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2 CORINTHIANS 1:8-11

2 Corinthians Series

Let's bow together before the Lord and settle our hearts in preparation for opening His word together.

[PRAYER] Lord, I just remembered again that Joseph is being deployed to Dubai this week for six months. So we're asking for a blessing on him and Evy, whose knee is healing, and their whole family. We thank you for the work you're doing in the lives of the folks here and the testimonies that are coming out of your power. We're grateful for that. Thank you for the family experience that we enjoy because of who you are and what you've done for us. We thank you for the differences that exist among us and the way that you bring those differences into a unity that we can experience together. I thank you for Pete and the way he leads worship with his excitement and emotion. I thank you for his love for you and may we catch that as well.

Now Lord, we're going to open your word. We know that you've given us your word to be a lamp unto our feet and light unto our path. We know that as we get to know your word more and apply it to our lives we can make wise decisions about the things that face us. So I pray, Lord, that as we look at your word today that you would teach us some valuable things that we'll be able to walk away from this service being touched by you and the power of your word. We ask this in Jesus' name, amen.

Last week we started the book of 2 Corinthians. So you can either open your Bibles (if you brought your Bibles with you) or I'll put the verses on the screen as well. It's a study about God's power. When we look at God's power and understand it, it changes our lives. So we're going to see that in a number of ways. Embracing God's power today. As we go through the book of 2 Corinthians we're going verse by verse through the study. The goal that we have is to connect to the energy or the power or the strength that God provides. So last week we talked about the comfort of God, which is His power that He gives us when things aren't going well. Today we're going to continue part of that dialogue and we're going to continue in the passage picking up at verse 8.

So I'm going to ask you to stand, if you would, with me as I read this passage of scripture from 2 Corinthians 1:8-11. We stand out of respect for God's word. Let me read these verses that we'll be looking at today.

It says – We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to

endure, so that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us again. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many.

You may be seated.

2 Corinthians is a special book in part because it's so personal. It's a personal testimony of Paul as he's writing to the Corinthians. He knows them already, so he's sharing some information with them. As he does, because it's so personal, we get an inside look into his heart and how he's processing life. Kind of a unique look, I think, into a person's heart.

You get that when you listen to a testimony. Jocelyn shared last week. Maybe some of you would be interested in giving a testimony here to others on a Sunday morning. That would be great. But when you hear somebody's testimony, something happens because you're able to see into their heart, and then God does something through that to give you something that you need in your own life. That's what's happening with Paul. This is God's word, so it's even more powerful than just a testimony we might share. But it's something that's coming out of His word about some problems that He's experiencing in His life.

I want to start our study today with a question that I want you to ponder with me. I want to know what you think about this question. Here's the question: Does God allow you to experience more suffering than you can bear?

Well some of you who know the Bible might quickly think of 1 Corinthians 10:13. It's one of my favorite verses. I think I quote it at least once a week because I'm working with people and telling them about this, especially as I work with parents. It's one of my favorite verses and it says this: *God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.*

Notice it does say more than you can bear, but what is it talking about? It's talking about temptations in this passage. You can be confident that any temptation that comes your way is not greater than you can bear and that God provides a way out so that you can rely on His grace to bear up under that temptation and not give in to it. So if you're tempted to have an angry outburst, or you're tempted to give up, or you're tempted to get all stressed out about something, you need to know that there is a promise. So I would say the answer in this case, if we're answering in regards to temptation, the answer would be no according to this verse. There is no temptation that's greater than we can bear because God has given us something to go along with that. Very important to understand this particular passage of scripture.

But I want to go back to the question because the question is does God allow us to suffer more than we can bear? I think the answer to the question is yes. Because He wants us to come to a place in our lives where we recognize that we can't do this on our own. If we think we can do it on our own, well we're just being humanistic. What do we need God for anyway? We just manage this ourselves. Everything is fine. But I think that sometimes the pressures in our life get

so great that we're very challenged by the situation and what's going on in it. In those moments we have to come to the Lord and say, "Okay, I need help here. I'm stuck. I've got a problem," or "I'm feeling overwhelmed," or "I'm confused by the situation." I don't know what it is that hits you, but I think it's important to understand that we come to the end of our abilities and our challenges.

So here's how it goes sometimes as we're talking to people. Maybe I'm suffering about something and some bad thing is happening in my health or my finances or in my relationships or something. Something bad is going on and I'm just feeling really disappointed or upset or overwhelmed by that. Someone lovingly comes to me and says, "Oh just remember God won't give you any suffering greater than you can bear." Now I feel a little bit uncomfortable with that because that's not exactly what I need at the moment. I don't feel very comforted by that statement, although the person means well, I'm sure. But I think they're theologically off.

First of all, we cannot attribute all bad things to God. God doesn't cause problems, all the sufferings to come into our lives. But secondly, we end up saying something like this: "If God won't put more on us than we can bear, then what's wrong with me? Because I don't think I can bear this pain?" We start saying, "Something's wrong here because I feel overwhelmed. I just want to connect to God in a very special way here."

Remember in 2 Corinthians we're looking at the power of God because Paul is demonstrating in the whole book this idea of power and how we have access to God's power and how it often comes through weakness, he's going to say in chapter 12. We've got a ways to go before we get there. But at this point he's saying in the passage he's just feeling so overwhelmed by this. So overwhelmed.

Jesus says in Matthew 11:28, this passage that reminds us, I would suggest, that we need help when we're under pressure – *Come to me, all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.* There's this thing that you don't carry alone is the idea. God is there. He wants to help you with the burdens. He wants to carry them for you. He wants to provide joy in the midst of the struggle. Life is hard.

Now I'd like to talk to young people for a moment because I want you to look at the passage that we're looking at here. Notice it says – *We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death.* I just want you to see how bad the pain was.

Now young people, here's what I want to say about life. Life is an adventure. It's great. Tremendous things happen. We can enjoy life. There's all kinds of good things that happen. We enjoy the beauty of living in this great creation that God has given us. There's all kinds of beautiful things that take place in relationships. Good things happen and you want to have this positive outlook on life. I think it's just great. But you need to know that there are going to be times when you're going to feel overwhelmed by the pressure or pain or struggle. Those of us who have been around a while know that that comes around every once in a while and in fact some people live with that more than others. You just need to know and be aware of that.

It's really important that you understand that, young people, because today young people often experience a tremendous amount of pain and suffering. Even in our community we have people who have taken their lives, committed suicide. That is not the right solution to the problem, but I can feel the pain that the person is experiencing because Paul experienced it here. I don't think Paul is talking about suicide here. He's talking about the pain was so great he just knew that he was probably going to die. "This is so bad I think I'm going to die." I know some of us who are older have gone through things in our lives we go, "This hurts so bad I think I'm going to die" (not that I'm going to kill myself).

I want to suggest to you young people that young people today find themselves under this pressure and they don't know what to do. So I want to tell you today what to do. 2 Corinthians is a book about God's power. That's where we go. If you get stuck somewhere and you're imagining or thinking about suicide, you need to call and get help and you need to realize that God provides solutions for us. Paul knew that and he wants to share that information because the power of God is what we have access to and we need to know that when we're under tremendous pain.

Notice the word *death* is mentioned four times here in this passage. *We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.*

So the power that God has is bigger than even death is what he's saying. If we can grasp this idea of God's power we can recognize He can help me in this relationship, overcome this disappointment, deal with this financial problem, deal with this court problem (if you've got a court problem). He helps us deal with every kind of problem that's out there. Especially the problems that are outside of our hearts. We feel so overwhelmed and hard-pressed He allows us the grace to be able to deal with that. Very important message.

I've been working for several weeks with a lady on her parenting. She's not a believer. I told her at the very beginning, "My goal is to persuade you to become a Christian." She hasn't done that yet. But a couple weeks ago in our eighth meeting she said this: "This stuff, this parenting is so overwhelming. I could never imagine it could be this hard." When someone says that to me and they're not a Christian, I'm not sure how to help them. Except I said to her, "This is one of the reasons you need to become a Christian. When you become a Christian you have access to power that you don't have on your own." If you're trying to live this life on your own, you're in trouble.

Now there are some people who are smarter than other people, so they can go further along without feeling like they're at the end of their rope. They're really smart people. When you have smarts, intelligence, you can use logic and information to solve problems and you can do that a lot. So if you're smart maybe you think you can get further along in your life before you hit the dead end where you go, "I need help with this."

I think that's why Jesus said, "It's hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." Why? Because a person who has money says, "Oh, I'm feeling so uncomfortable. I'll hire somebody to fix that." Or "I'm feeling so uncomfortable I'm going to pay to get rid of this problem." So rich

people have a hard time sometimes coming to God's kingdom because they can start sending solutions out there using the resources that they have.

But I got to tell you everybody comes to a point where they exhaust all of their resources because none of us have what we need to go forward. God has created us. He's designed us. He's designed our heart to hold this much pressure. But life is made of this much pressure. God wants the pressure to pass through our hearts where we have to process it, of course, but not weigh us down. So that's why He says, "*Come to me, all you who are burdened, and I will give you rest.*" Paul is the testimony here for us and we can walk away from this saying, "Man, I just need to learn more about how to give it to the Lord and allow the Lord to take that pressure in my life that I experience every day."

I know some of you are under great pressure in your lives right now. Others of you are not. And that's okay. We go through these seasons in our lives. But you just have got to know that when you're under the pressure like this then God has a solution and Paul is explaining that solution, which we're going to look at a little bit more in a moment.

We all come to this place where we're at the end of our resources. But why wait till then to allow God to work in the midst of the pressure? See, we could wait till we're overwhelmed and say, "Okay God, I'm so overwhelmed. Please help me." Or we could process it day by day as the pressure is building and going and it's going through our hearts. "Okay, I'm giving it to the Lord." Having all of these off-ramps for the stress in our lives because we're tied into this comfort of God that He wants to provide us. But this happened. We don't know exactly what happened. The Corinthians must know what's going on because he doesn't describe it to them, but they must not know the depth and the breadth of the problems that are going on.

In our lives sometimes we create or we find ourselves in situations that are rather complex. People who aren't following the principles of God end up with problems in their parenting or their finances. They end up with all kinds of struggles in their lives. Bad things happen when you're not following the Lord. So we don't know if this is something Paul created or maybe it's just the persecution that comes. Problems come, not always because you did anything right or wrong. Sometimes they come just because we live in a broken world and brokenness is painful. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God.

I think that's really the ticket to the answer to the question, does God allow suffering greater than we can bear? I think the answer according to this passage is yes, so that we will learn not to rely on ourselves but rely on God. Not just in the painful, difficult struggles, but in the every day parts of life so that we're in the business of turning that stress over to the Lord so we don't have to live under that pressure. Oh we do have to live in a pressure that exists in the world, but in our hearts we're freed from that. We can enjoy something special in our relationship with God.

Verse 10 says – *He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us again and again and again.* See, God is in the business of delivering us from these situations and giving us that freedom inside. *On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us.*

Where is the hope coming from? It's coming from the Lord and this ability to have hope, which of course allows us to look at the future in a bright way. Even though the world is difficult and challenging, we know the end of the story that we have victory in Jesus Christ (as we sung about earlier). We have this victory because of what Christ has done. So we can move ourselves in that direction and God can move us in those directions in a powerful way.

We're going to look in this last part of the passage at a solution that God provides for us in order to connect to this power. Maybe you were reading ahead, but this passage is really talking about prayer. In fact Paul, who wrote these words in a different book, says *pray without ceasing*.

My doctor says to me, "Is here anything else we need to talk about?"

I said, "Well I've been having leg cramps." My doctor has instructed me that I need to be working out four hours of cardio a week. That's an awful lot of exercise. I don't know how you do cardio without exercising your legs. So I was getting these leg cramps, especially at night. I'm sleeping and waking up with a leg cramp. Just painful. Now there's lots of reasons people have leg cramps and I know all of you health nuts are going to give me advice about them. I'm open to that. I'll listen to anything you have to say.

But my doctor says to me, "Are you stretching?"

I said, "No, not really."

"Well you need to stretch." So my doctor demonstrated some stretches that I need to do to stretch my legs because they're tight. Mainly because I sit at a computer most of the time and then I go run or whatever I'm going to do. I don't stretch or I didn't stretch that much.

I start asking the question why. Why is it that I don't stretch? I think the reason I don't stretch is this: One – I don't have time. I'm too busy. Number two – I don't think it's that important. And number three – it doesn't do much for me. That's kind of my opinion about stretching. However, I started thinking about it and I realized that's the same reason some people don't pray. I don't have time for this. I'm too busy. I don't think it's that important. It's not doing much for me. The problem with stretching though for me is if I'm not stretching I end up with cramps. Those are problems. I've got to tell you, those are real problems. When you have a cramp in the middle of the night and you wake up with that, it's really painful. So not only you've got to stretch it out and wake up from your sleep, but then the pain of that takes a couple days actually to get over that of the pain of what happened in that cramp.

I think when it comes to prayer the same thing is true in our lives. We may say that and maybe you can get through today and not pray. Maybe you can get through tomorrow and not pray. But I'm going to tell you eventually you're going to have cramps. You have cramps in your heart, in your life. You're going to have a panic attack, or you're going to have an anger episode, or you're going to get all stressed out about something. So God has provided a solution for dealing with the overwhelming feeling. That's what Paul is talking about, the overwhelming feeling to the point of death. He's got a solution that is to tie into God's power and one of the things he's going to say we're going to read in one of the verses in a moment is that we need to be praying.

So Paul sets up this sense of an attitude of prayer. We have this continual process of offloading stress to the Lord. *Pray without ceasing*. We are continually in this dialogue of prayer with the

Lord. Prayer is this vehicle for bringing about change. Something we need to be practicing and working on.

Let's go back to the passage. Notice in the bottom of verse 11 it says – *As you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many.*

So this is a particular kind of prayer I want you to notice. Is this praying for yourself? No. He's talking about getting prayer from other people. Right? Paul was a guy who prayed. He was in a habit of praying, but he also asked other people to pray for him because something happens in the power of God. Get this now. We're talking about the power of God. Sometimes the power of God is accessed by other people praying for you. So you go and you have people pray for you and when they do, you experience the power of God. That transaction is a real important one.

Paul was a guy who prayed all the time. So he says this in a different book of the Bible. As he's ending the book of Ephesians he says – *And pray in the Spirit in all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep praying for the Lord's people.* So pray for the Lord's people. You hear about these things on Sunday morning. That's one of the reasons we gather together so we can learn about each other, we can be holding each other up, and be praying for the challenges that people are experiencing.

Then Paul says these words in verse 19 – *Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.*

In this passage that we're looking at today that we're going to take home with us, Paul talks about prayer in a way that really helps us to grasp something about the mechanism of the exchange of power. God has power. It's available to us. We need power. How are we going to get it? One of the ways we're going to get that power is by prayer. I would suggest praying for ourselves is a good idea, but in the passage here it's primarily talking about getting prayer from other people because when you do that, good things happen. God wants to do a work in our lives.

I'm really grateful that I have people praying for me. I'm in a small group in the course of a week. In that small group we exchange prayer requests. We're able to lift them up, check on each other maybe in the course of the week, find out what's going on. But I know that people are praying for me. I know that some of you are praying for me just because I'm the pastor here, so you're praying for your pastor (for which I am very grateful). But it's much more than that.

I'm a member here at this church, so there's this something I enjoy about the connectedness that we experience. I'd like to be praying for you. The communication card is an opportunity for you to be sharing a prayer request that God would have you share with other people. I'll gladly pray for you, but there are other people here. We're a body fit together. So being connected to other people here is great because when you come between 9:45 and 10:05 before we start singing, that's the time we're talking, we're exchanging, we're learning about each other, we're sharing, we're updating on what's going on. Because we're praying for each other. It's part of what it means to live in this community.

We even design our worship service so after the teaching we have a ministry time. That ministry time is we sing a song and we are encouraged then to reflect on what God is doing as a result of what we've heard or the worship or our experience here. What is God saying to you? It may be the only few minutes in your week that you get five minutes before the Lord to pause. So it's a dedication time, certainly.

As part of that experience we have prayer counselors available to pray for people in case you want to come up for prayer about something going on in your life. It's just such a rich experience when other people are praying for you. You can just pray in your own seats during that ministry time, but we designed it in such a way so that when at times God prompts you, you might get prayer from someone else because something happens. There's a transference that takes place.

I went up a few weeks ago for prayer myself and as I did Nancy prayed for me about my very stressful month in September. It was very stressful in my own life. I just wanted to offload that. The beauty to going to someone else and having them pray for you is that you get to rely on their faith. So they're lifting up before the Lord your request and somehow in our weakness in that moment we need some bolstering of our own faith and we come along and someone else then is lifting up this request and we're drawn into that. And then we receive something. It's just such an amazing thing when someone prays for you because you receive something in the midst of that prayer that you need in order to deal with life situations.

Do not live life alone. Paul didn't. He's writing this letter explaining his situation, thanking them for their prayers because he knew he lived in community. He knew he needed their prayers. He asked for prayer. Do not live life alone. Live it in community. We are in community together. It's an opportunity for us to share and exchange life, to share requests, to pray for each other.

I encourage you to look around. Who isn't here today? Do you know why they aren't here? Maybe something is going on in their life and they need some prayer. Maybe by calling on them and checking on them you might be able to impart some grace to them. Because people appreciate that they're missed. They appreciate someone caring about them. And then we can lift up some prayer for them.

Prayer is a valuable tool and it's one of the things Paul is leading us to in this passage to access God's power. But he also wants us to know that you can't live life alone. If you're trying to live life alone you will come to the place he did where you're just so overwhelmed with life you're stuck. We need to be tied into God's grace. We need to recognize that God is our solution. God provides this power, this strength that we need that we can't offer ourselves. We all come to that place one way or another. I don't want to get that place without having practiced a little bit on the day to day so when the big things come I'm ready for them. If I can be ready for them, I can trust the Lord in the midst of those difficult challenges.

What a great passage. The book of 2 Corinthians is a treat. We're going to be going through it verse by verse and gaining more principles about God's power and other things we'll come to in the passages to understand about our own lives.

Would you stand with me and let's pray together.

[PRAYER] Lord, it's amazing to think about the reality of how great and awesome your power is. We use the word 'omnipotent' to describe how much power you have. It's just unfathomable. And then to think we can tap into that is a privilege. So Lord, I pray that you'd give us the confidence to come into your throne room with boldness to ask you for that grace that we need in our times of need. We ask, Father, that you would provide us with the strength and give us the motivation and the willingness to stretch our hearts by praying. We ask that you would give us a special gift of that grace this morning. As you're revealing certain things to each one of us about our lives, teach us how to rely on you for the blessing and the power that you want to give us. We ask this in Jesus' name, amen.