruciform – a cross-shaped life – is all about experiencing and extending God's comfort. Here's the first takeaway.

A CRUCIFORM LIFE ACCEPTS SUFFERING AS NORMAL.

After words of greeting, Paul started off his letter by mentioning God's compassion and comfort a lot in vv. 3-7. Did you know the word for "comfort" or "compassion" shows up no less than ten times in those five verses which is one-third of all its occurrences in the NT? Paul wrote about comfort and compassion here because of the undeniable reality of trouble, suffering, and difficulties in life. I want you to notice an important assumption he makes here. Following Jesus doesn't prevent all trouble and suffering in my life. Paul didn't get specific about the troubles he had in mind. They were likely both external and internal. News flash! Troubles aren't something alien to being a faithful and committed follower of Jesus. God never promises endless prosperity, success, or a life free of all trouble to even the most devoted of Jesus' followers back then or now. Notice Paul didn't try to explain the problem of suffering as we like to try to do today. He didn't ask why bad things happened to good people like him or other Christians. He didn't try to run away from it, or avoid it, or become bitter or resentful.

There never seemed to be a moment in Paul's life when the experience of troubles became a serious temptation to abandon his faith in Jesus. He just took it in stride as a normal part of life – even in the life of a person doing his or her best to follow Jesus. Indeed, Paul accepted it as an expected and inevitable part of being Jesus' follower. In those early years of the first century as Christianity spread rapidly, anyone who chose to become a Christian chose to face trouble. He might be abandoned by his own family. She might suffer hostility from pagan neighbors. They might be persecuted by the government. It was always costly to follow Jesus in the first century. We easily forget that in 21st century America. Those first Christians learned very quickly there is no Christianity without a cross. We're called to live out a cruciform – a cross-shaped - life.

But Paul took his matter-of-fact acceptance of troubles in life to an even deeper level. Serving Jesus doesn't prevent all troubles and suffering in my life. It's one thing to be a follower of Jesus, but Paul was a full-time servant in his role as an apostle. Ever since that miraculous encounter with the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus, Paul engaged in a 24/7 effort to bring people to Jesus, establish churches, and make devoted disciples particularly among non-Jewish people in several of the countries bordering the Mediterranean. We'd be tempted to assume his important role would have somehow resulted in divine protection from trouble, hardships, and suffering. Not true. In fact, serving Jesus seemed to result in greater trouble, more difficult hardships, and more painful suffering. Paul was the walking, talking fulfillment of Ps. 34:19 (NLT), "The righteous person faces many troubles, but the Lord comes to the rescue each time." No person in his right mind would have chosen the kind of life Paul lived of their own free will. He was routinely exposed to physical danger, the threat of execution, hardship,

insult, abuse, loneliness, anxiety, and conflict. But Paul had no choice because he knew he was called to be an apostle and to serve King Jesus.

Right there is something very important to remember anytime you step out to serve Jesus in some way whether it's in full time ministry or in a volunteer role here at the church. Serving the Lord in some way doesn't guarantee God is going to protect you from trouble. We probably think it should, right?! After all, shouldn't God want to protect and help the very people who are trying to build up and extend His Kingdom? Shouldn't devoted servants of God experience fewer health problems, fewer financial struggles, less conflict in their key relationships, and less hostility from those who reject Jesus? Jesus Himself might be the very best answer to that question. He was and is the center of His Father's mission in this world. And yet God allowed Jesus to experience the unimaginable suffering of the cross. In fact, He sent Jesus to the cross. What was true of Jesus is apparently true of His servants. A cruciform – a cross-shaped life – is marked by suffering and troubles, not their absence.

This was a truth Paul had to revisit with the Corinthians over and over again. Why? Some believers there in Corinth didn't appreciate Paul's cruciform, cross-shaped life or ministry. Paul had suffered so much he looked like death. His ministry seemed to be dominated by mishaps, by weakness, and by one defeat after another. Yes, he could write powerful letters, but in person Paul was kind of a letdown. Not very charismatic. Not impressive at all. Where was the evidence of God's power? Why didn't his ministry look more successful? Some in Corinth began to doubt Paul's leadership and authority. Maybe he would enjoy more "success" if he was really doing what God wanted him to do! Paul had to argue throughout 2 Corinthians that his ministry was cruciform, cross-shaped. It actually resembled the life and ministry of Jesus. It would certainly never match up to how this world defines success or achievement. No, instead suffering and trouble comes to anyone who lives for Jesus and, also, to whoever serves Jesus, because we live in a world twisted by sin, evil, and utter hostility to God. A cruciform – a cross-shaped life – is all about experiencing and extending God's comfort. Here's a second takeaway.

A CRUCIFORM LIFE EXPERIENCES GOD'S COMPASSION.

If you're living a cross-shaped life you learn to expect suffering and troubles as normal. But here's some really good news. You also become an object of God's comfort, mercy, and compassion. "All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is our merciful Father and the source of all comfort. He comforts us in all our troubles.... For the more we suffer for Christ, the more God will shower us with his comfort through Christ." (2 Cor. 1:3-5 NLT) So, a cross-shaped life is grateful for His compassion and never takes it for granted. The pagan, false gods of the Romans and the Greeks in the 1st century were not known for their compassion toward human beings. The idea that the one true God is merciful and wants to comfort those who worship and serve Him was a new and novel concept for those new believers in Corinth. We acknowledge that wonderful truth today because of what the Bible says. For example, "The Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love. The Lord is good to all; he

has compassion on all he has made.” (Ps. 145:8-9 NIV) But the Corinthians had to be taught that great and wonderful truth. So, like Paul, we need to get in the habit of thanking God continually for His care and compassion and never take it for granted.

Back in 2009, a woman by the name of Linda Page died of cancer. She was only 60. Her husband, Bob, was a pastor and after Linda died he called a close friend. As they talked together, they recalled the message of 2 Corinthians 1 and the comfort of God. Bob made this observation, "With God it is not just comfort; it is comfort with strength in it, with teeth in it. Last fall, when we learned the extent of Linda's illness and I realized what was ahead, I knew I'd need to learn how to be a servant to my wife in ways I had never done. I wasn't sure I could do that. Now I look back on all that I have done for her, and I think, Wow! God gave me grace to do all that." What is God's comfort like? "Comfort with strength in it, with teeth in it." Spoken by one who both needed it and experienced it.

Experiencing God's comfort isn't about escaping all troubles in life or never going through hard stuff. Instead, it's all about having endurance in life not having an easy life. I know that word "comfort" can be defined as a sense of emotional relief, of well-being, and freedom from pain and anxiety. We live in a culture that worships at the cult of comfort in its self-centered search for an easy, problem-free life. That wasn't Paul's definition of the word "comfort" here. Notice how Paul helped us understand God's kind of comfort and compassion in our passage. "Then you can patiently endure the same things we suffer." (2 Cor. 1:6 NLT) In other words, God may not always remove the afflictions that come our way in life especially in the time frame we prefer, but He always provides comfort and encouragement by giving us the fortitude, strength, and grace to face them. He gives us comfort with teeth in it!

So, is it OK for suffering Christians in other countries to pray they won't be persecuted or rejected for their loyalty to Jesus? Likewise, is it OK for us to pray for God's healing of our bodies, God's help with broken relationships, or God's intervention when we need a job or help with our finances? Of course, it is! But let's always remember, God's care and compassion is provided primarily to help us endure our difficulties patiently and not just to give us an easy, trouble-free life. God's comfort provides courage, strength, and grace which enables us to cope with whatever life can do to a follower of Jesus. One person observed, "Suffering colors life, doesn't it?" Back came a great cruciform reply, "Yes, but I propose to choose the color." A cruciform – a cross-shaped life – is all about experiencing and extending God's comfort. Here's a third takeaway.

A CRUCIFORM LIFE KNOWS GOD'S COMPASSION DOESN'T END WITH ME.

"He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When they are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us." (2 Cor. 1:4 NLT) One wonderful outcome of God's comfort is the ability He gives us to extend His love, grace, and strength to others who really need His comfort. If you're living out a cruciform life, you know extending God's compassion to others is a privilege. There's nothing worse than going through something painful or very hard, but for it to have no

value, no purpose, or no larger meaning. There's nothing better than God allowing you to become a channel of His love to someone else who is struggling.

When you're going through a very painful, hard time, who do you want to talk to about it if anyone? Isn't it the people who have experienced what you've experienced or, at least, people who have suffered greatly and found a way through it? If you've suffered the death of a spouse or child, isn't the comfort of those who have had the same experience just greater somehow than those who haven't? Or surviving a terminal disease? Or getting on the other side of a divorce? Or getting victory over an addiction? Or being unemployed for a long time? Or being the victim of some kind of abuse? God is the source of all comfort and compassion. He channels that through His people who have suffered, endured, and held onto their faith in the Lord. That's one way God redeems or brings something good out of the really tough things that happen to us in life. You may never be able to figure out why God allowed something so painful to come into your life, but how you got through it by God's grace can be an enormous encouragement to other people who face similar struggles in their lives.

God comforts us so we can comfort others. It doesn't end with us. God always gives a surplus of His comfort, and He intends it to overflow to others. Now, here's a funny thing. When we extend ourselves by giving God's comfort to someone else, we ourselves experience a deeper level of God's comfort in our own lives. If you just stay focused on yourself, you will be miserable. Because Paul knew what it was like to be discouraged, he could encourage. Because he knew what it felt like to be unbearably crushed, he could comfort. Because he had experienced being at the end of his rope, he could console others – because He knew who held the other end of the rope!

Amy Carmichael was a missionary to India who suffered enormously in her life. She once wrote these words. "I have noticed that when one who has not suffered draws near to one in pain, there is rarely much power to help.... What if every stroke of pain, or hour of weariness or loneliness, or any other trial of flesh or spirit, could carry us a pulse beat nearer some other life, some life for which the ministry of prayer is needed. Would it not be worthwhile to suffer? Ten thousand times yes. And surely it must be so, for the further we are drawn into the fellowship of Calvary with our dear Lord, the more tender we are toward others. God never wastes His children's pain."

God never wastes His children's pain. A cross-shaped life realizes that whatever gets produced in me by God's comfort is meant to benefit others. That's what Paul was getting at when he said here, "Even when we are weighed down with troubles, it is for your comfort and salvation! For when we ourselves are comforted, we will certainly comfort you." (2 Cor. 1:6 NLT) Paul knew if he had chosen to shrink from all the many dangers and troubles he faced in his role as Jesus' apostle for some safe, easy place, many people would never have heard about Jesus including those first believers in Corinth. God used Paul's troubles in life and ministry to open the door of eternal salvation to them. Just as Jesus endured suffering to bring salvation to the world, Paul endured all kinds of trouble to bring the message of salvation to the world. That

realization brought unbelievable comfort to Paul when he himself was tempted to be discouraged.

That should also remind us that being a disciple of Jesus is all about relationships. That's the R in ROPES – our KRBC picture of a disciple. Relationships. God doesn't comfort us just to make us comfortable but to make us comforters of others. And what kind of comfort is it? God's very own comfort and compassion. Paul didn't offer his own comfort to the Corinthians, but God's unique, eternal comfort. Likewise, when God brings us through tough and turbulent times, we get to pass along God's comfort and compassion to others, not our own! So, in a cruciform – a cross-shaped life - both the hard things we undergo in life as well as the strength and the grace God works into us through His comfort somehow work together to bring about spiritual authenticity and power in our own lives which can then encourage and bless others.

Ed Dobson pastored Calvary Chapel, a megachurch, in Grand Rapids, Michigan for 18 years. Around his 50th birthday, he was diagnosed with ALS or Lou Gehrig's disease. There's no known cure. Eventually, the body just gives out. Shortly after his diagnosis Dobson wrote, "I felt like I was sinking into the darkness – that my life was over. I felt like I had been buried alive." Dobson lived for another 15 years after his diagnosis and died back in 2015. But, he said living with ALS gave him a very different outlook on life and on what it means to follow Jesus. Before the disease, he basically focused on the resurrected Jesus. But after his diagnosis, he focused just as much on the sufferings of Jesus. He said, "Even when my body doesn't work, I remember the same Jesus who created the universe limited himself to the human body."

Through his ordeal, he learned how to meet others in their pain. One example. Shortly after his diagnosis, Dobson visited a woman in the final stages of ALS. The woman's husband stood in the doorway and politely explained that his wife didn't want to see anybody. But feeling urgently, Dobson walked past the man into the woman's bedroom. Dobson spoke to her, but she remained silent. He returned for more visits, but each time she would just roll over and face the wall, never saying a word. He always prayed with her, even though she didn't give any sign of interest in God or Jesus. He wrote a prayer to Jesus on a note card, and her husband taped it to the wall where she would always see it. On the weekend she died, she asked her husband to carry her into the living room. She wanted to watch Dobson preach on TV. After she had listened, she told her husband to tell Dobson she prayed the prayer. She was ready to die. And the next day she did, but not before inviting the Author of eternal life into her life.

Are you cruciform? Do you have a cross-shaped life? If so, you will come to see that suffering and troubles in life are normal. But in them you will experience God's comfort and compassion. It's the kind of comfort with teeth in it. It will enable you to endure. So that you can be comfortable? Not so much. So you can become a comforter and experience the privilege of extending God's compassion to others.