

**PATIENT ENDURANCE****2 CORINTHIANS 1:8-11, 6:3-10**

2020 was a very difficult year for the world. Bible searches soared online last year as a record number of people turned to Scripture for passages addressing fear, healing, and justice. The popular YouVersion Bible App saw searches increase by 80% in 2020, totaling nearly 600 million worldwide. Here was the number one verse in the US, India, South Africa, the Netherlands, and the Philippines. “So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. (Is. 41:10 NIV) YouVersion founder Bobby Gruenewald said, “Through every hardship, people continue to seek God and turn to the Bible for strength, peace, and hope. While 2020 is a year so many say they’d like to forget, we see it as a year to remember how God used the Bible App to help so many people who are searching for answers.” Overall, the app tracked 43.6 billion chapters of the Bible read in 2020, with half a billion verses shared, its highest on record. It’s encouraging to hear that when strength to endure is needed, many people still realize at some level that they need to move closer to God.

Last week we began a new messages series on 2 Corinthians. I’m calling it “Cruciform: Living a Cross-Shaped Life, The Message of 2 Corinthians.” That word “cruciform” might be a new one for you. It simply means anything built or designed in the shape of a cross. Not just objects can be cruciform. You can have a cross-shaped life. That simply means your life resembles and reminds others of Jesus in a good way. If you’re cruciform, it’s another way of saying you look like Jesus or you’re Christlike.

If anyone had a cross-shaped life, it was the great Christian leader, Paul. We learn about him through the book of Acts and several letters he wrote to different churches. One of them was in the city of Corinth which is now just some ruins in the country of Greece. But in the first century it was a big, prosperous, and immoral city. It’s an understatement to say Paul had a difficult relationship with this church. He founded the congregation, but then moved on to start other churches. When you read both 1 and 2 Corinthians, you become aware there were some serious tensions between Paul and Jesus’ followers in Corinth. A lot of it had to do with the simple fact they were baby Christians. Spiritual immaturity reigned supreme at the church in Corinth! One good result of that dynamic is we get to see a very personal side of Paul we don’t get to see in his other letters. Scholars say 2 Corinthians is Paul’s most personal letter. That’s helpful to know. What emerges is a picture of a cross-shaped life that transcends some 2,000 years and is absolutely relevant today. It resembles and reminds us of Jesus’ life and ministry in good ways. Today, I want you to see through Paul that a cross-shaped life is all about patient endurance. That was true back in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. It’s just as true today for us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. So, we begin by reading together the first of two passages in 2 Corinthians we want to consider today.

Paul experienced something he thought was going to kill him. What? Bible scholars aren’t sure. I believe the best suggestion is what Paul experienced in the city of Ephesus. You can read about it in Acts 19. Ephesus was located in the Roman province of Asia or present-day Turkey. That’s where Paul ended up after he left

Corinth. It was the location from which he wrote both 1 and 2 Corinthians. There was a mighty moving of God's Spirit in Ephesus when Paul started his ministry there. So many people were becoming Christians that some businessmen felt it threatened one of Ephesus' most important industries – everything involved in the worship of the pagan goddess, Artemis, or Diana. Idols. Temples. It was big business. Riots even broke out and Paul was viewed as the primary bad guy. I believe we just read Paul's personal reaction to what happened in Ephesus. He thought he was going to die. The stress, the tension, and the spiritual warfare he endured was indescribable. Can we learn anything from Paul's experience and his words? Yes! First, a cross-shaped life

### **EXCHANGES SELF-RELIANCE FOR GOD-RELIANCE.**

“But as a result, we stopped relying on ourselves and learned to rely only on God, who raises the dead. And he did rescue us from mortal danger, and he will rescue us again. We have placed our confidence in him, and he will continue to rescue us.” (2 Cor. 1:9-10 NLT) Whatever Paul experienced - as terrifying and life-threatening as it was – had one very positive result. It had driven him back to God and demonstrated to him his utter dependence on God. Paul was a changed man after being rescued by God. It was like a second conversion experience. It taught him – as nothing else before had done quite as thoroughly – to trust in God instead of relying on and trusting in himself.

Can you relate? Has God ever brought you through some dark and terrible time – a serious illness, a divorce, the death of a spouse or a child, a serious financial set back, or an addiction? On the other side of that experience, did your confidence in God grow through because you'd been rescued and delivered through His power? Anytime I exchange self-reliance for God-reliance, I learn to put my confidence in God more comprehensively. That's always a good thing and it's a mark of a cross-shaped life. Even Jesus, despite being God in human flesh, learned how to be totally dependent on His Father in and for everything. He said, “I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself. He does only what he sees the Father doing. Whatever the Father does, the Son also does.” (John 5:19 NLT)

Paul was, by nature, a “can do” kind of person. Brilliant. Capable. Gifted. Passionate. A natural leader. He was anything but a dependent personality, but this terrible experience he endured forced him to depend on God in ways he hadn't before. He learned an important lesson in humility and what it meant to experience more of God's power. Can you relate? The difficult things you've gone through in life and survived provide you and me the opportunity to learn to be humble before God and experience His power. We all want a life with as few hassles and problems as possible. Nothing wrong with that. But there is one danger when everything goes well all the time. It tempts us to think we can handle life alone. That's something we can learn from Paul. He constantly dismissed any and all security and confidence based on self or others. He learned only God deserves to be our ultimate security and confidence. Growing and developing as a follower of Jesus means our natural self-confidence will get weaker and get replaced by an increasing and radical confidence in God alone. Painful? Yes,

often. Difficult? Always. But we can trust God to bring something good and eternal out of those trials in our lives as He did for Paul.

It was just another ordinary spring training game between the Atlanta Braves and the Pittsburgh Pirates—until a rogue bat flew into the stands heading straight for a young boy. In a moment that’s now been forever captured in a reporter's photo, the boy's father reached out his arm to block the bat from hitting his son's face. The dad said, "I didn't have a lot of time to think. Once I saw it was headed for my son, I just did anything I could to block it and deflect it." That’s what dads and moms do instinctively - almost without thinking. If you’re a follower of Jesus, His Father is your Father. We have all kinds of dangerous stuff flying at us. We probably don’t see most of it. But God sees it all. And God protects us far more than we can ever know. That’s why we need to rely and depend on Him more and more. Secondly, a cross-shaped life...

### **GIVES AND RECEIVES INTERCESSORY PRAYER.**

I don’t know if Abraham Lincoln was a follower of Jesus. I’d like to think he was since he was undoubtedly a great man. He once said. “I have often been driven to my knees because I had nowhere else to go.” Don’t overlook something important Paul mentioned in our passage today. “And you are helping us by praying for us. Then many people will give thanks because God has graciously answered so many prayers for our safety.” (2 Cor 1:11 NLT) Paul would have agreed with Abe Lincoln. Whatever he went through, Paul learned the value of prayer at a far deeper level than ever before.

All forms of prayer are good and important, but Paul was referring right here to intercessory prayer specifically. When we go through experiences that demand patient endurance to survive, we need to receive the prayers of God’s people for us. And when other people go through similar experiences, we need to be praying for them. What is intercessory prayer? Here’s a simple definition. Intercessory prayer happens when I pray for someone other than myself. When others pray for us or we pray for others, God releases spiritual blessing into our lives, or He engineers acts of deliverance or rescue. The single most loving thing you can do for your spouse, your kids, your extended family, your neighbors, your friends, your co-workers, or your classmates is to pray for them especially when they’re going through something very difficult. That’s why we have an email prayer line here at the church. You can join it by going to our website and signing up for it. That’s why we have a monthly prayer guide. Pick one up on the way out today if you haven’t gotten it yet. I invite you to join me for a time of weekly intercessory prayer at a new time on a new day: Wednesdays at 6:45 in the lounge. We pray for the church... for individuals... for our country and for our world.

Bettye Tucker is a retired cook who worked the night shift at Children's Memorial Hospital in Chicago, Illinois. She did her job for 50 years retiring in 2016. She saw a steady stream of parents in her job, many of them frightened and weary. For example, on just one night Miss Bettye (as she liked to be called) served food to a mother whose 3-year-old fell out of a second story window that morning, another mother whose 17-year-old was battling a rare form of leukemia, and a third mother whose 18-year-old had

endured seven hours of brain surgery. Their stories break the heart of Miss Bettye. She cooks for them. She talks to them. She says, "When I ask, 'How you doin' today?' and they say it's not a good day, I say, 'Don't lose hope.' When the nurses tell me it's a bad night, I say, 'I understand it's a bad night. But guess what? I am here for you. I'm going to get you through the night.'" Miss Bettye also knew and practiced the power of intercessory prayer. She said, "I'm a praying lady. I pray every night, for every room and every person in the hospital. I start with the basement, and I go up, floor by floor, room by room. I pray for the children, I pray for the families, I pray for the nurses and the doctors. I say, every night while I'm driving in on the expressway, 'Oh, Lord, I don't know what I'll face tonight, but I pray you'll guide me through.'"

But isn't prayer just a nice thing to do, but not really a necessary thing? Wrong! Paul learned through whatever he endured that intercessory prayer energizes all spiritual tasks. He acknowledged the Corinthians' prayers for him had been used by God to help and deliver him. He firmly believed in prayer's power because he knew God listens, responds, and delivers. Yes, he had put his life and ministry into the hands of an all-powerful God, but he also needed the prayers of God's people. Here's how it works. God wants something to happen. Through the Holy Spirit, He impresses you to pray in a certain way about something specific. Maybe you're constantly reminded of a certain person or a specific situation over a period of time. It's likely the Holy Spirit is encouraging you to pray. By doing so, God is inviting you to participate in what He wants to do in that person's life or in that situation. When you obey and pray – often many times with persistence - God releases His will into that situation and for that person. When you read Paul's letters in the NT, you'll find him asking God's people to pray for him often – his life, his ministry, and his effectiveness. Do you know the single best way you can help me as your pastor? Pray for me! Pray for your next pastor. Pray for the pastoral search team. Pray for the staff. Pray for our ministries. Pray for those struggling with difficult issues. Pray for our missionaries.

Or to put it another way, intercessory prayer builds God's Kingdom. Intercessory prayer helps – in a way Paul didn't stop to explain here – to set in motion what God wants to accomplish in the lives of people. He literally uses our prayers to build His Kingdom in this world. Now because God is all-powerful, He could have set it up to work differently. But God has ordained our prayers as a primary way to get His will accomplished. He chose to involve you and me in the building of His Kingdom and a primary method or tool to get it done is intercessory prayer. That's the meaning of the original Greek word translated as "help" there in v. 11 (NLT). "And you are helping us by praying for us." The Corinthians' prayers helped Paul evangelize and start churches. God also used their prayers to rescue and deliver him from death itself there in Ephesus. Their prayers enabled Paul to endure patiently. Someone as great in the things of God as Paul wasn't ashamed to ask for the prayers of even spiritually immature believers like the Corinthians. Why? Because God builds His Kingdom through intercessory prayer. A final thought for today. A cross-shaped life...

**LIVES A LIFE OF GODLY ENDURANCE.**

Turn with me to a second passage. What's similar to what we read earlier in 1:8-11? Both are about hardship and difficulty Paul endured. What's different? Chapter one was about one terrifying incident or event that almost cost Paul his life – probably the riots in Ephesus. Chapter six is about what Paul had learned to endure most of the years he had faithfully followed and served Jesus. Why did Paul include this information in his letter? When you read between the lines of both of Paul's letters to the Corinthians, you begin to realize a significant group within the church there had big questions about Paul's leadership even though he was their spiritual father. Some of them thought being an apostle meant you should have a triumphant, problem-free life. Your life and ministry should be marked by success at all times. After all, isn't God all-powerful? Isn't that what it means to have God on your side? But Paul's life and ministry was full of one problem after another. It just didn't look very successful or powerful. In addition, Paul himself lacked charisma and gravitas. Oh, he could write a strong letter! But in person, not very impressive. Paul was kind of an embarrassment.

Some of the Corinthians were unable or unwilling to see in Paul's life and ministry the shape of the cross. They were unable to understand or appreciate how God works through our weakness and suffering. They saw it as being ineffective. The value of having a cruciform life was meaningless to them. Paul's life and ministry made them question whether he was really anyone they should follow. God's favor and blessing – they reasoned – should be evidenced by amazing power and success. Christians should always live triumphantly, and their leaders should be prime examples of God's power successfully triumphing over all evil and every obstacle. Come to think of it, the Corinthians would have fit in really well with churches and pastors today who believe God wants all of His children to be healthy and wealthy 24/7. We're told by those who believe a prosperity gospel that God's will is for your life to be essentially problem-free!

What can we learn from Paul's experience? First, the results of following and serving Jesus can look contradictory. Paul described what it meant for him to follow and serve Jesus. He mentioned many of the negative obstacles he had faced serving Jesus—beatings, prison, angry mobs, physical exhaustion, sleeplessness, and hunger. Those were the very things the Corinthians thought inappropriate for an apostle to have to endure, but Paul owned them like a badge of honor. Then, Paul mentioned how he lived and conducted his ministry in the face of all those obstacles. By the power of the Holy Spirit living in him, Paul's life and ministry was marked by purity, understanding, patience, kindness, love, truthfulness, and integrity. But when he got to vv. 8-10 (NLT), Paul became almost lyrical in describing his cross-shaped life and ministry. "We serve God whether people honor us or despise us, whether they slander us or praise us. We are honest, but they call us impostors. We are ignored, even though we are well known. We live close to death, but we are still alive. We have been beaten, but we have not been killed. Our hearts ache, but we always have joy. We are poor, but we give spiritual riches to others. We own nothing, and yet we have everything." Yes, there was plenty of irony, paradox, and seeming contradiction in Paul's life and ministry/ But that was authentic life in Jesus! That's what it looked like! It still does today.

What can we learn from Paul's experience? Second, my life and ministry can reflect the experience of Jesus. True enough, if you looked at Paul's life and ministry from a worldly, secular point of view, it didn't amount to much at all. It was an utterly pointless and absurd way to live. But if you looked at it from God's point of view, it looked a lot like the life and ministry of Jesus. Jesus lowered Himself and suffered a great deal in order to raise us up. Paul suffered through miserable situations in order to share the good news about Jesus with others and see them come to faith. Some thought Paul's troubles disqualified him as an apostle, but Paul knew he'd be disqualified if he tried to avoid the inevitable trials that came with following Jesus and representing Him in this evil world. His life and ministry were cruciform – cross-shaped – because it resembles and reminds us of Jesus.

What can we learn from Paul's experience? Third, God's power can be revealed through my weakness. Paul brought out this truth all through 2 Corinthians in just about every conceivable way. God's power can be revealed through my weakness. If hardships were seen by Paul's critics in Corinth as evidence his ministry was weak and ineffective, Paul reminded them the way he faced of all those difficulties was actually a sign of the power of God working in and through him. Many Corinthians just didn't get it – that you and I can only ever experience God's power fully when we have become utterly weak and despairing of any human solution.

Paul is maybe the best example of patient endurance we will ever encounter except for Jesus Himself. What does godly endurance look like? We have it spelled out for us in 6:3-10. Very quickly, let's break it down like this. It's God-produced, not self-produced. Paul never claimed he had endured anything in his own strength. The only reason he had persevered and prevailed was because God had created that patience and endurance in him. It's "a long obedience in the same direction." That's a great phrase I borrowed from Eugene Peterson who gave us The Message version of the Bible. The Christian life isn't about one-day endurance or even one-year endurance. It's about hanging in there with God and hanging on to God year in and year out, through good and bad, come what may your whole life long. It's the ability to bear all things gracefully and positively. This isn't patient endurance with a frown - with a kind of grim or passive resignation. This is patient endurance with a smile, with a song, and with a joyful heart. It results in lives being changed for eternity. Here's a simple fact. If there had not been those who came before us who were ready, willing, and able to bear abuse, torture, and death for the cause of Jesus – like the apostle Paul - we would not have the Christian faith today. So, when we are called upon to patiently endure what God has ordained for us in this life, let's remember God will use it to change the eternal destiny of those who see it and see how it resembles and reminds them of Jesus. It will draw people to Jesus. That's the power of a cross-shaped life.

I never ran cross-country competitively. But when I was in high school, I would occasionally run the cross-country course which featured Killer – a hill about halfway through the course that would severely test my endurance and desire to keep going. In a cross-country race, the officials go out ahead, place flags on the course to show the

runners where they're supposed to run. A certain color might indicate "left turn." Another color means "right turn." Another sign means "straight ahead." There's a specific racecourse marked out for the runners. If they have any intention of winning, they have to follow that course marked out for them. You can't decide, "Boy, this is a six-mile race, but I've only got four miles in me today. I'm going to take a short cut. I hope nobody minds." You can't look at a particular hill and say, "That hill just looks nasty. I'm not going to tackle that one today. I'll just skip around it." You have to run the race marked out for you. It's the same when we follow Jesus. God has gone before you. He knows your end from your beginning. He knows all the days of your life. In His great love and foreknowledge. He has gone ahead of you and planted some flags – so to speak - ahead of you. They'll help you get to the finish line. Like the Bible says, "And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us." (Heb. 12:1 NLT)

Are you cruciform? Do you have a cross-shaped life? If so, you're moving from self-reliance to God-reliance more every day. You pray for others more not less because you realize that's how God stuff happens. And you just keep going. You persevere. You patiently endure. You keep holding onto God come what may with joy.