

Text: 2 Corinthians 11:16-33

Title: Credentials of Weakness

Truth: Paul's afflictions are better proof of his ministry than any resume.

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Introduction

The apostle Paul is concerned for the church in the city of Corinth.

They need to hear him out, and he gives a number of reasons for that in the opening verses of chapter 11. He addresses a misunderstanding that the church has about his financial support policy, and then directly calls out the false apostles as what they are—apostles of the devil, teaching a different Jesus, a different gospel, and a different spirit.

I. Paul's "Foolish" Boasting, v. 16-21

- A. Somehow, he has to persuade them to listen to him. He decides to lower himself to the level of his opponents, answering a fool with a method similar to the fool's folly (Prov. 26:5). The circumstances are desperate—let the reader understand—because the issues here are not minor debates. They are eternal life and death.
- B. So he asks them not to think of him too badly, as a fool, but give him some leeway to boast. If they accept the unwise self-congratulation of the false teachers outside of their sphere of ministry (10:12-17), they can do the same for the apostle Paul. Maybe they will realize (again) that Paul is worth listening to.
- C. Many people are using this fleshly method, so Paul seems to say something like this: "If you can't beat 'em, join 'em!"
- D. In verses 19 and following, Paul uses strong sarcasm to cut deeply into the hearts of the Corinthians. Sarcasm is caustic or ironic language that the writer uses to achieve an effect. In this case, Paul's intended effect is a healthy one, not a cutting or destructive effect like some sarcasm. Here he uses it to build up instead of tear down, to save them from apostasy in departing from the true gospel.
- E. First, Paul says that the Corinthians put up with fools gladly, since they are so wise. This is ironic because they although they *think*

they are very wise—a desirable characteristic in Greek culture—the acceptance of fools weighs against their claim of wisdom!

F. They should have no problem “bearing with” Paul because they regularly “bear with” the false teachers who abuse them something terrible. Paul uses figures of speech that have to do with physical abuse to show how the false super-apostles are spiritually abusing them.

1. Brings you into bondage. Their false gospel enslaves you, bringing you back into sin, not freedom in the Lord (John 8:34, 36). See also Galatians 2:4 and 2 Peter 2:19 which show the work of false teachers is an enslaving work.
2. Devours you. This means they prey upon you, perhaps taking your money, “devouring widows houses” (Matt. 23:14).
3. Takes from you. Take advantage of you.
4. Exalts himself. They have a high level of arrogance, not humility.
5. Strikes you on the face. I don’t think the false teachers are actually hitting the Corinthians across the face. This probably means something like “their message and method is a slap in the face.” And you put up with that?

Have you forgotten Paul’s kind method of sharing the gospel with you, how you realized you were sinners and Christ died for you? Do not be tricked by false doctrine into doubting the truth of that which you know in the deepest part of your soul. What other system of thought or religion out there is able to explain what is *actually* going on in your life, not filled with platitudes and a “follow your heart” message.

- G. Paul’s last bit here of high-level sarcasm is that he was “too weak for that!” He was too weak to be abusive toward the Corinthians, HOW TERRIBLE! He will boldly, if foolishly, boast in that.
- H. We could spend some time thinking about how false religions are guilty of spiritual abuse toward their followers. Taking their money, bringing them into bondage, exalting themselves, in effect slapping them in the face. They are telling people living in sin that they are OK; people that believe the gospel that they are narrow-minded;

that it is OK to believe whatever way you want to believe and follow your own way. That sounds like “all we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, everyone, to his own way.” That is sin. Many voices out there *encourage* it.

II. Paul’s Ministry “Resume,” v. 22-29, 32-33

This section records the core of Paul’s bragging to show his superiority (or at least not inferiority) to the false teachers.

- A. **Ethnic qualifications.** Paul asks if the other “apostles” are Hebrews. Are they Israelites? Are they descendants of Abraham? If so, consider that Paul is as well (see Philippians 3:3-6).
- B. **Ministerial qualifications.** He is indeed a servant of Christ, directly called by Jesus into the ministry. The other guys cannot say that. Paul is even more a real minister because of what he will say next.
- C. **Physical strain and abuse.** Paul worked sometimes night and day to avoid being a burden to anyone, and to be an example of hard work. But he also received beatings from the Jews (39 stripes, from Deuteronomy 25:1-3, Matt. 10:17). He sat in Roman prisons quite frequently, not just in Philippi in Acts 16 but also in Jerusalem, Caesarea, and Rome (and the events in those places had not even happened yet, coming at the end of Acts). He faced death constantly (see 2 Cor. 1:9). The Romans beat him with rods three times, and it almost happened again in Acts 22. Some people in Lystra stoned him and left him for dead (Acts 14:19-20).

Sidebar on the List of Trials in vv. 23-29

1. Paul wrote 2 Corinthians around 55-56 A.D.
2. The writing of 2 Corinthians occurred at Acts 20:1-2a while Paul was in Macedonia.
3. The list of trials in 2 Cor. 11:23-33 is far more extensive than what Luke lists in Acts up to Acts 20:2. We know therefore that Luke’s record in Acts is selective. For instance, it does not record the five whippings by the Jews, nor two of the beatings with rods by the Romans, nor the shipwrecks, nor the time when he was afloat on the open sea.

4. Paul's imprisonments in Jerusalem, Caesarea, and Rome had not happened yet (they were after Acts 20:2), so they could not have been listed by Paul here because they occurred after Paul wrote and sent 2 Corinthians.

- D. **Travel problems.** Thrice he was shipwrecked and once he was afloat in the wreckage of a ship for a day and night while he awaited rescue. He must have felt the rescue was from the Lord. These events are nowhere else recorded, like in the book of Acts. This all happened before the big shipwreck of Acts 27. Evidently, Paul's journeys provided a lot of material for harrowing tales. Add to that "perils of waters" from v. 26, better translated as "perils of rivers." He had to cross many rivers during his journeys, most of which did not have nice footbridges.
- E. **Dangerous people.** There were robbers in the Taurus mountains between Perga and Antioch of Pisidia, and probably lots of other places. He had problems with the Jews who were trying to kill him and hinder his ministry (Romans 15:31) and who regularly kicked him out of synagogues. The Gentiles were no better, giving him a large amount of persecution. Other troubles came from false brothers, like false teachers and those who professed to be Christians but were not. Then there was Aretas the king in Damascus (v. 32-33) who tried to kill Paul. He had to leave the city in humiliation, without dignity and hidden in a basket.
- F. **Dangerous places.** Cities were unsafe to Paul. The wilderness was unsafe. The sea gave Paul many difficulties. But he did not shirk away from the work God had called him to do because of these things, fearful though they might be.
- G. **Physical deprivation.** Paul suffered extreme physical weariness, hard work, sleepless nights, hunger, thirst, fasting, cold, lack of proper clothing (gear). Missionaries suffer this today. I can illustrate this from a recent story from African mission work in the southern savannah region of Chad.

So far this does not sound like stuff that you would share at a job interview. These are not resume enhancers according to the typical way of thinking. These are like failures, problems, afflictions, not great accomplishments. And there is one more:

H. **Church problems.** Any man or woman who cares for the spiritual well-being of people has been touched by this same thing. Some may shield themselves from the pain by treating the matter clinically and stoically. Others cannot do that all the time or even some of the time, and the problems in the churches wear on their mind and body and spirit.

Paul was deeply concerned for the churches. He encountered two general kinds of problems:

1. Weakness. It could be weakness of faith, or conscience, or body.
2. Stumbling. Probably stumbling into sin, in one's own life, or in relationships.

These caused Paul great pain across the numerous churches that he had planted and with which he had regular interactions, for whom he taught pastors, etc. When he says this caused inward "burning," I take it that he does not necessarily mean anger—though blatant rebellion could cause that—but deep sympathy which heated up his insides.

I wonder if we may place most church problems today in these same two categories.

- I. Compared to this catalog of experiences I am quite sure that none of Paul's opponents would be able to come close. Probably none of them had been in jail, much less suffered this kind of persecution. Paul's sufferings were staggering. But they showed that he was a real apostle, otherwise he would not have undergone all this (see Galatians 5:11). Why else would he undergo such hardship if he could just be like the false teachers, give a false gospel, and have life a lot easier? He'd have more money, less care for the churches, less trouble with the Jewish authorities, etc.

III. Paul's Boast was in His Weakness, v. 30-31

- A. Paul comes finally to the point of the passage. He says in verse 30 that if he is driven to boast, he focuses and limits his boasting to his weaknesses.

- B. Verse 31 constitutes an oath or promise that Paul is telling the truth. He calls God to be his witness that there is nothing false in what he has recounted.
- C. Verses 32-33 are a story of humiliation where Paul had to be spirited out of town under cover, in a basket, like a prison escapee. It was an adventure, but like the rest of us, I am quite confident Paul could have done without it!
- D. The point is that Paul boasts in his weaknesses, which is opposite of the proud false teachers. Even though he used the folly of boasting to get the Corinthians loosed from the grip of the false “super apostles,” he ironically boasts in weakness and suffering for the sake of the gospel. That is the kind of “boasting” is OK in Paul’s mind.
- Somewhat paradoxically, weakness is better than strength. Suffering better shows the reality of a ministry than strength because it exalts God’s power.
- E. Notice Paul has alluded to this theme already. In 2 Cor. 1:9-10 Paul experienced God’s deliverance when he thought he was as good as dead. In 4:7 he expressed that he possessed the treasure of the gospel in an earthen vessel, so that the power in his ministry may be clear that it is done in God.

Conclusion

And so, we learn that weakness overcome by God’s grace is a better measure of a ministry, and more convincing, than human strength and wisdom coupled with false teaching. “The wisdom of this world is foolishness with God” (1 Cor. 3:19, 1:20).

Paul teaches us that trials in Christian service not only help us to trust God instead of ourselves (2 Cor. 1:9), they bring God glory. He is the God of the impossible, you might say. He is the God who delights in working through us when we are unable to do so ourselves. God is not delighted in “I did this or that” but “When I was in this fix, God preserved; God upheld; God used me to minister for him; God did it.” He is honored when we are humbled. So opposite of the world’s perspective on things! MAP