

XV. The Cost of Apostleship

April 14/15/16, 2015

2 Corinthians 11:16-33

Aim: To appreciate that Paul's suffering set him apart from the money- and comfort-seeking false apostles and marked him as a true apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ.

A. Paul's Foolishness (2 Corinthians 11:16-21)

As we have seen in chapters 10-11, the Apostle Paul abominated boasting. Most especially, he hated the boasting of those he derisively called the 'super-apostles' because their self-boasting had gained them a hearing in the Corinthian church while diminishing his apostolic authority. The super-apostles' gains had been so substantial that Paul realized that he would have to engage in the same foolishness. That is why the first part of chapter 11 is devoted to preparing his readers for the boasting he so loathes.

Accusations have been made that Paul is worldly, a fool, and weak. Paul denies the first: the weapons of his warfare are not worldly but possess divine power to capture the proud for a life of obedience to Christ (10:4). He then turns to their second and third arguments, that he is a 'fool' and 'weak.' With these he actually agrees, though his agreement, which combines both charges into one, is stated in a brilliant literary form, full of pathos.

1. Paul's Reluctant Boasting (11:16-18)

a) Paul Boasts As a Fool (11:16)

¹⁶*I repeat, let no one think me foolish. But even if you do, accept me as a fool, so that I too may boast a little.*

Paul is engaging in a kind of role-play. Just as an actor may play a part alien to his character and convey a message through this, so Paul makes his point through this alien role. Paul had to risk actually being taken for a fool, even by brothers in Christ, in order to make his point in relation to the false apostles and their claims. Even if they misunderstand him and take him for an actual fool, he is still prepared to take the line on which he has determined, because he must. It involves playing the part of a boaster, in ironic imitation of the boasting of his opponents.

The term 'again' ('I repeat') pointed the Corinthians back to Paul's earlier discussion of boasting in 11:1. He had digressed to discuss the issue of financial remuneration and to expose the false apostles as agents of Satan in disguise (vv. 2-15). Before reluctantly launching his defense, which he regarded as foolishness, Paul distanced himself from the true fools. He did not want anyone to think him foolish like the false teachers; he was not habitually given to commending himself like they were. The false apostles boasted incessantly; Paul would boast only a little. The apostle was no fool; he was merely answering fools as their folly deserved (Pr. 26:5) to protect the Corinthians from spiritual disaster.

Now Paul is ready to boast. But, fearing that some of his hearers might imagine that his boasting is anything but foolish, Paul repeats his warning in verses 16-18. Paul reasons that though he doesn't want to be thought to be a fool, it's okay, if the Corinthians will then listen to his boasts.

b) Jesus Would Not Boast (11:17)

¹⁷*What I am saying with this boastful confidence, I say not as the Lord would but as a fool.*

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Verses 17 and 18 form a parenthesis and provide another important disclaimer. Paul acknowledged that what he was saying, he was ‘not saying as the Lord would.’ He was not, as some have foolishly asserted, denying that what he wrote in this passage was inspired Scripture (cp. 2 Pe. 3:15-16). What he meant was that he was not following anything his Lord had done, because Jesus never boasted. That made it hard for him to do so, because the supreme goal of his life was to be like Christ (cp. 2: Cor. 11:1; Rom. 14:8; Phil. 1:21; 3:14).

Paul knows that though such boasting is not something Jesus Himself would have done, it is a necessary foolishness. Paul recognizes straightaway that self-confident boasting is foreign to spirituality. He boasts only to show the truth about his situation and that of his opponents.

Jesus used many different methods of communicating His message, but He did not in fact take this particular path of acting a part in any of His encounters with His enemies, and this is what Paul is saying in verse 17. Paul has already referred to the meekness and gentleness of Christ (10:1). If he is departing from this model in his ‘boasting,’ however, it is as a ploy, a stratagem, not because he finds boasting palatable. If it were real boasting, it would be quite alien to the spirit of Christ, but it is not.

c) Many Boast According to the Flesh (11:18)

¹⁸Since many boast according to the flesh, I too will boast.

The many who boasted ‘according to the flesh’ (cp. 1 Cor. 3:21; 5:6; Gal. 6:13) were, of course, the false apostles. Their boasting was worldly, vain, and empty, based on their human accomplishments, as Paul’s had been before his conversion (cp. Gal. 1:14; Phil. 3:4-6). The false apostles could not boast of what God had done through them, since they were the enemies of God. To counter their claims, Paul was forced to boast also.

His opponents had followed the world’s way in their boasting (v. 18), and so he will do so too. The real difference between him and them was in motivation.

It seems likely that Paul’s opponents made their claims over the Corinthians and their superiority over Paul in terms of the conventional lists of achievements about which they could boast. Hence, Paul writes, ‘since many are boasting in the way world does, I too will boast.’ They have left him no alternative; but Paul’s boasting will be quite different.

2. The Corinthians’ Eager Foolishness (11:19-21)

In verses 19-21 Paul issued his final disclaimers before beginning his boasting in verse 22. He employed the most scathing language to be found anywhere in this epistle, using sarcasm to shock the Corinthians out of their complacent acceptance of the false apostles.

Paul began by needling the Corinthians for being ‘wise’ enough to tolerate the foolish false apostles gladly. He sarcastically pointed out that the Corinthians willingly listened to those who enslaved, exploited, entrapped, dominated, and humiliated them. That being the case they could surely bear with him.

a) The Corinthians Are ‘Wise’ (11:19)

¹⁹For you gladly bear with fools, being wise yourselves!

Paul’s loathing for what he is about to do is evident in his biting sarcasm as he ironically calls the Corinthians ‘wise’ for their putting up with his enemies’ boasting. In effect, Paul says, ‘You are so brilliant that you put up with fools while they exploit you.’

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b) *The False Apostles are Domineering (11:20)*

²⁰*For you bear it if someone makes slaves of you, or devours you, or takes advantage of you, or puts on airs, or strikes you in the face.*

Paul's opponents boast of superiority (11:5; 12:11), of being 'super-apostles.' Yet the effect of their ministry is to enslave and manipulate those who succumb to them.

Verse 20 is most revealing. It presents a nauseating picture of false teachers of a most arrogant kind, lording it over the church at Corinth. They had really treated the Corinthian believers like dirt, and yet, incredibly, they had taken it! What then had these men done? Pushing themselves forward, they had 'enslaved' the Corinthians, not literally, of course, but by a domineering style of leadership so different from that of Paul, who refused to 'lord it' over them (1:24), and so they had taken advantage of them. Their exploitation was probably financial, and the slap in the face could be literal, although we cannot be sure of this. How very different was that ministry which Paul had exercised among them, whose model was 'the meekness and gentleness of Christ' (10:1)!

Verse 20 provides three characteristics of false teaching, seen in many contemporary cults. The first characteristic is *enslavement*. Paul also used the Greek verb translated 'enslaves' in Galatians 2:4 to describe the Judaizers' entrapment of the Galatians in their false legalistic system. In subtle ways false teachers demand such a degree of loyalty from those they teach, that those who listen to them become slaves to rules and regulations that go far beyond what the Bible teaches. False teachers frequently dictate what their adherents may or may not do.

The second characteristic is *exploitation*. Sadly, it is possible in human relationships to be manipulative and even to use others for selfish and unworthy ends or purposes. False teachers may tell people, for instance, what they must do with their money and, in urging generosity, really be feathering their own nest.

The false apostles had similarly ensnared many of the Corinthians in the heretical teaching they espoused. The false teachers had 'devoured' the Corinthians in the sense of plundering them financially (the same Greek word appears in Mark 12:40; cp. Ps. 14:4). The Corinthians had also been taken 'advantage' of or entrapped by the false apostles. They had been caught like a fish on a hook or like an animal in a trap.

The third characteristic is *ill treatment*. The rule of false teachers may go beyond the bounds of the control that any individual should ever have over another person. People may be so taken in by what they regard as 'charismatic' leadership and spiritual authority that they accept anything.

The false teachers also elevated themselves in stark contrast to Paul, who followed Christ's example of meekness and gentleness in his dealings with the Corinthians (10:1). The false apostles were obsessed with their own importance. To strike someone 'in the face' is the ultimate insult (cp. 1 Kgs. 22:24; Lam. 3:30; Mk. 14:65; Acts 23:2). Shockingly, the Corinthians tolerated even the most extreme humiliation by the false apostles. They may have physically struck some of the Corinthians to intimidate them, or the expression may be metaphorical. Either way, they allowed themselves to be humiliated.

Paul never did to the Corinthians what the 'super-apostles' did. He never enslaved them. The allegiance he wanted from them was not to himself but to the Lord Jesus. He never exploited or took advantage of them, but rather worked with his hands so that he looked for no financial support from them.

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c) Paul Is Ironic (11:21)

²¹To my shame, I must say, we were too weak for that! But whatever anyone else dares to boast of—I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast of that.

How ironic is verse 21a! These false apostles gloried in their power. As so-called ‘apostles of Christ’ they threw their weight about and they did so in a most obnoxious fashion. ‘They reckon I am weak?’ asks Paul. ‘Why, yes, so I am! If power is to be identified by this sort of conduct, then put my name down – and Timothy’s name too (‘we’) – as those of weak men!’

Sarcastically he adds, ‘To my shame, I must say, we were too weak for that!’ In essence, Paul says: ‘I was too weak to enslave you and devour your resources and ensnare you and lift myself up and abuse you. Shame on me!’

Paul’s sarcasm reaches its peak in verse 21. Actually, his ‘weakness’ in not enslaving, exploiting, entrapping, dominating, and humiliating the Corinthians proved to be the strength and proof of his genuineness as an apostle and the evidence of his love for them. Just as the false apostles had been bold in attacking him, so Paul would be bold in defending himself. His parenthetical phrase, ‘I speak in foolishness,’ evidences the sarcasm of this section.

B. Paul’s Qualifications (2 Corinthians 11:22-29)

D. A. Carson suggests that Paul’s detractors might have expected Paul to have said something like: ‘I have established more churches; I have preached the gospel in more lands and to more ethnic groups; I have traveled more miles; I have won more converts; I have written more books; I have raised more money; I have dominated more councils; I have walked with God fervently and seen more visions; I have commanded the greatest crowds and performed the most spectacular miracles.’

In truth, this kind of list was common in pagan culture. For example, Augustus Caesar wrote a eulogy in his own honor, listing his accomplishments, the famous *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*. Paul and Augustus are similar in their attempts to show the great sacrifices they have made for their people. But here, Paul numbers his weaknesses instead of his accomplishments—his boasting is a studied parody of the *Res Gestae*. Since the *Res Gestae* was posted in various places in the provinces in temples to Augustus, and in view of the status of Corinth as a Roman colony, the Corinthians were probably familiar with the *Res Gestae* and would have recognized Paul’s parody of the public standards by which leaders were normally judged to be great and legitimate.

In modern Western culture, boasting is regarded as brash and impolite. Humility and self-effacement have traditionally been regarded as virtues. In Paul’s day it was quite otherwise. People in Greco-Roman antiquity possessed no hope of glory in an after-life. A detached immortality was the most one could expect. Therefore, it was customary to achieve ‘glory’ in this life, and to boast of one’s achievements in this life. A good example is the *Res Gestae* of the Emperor Augustus in which he proudly recounts his many victories, official positions in Roman society, successfully completed buildings and other accomplishments. Boasting was also commonplace among the Jews. The Pharisee in the temple boasted of his religious achievements (Lk. 18:9-12). Echoes of earlier boasting are evident in ex-Pharisee Saul’s *curriculum vitae* in his letter to the Philippians (Phil. 3:4-6).

Paul’s list of ‘accomplishments’ (vv. 22-33) is the longest of three such lists in 2 Corinthians (see 4:8-9; 6:4-10), though only here does he boast, in detail, of what happened to him. Only some of these incidents are found in the Acts of the Apostles. We ought not to think therefore

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that when we have read what Luke says about Paul we know everything about the apostle. This list shows us how much more happened to him.

1. Paul Is a Sincere Jew (11: 22)

²²*Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they offspring of Abraham? So am I.*

Two areas of boasting in which Paul's opponents engaged appear in verses 21-29. *First, they boasted about their Jewishness* (v. 22). That this was the case indicates that they were probably Judaizers who made much of circumcision. Paul begins by pointing out that there was no doubt about his own Jewish ancestry and essential Jewishness. As he shared with the Philippians, he had more grounds for boasting of Jewish descent and faithfulness than most (Phil. 3:5-6).

At one point only does Paul seek to match his critics – their Jewishness. Paul's threefold fleshly identity is impeccable.

Before demonstrating his superiority to the false apostles, Paul replied first to yet another one of their slanderous lies in verse 22. He showed that he was in no way inferior to the false apostles in regard to his Jewishness. To each of the three questions he posed, Paul replied simply and powerfully, 'So am I.'

a) Hebrew

The term 'Hebrews' defines the Jewish people ethnically and linguistically. In Paul's day 'Hebrews' also distinguished the Palestinian Jews, whose native language was Hebrew or Aramaic, from the Hellenistic, Greek-speaking Jews of the Diaspora (cp. Acts 6:1). The false apostles may have questioned Paul's authenticity by arguing that he was not a Palestinian Jew like themselves and the Twelve, but a Hellenized Jew. But though Paul was born in Tarsus, a city in Asia Minor, he was nonetheless a 'Hebrew of Hebrews' (Phil. 3:5); that is, he preserved his family's traditional Jewish heritage. Like most educated men of his day Paul spoke Greek (Acts 21:37). But that does not mean that he was a Hellenized Jew; in fact, the Bible implies that Hebrew or Aramaic, not Greek, was his native language (cp. Acts 21:40; 26:14). Further, although he was born in Tarsus, Paul evidently came to Jerusalem as a young child, was raised there, and studied there under Gamaliel (Acts 22:3; 26:4).

As a Hebrew he has pure *ethnic* identity. He was in fact 'a Hebrew of the Hebrews (Phil. 3:5), which meant that he was a full-blooded Jew, and more than that he was a Hebraic Jew who was fluent in Hebrew and Aramaic and thoroughly steep in Hebrew culture.

'Hebrews' is a linguistic and cultural term. What Paul means by its use here is that he had been reared with the language and with the culture of the Holy Land itself, not that of Hellenistic Judaism. This does not mean he was born in the Holy Land, nor that he did not know Greek, for clearly he did. What it does mean is that the Jewish family into which he was born maintained its Jewish culture despite its Gentile environment (cp. Phil. 3:5).

b) Israelite

As an Israelite, he had full *religious* identity with the people of God and all the rights and privileges thereof—an awesome religious identity (cp. Rom. 9:4).

'Israelites' is probably here intended as a racial term, denoting the descendants of Jacob, members of the twelve tribes of Israel.

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The term ‘Israelites’ (Ex. 35:29; 1 Sam. 2:14; 14:21; 29:1; 2 Kgs. 3:24; Neh. 11:3; Rom. 9:4) views the Jewish people in terms of their descent from Jacob (Israel). It also expresses their theocratic identity as God’s chosen people (Amos 3:2; cp. Ex. 19:5-6; Rom. 9:4-5).

c) Abraham’s Seed

As the seed of Abraham he was of God’s *covenant* people and a participant in the salvation-historical privileges of the elect people of God.

‘Abraham’s descendants’ had rather fuller implications, for the covenant promises God made to Israel were first made to Abraham (Gen. 12:1ff.), so it was a claim to stand within the great Old Covenant purpose of God and to inherit its promises.

Like the false apostles, Paul was also one of the ‘descendants of Abraham.’ He was heir to all the covenant privileges and blessings that God promised to Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3).

So then if language, culture, race, and religious inheritance meant anything, Paul and these men were equal. This certainly establishes beyond doubt that they were Jews. Paul had the pedigree. No one could gainsay his famous lineage and culture, and few could equal it. Paul’s fleshly superiority was incontrovertible. It was true, but Paul could barely bring himself to voice it, because it countered the gospel of grace and the call to assume the humble character of Christ and take up the cross and follow Him (cp. Mt. 16:24). This was foolish boasting indeed. And Paul could hardly do it.

Having established that in every way—socially, religiously, culturally, linguistically, and covenantally—he was not at all inferior to the false apostles, Paul presents credentials that actually proved he was superior to them.

2. Paul Is a Suffering Servant (11:23-29)

Second, Paul’s opponents boasted about their service for Christ (v. 23). Presumably they bragged about the extent of their work and what they had suffered in its cause. Paul answered with boasts that more than matched those of the false teachers.

In everything else, however, Paul highlights matters of difficulty and hardship – hard work, imprisonment, floggings, threats to his life. What manner of boasting is this? In what must have been a daring exercise in antiquity, Paul takes the literary convention of boasting and inverts it. His boast is in folly, weakness, disappointment, and defeat.

Much of this catalogue of sufferings can be verified from the Acts of the Apostles, although we learn far more about his sufferings from this passage than we do from the many chapters in that book which describe Paul’s missionary travels.

a) A Servant of Christ (11:23a)

²³*Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—*

In verse 23, he begins to assert superiority, and so he now says not simply that he is a fool, but that he is going beyond folly into madness. His claims are however strikingly paradoxical. The image of Paul most Christians have is many-sided, for he was a rich and many-sided personality, but few will think of him as witty, yet there is great wit employed here in the service of the gospel.

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To call the false apostles ‘servants of Christ’ even for the sake of argument was repulsive to Paul, so he hastens to add the disclaimer, ‘I speak as if insane.’ ‘Insane’ translates a form of the verb *paraphroneō*, which literally means, ‘to be beside oneself,’ or ‘to be out of one’s mind.’ It is a stronger word than *aphronsunē*, which the apostle used earlier to describe his foolishness in boasting (11:1, 17, 21). If boasting was to Paul the act of a fool, suggesting that the false apostles were servants of Christ was the raving of a madman. The phrase also expresses Paul’s view of his boasting. The whole discussion was insanity, but the Corinthians’ lack of discernment made it necessary.

As Paul poses the next question, ‘Are they servants of Christ?’ and answers, ‘I am a better one,’ he reflexively adds, ‘I am talking like a madman.’ And with that he switches from boasting in his fleshly strengths to boasting in his weaknesses. This was doubly foolish because Paul’s enemies rejected his weaknesses, viewing them as disqualifications. He boasts in his seeming disqualifications.

The phrase ‘I more so’ marks the beginning of Paul’s demonstration of his superiority over the false apostles. The first credential he presented, his suffering, seems a little unusual. Paul’s detailed list of the things he had endured makes him sound more like someone who needed help from the Lord rather than an empowered and commissioned apostle of Jesus Christ. How could the fact that he antagonized so many people and put himself into so many difficulties possibly be evidence of his apostleship? But suffering was exactly what Jesus predicted that His apostles would experience (Mt. 10:16-25). To that general promise to the apostles of suffering, the Lord added a specific one to Paul (Acts 9:15-16).

This is the fourth and most detailed description in this epistle of Paul’s suffering (cp. 1:4-10; 4_7-12; 6:4-10). Though it gives more details of Paul’s trials than Luke lists in Acts, it is by no means exhaustive; the apostle’s humility caused him to say only what was necessary to make his point.

b) General Sufferings (11:23b)

...with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death.

Paul turns convention on its head and argues for the authenticity and superiority of his apostolic service from his weaknesses, not from his strengths. The apostle begins with a generalized statement of his sufferings. He pictures a life overflowing with perpetual, incalculable sufferings. This was Paul’s claim to authenticity. Certainly, none of the super-apostles could match it, and more certainly, none cared to.

Paul then matches the false teachers’ boasts about their service of Christ with a catalogue of his own. First, no-one’s volume of work in the interests of the kingdom of the Lord Jesus was greater. He had ‘far greater labors’ – although again, he acknowledges that to make such a claim is foolish!

Kopos (‘labors’) describes working to the point of sweat and exhaustion. It is translated ‘toil’ in 1 Corinthians 15:58. Of Paul’s ‘imprisonments’ recorded in Acts, only the one at Philippi had taken place as Paul penned this passage. How many other time he was imprisoned is unknown. Along with being imprisoned, Paul had been ‘beaten times without number.’ So numerous were those official and unofficial beatings that the apostle could not even count them all. As will be seen when he delineates some of them in verses 24-25, they came at the hands of both his own

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countrymen and the Gentiles. Paul lived constantly ‘in danger of death,’ knowing that every day could be his last. Yet he never wavered in his commitment or compromised the message he preached.

c) Physical Sufferings (11:24-25)

In conscious parody of Caesar’s proud résumé, Paul lists his specific sufferings, giving explicit substance to what he has just summarized. To those caught up in the prosperity gospel of the super-apostles, these specific sufferings were hardly résumé enhancers, but foolish admissions. But to Paul, they were proof positive that he was a servant of Christ. Suffering, not success, authenticated Paul’s ministry.

(1) Jewish Lashes (11:24)

²⁴*Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one.*

The ‘forty lashes less one’ was a unique Jewish punishment administered in the synagogue and was the most severe beating allowed by Scripture (cp. Dt. 25:1-3). It was extremely painful and humiliating. No more than forty stripes could be administered at one beating, and that is why they were limited to thirty-nine—because if the executioner exceeded forty, he himself was liable to be flogged. Remarkably, not one of Paul’s floggings is mentioned in Acts or any other source. Therefore, the five floggings all occurred early in Paul’s ministry.

Deuteronomy 25:1-3 limits to forty the number of lashes an offender may receive in a flogging. The Jews were afraid they might exceed this by miscounting, so they deliberately numbered them short of this.

This particular punishment was prescribed by the Mosaic Law (Dt. 25:1-3). The Jews of Paul’s day, in their legalistic zeal for the external observance of the Law, limited the number of blows to thirty-nine lest they inadvertently miscount and give more than forty. Just as Jesus had warned (Mt. 10:17; 23:34), the unbelieving Jews beat the messengers He sent to them (cp. Acts. 5:40).

Imagine Paul’s love for his people, the Jews. When he entered a town he went to the Jews first, though in many cases that meant a thirty-nine stripe flogging in the synagogue for false teaching and blasphemy. What astonishing love! Paul’s painful, heroic love remained perpetual and unflagging as he went to the Jews first. His credentials dripped with his own blood.

(2) Gentile Rods (11:25a)

²⁵*Three times I was beaten with rods.*

The rod, on the other hand, was the instrument of Roman and therefore Gentile punishment. Paul’s only recorded beating with the rod in Scripture took place in Philippi as described in the beating of Paul and Silas in Acts 16:22-23. In 2 Corinthians 11 Paul lists three such separate beatings with the rod. Surely, Paul experienced more in his extended missionary journeys. His body became a living monument to suffering (cp. Gal. 6:17). The scars on his body were marks of apostleship and evidence of his superior qualifications over the super-apostles. Most of all, they were scars of love.

Beating with rods was a Roman punishment but inflicted by them on others, for Roman citizens were specifically excluded from it (cp. Acts 16:22-23, 37).

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Paul also experience corporal punishment from the Romans. That punishment was the equivalent of the Jews' thirty-nine lashes. The only such incident Luke recorded in Acts took place at Philippi (Acts 16:22-23, 37; cp. 1 Th. 2:2). Paul proudly bore the scars from his beatings at the hands of the Jews and the Romans as the 'brand-marks of Jesus' (Gal. 6:17).

(3) Stoning (11:25b)

Once I was stoned.

We have a full account of Paul's stoning at Lystra where his attackers left him apparently dead (cp. Acts 14:19). The physical trauma inflicted by such events is a matter of historical record. No doubt Paul's face also bore the marks of Jesus. The only reason Paul escaped alive at Lystra is that the stoning was the inefficient work of a Jewish mob. If it had been a judicial stoning as proscribed in the *Mishnah* (Sanhedrin 6:1-6), the outcome would have been otherwise.

The apostle was stoned, dragged out of the city, and left for dead at Lystra (Acts 14:19). That incident was an act of mob violence, not a formal, judicial stoning.

(4) Shipwreck (11:25c)

Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea;

Maritime disasters were not unusual in the ancient world due to fragile vessels, poor navigation, misleading maps, and meteorological guesswork. Paul's three shipwrecks occurred before the famous shipwreck on the island of Malta described in Acts 27. So Paul was involved in at least four shipwrecks. And one of them was particularly miserable because it was mid-sea, so that Paul became flotsam for twenty-four hours in open sea.

Three times Paul's numerous sea voyages (Acts records nine before the writing of 2 Corinthians) ended with him being shipwrecked. That does not include the apostle's shipwreck on his voyage to Rome (Acts 27), which had not yet occurred.

Until his last journey to Rome, most of his sea journeys will probably have been short, but several would be hazardous, traversing rough waters.

d) Travel Sufferings (11:26)

²⁶*on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers;*

Next Paul catalogs his perils with rhythmic, specificity. Paul was no tourist! The dangers are all frequent-traveler perils and fall into two categories: *places* and *people*. Paul experienced danger everywhere he went—rivers, the city, the wilderness, the sea. But it was people, rather than places that were the greatest danger. Acts records six Jewish plots against Paul and three perilous encounters with Gentiles (cp. Acts 9:23, 29; 13:45; 14:2-19; 15:26; 17:5ff.; 18:12; and 14:19-20; 16:16-40; 19:23-41).

Paul next described some of the 'dangers' he encountered on his frequent journeys—both the countless shorter trips that made up his three main missionary journeys and the many other trips he took. Forging the many 'rivers' that crossed his path put Paul in constant danger of drowning, since bridges were few and floods were frequent. Another threat to travelers were the 'robbers' that haunted the roads. Paul faced constant hostility from his 'countrymen' almost from the moment of his conversion. He also faced hostility from 'the Gentiles,' most notably at Philippi

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(Acts 16:16-40) and Ephesus (Acts 10:23-41; 1 Cor. 15:32). Not only did Paul face danger from different people but also in different locations. He faced dangers in virtually every ‘city’ he visited. Nor was he safe outside the cities, for he also faced dangers in the ‘wilderness.’ Finally, as noted above, travel ‘on the sea’ posed the ever-present danger of shipwreck.

Verse 26 covers a great deal of ground. The word that constantly recurs is ‘danger.’ Such a catalogue makes us aware also of the providence of God, for despite being beset by so many threats to his life, Paul was still alive to carry on his gospel work. Many servants of Christ could give the same sort of testimony. Paul probably ended it with ‘danger from false brothers’ because of possible parallels with the situation he was now dealing with at Corinth.

But the most insidious danger of all were the ‘false brethren,’ who posed as believers and then tried to destroy Paul’s ministry. The false apostles at Corinth were prime examples of such treacherous pseudo-brethren, as were the Judaizers (Gal. 2:4).

Most significantly, ‘dangers from false brothers’ is positioned at the conclusion of the dangers. These ‘false brothers’ are the same as the ‘false apostles’ of verse 13 who are trying to pass themselves off as ‘apostles of Christ.’ ‘Danger from false brothers’ flashes like a blinking neon sign at the end of Paul’s dangers, indicating both the pain that he has suffered and the peril to the Corinthian church. It is these who have posed and pose the greatest danger to Paul. Indeed, it was these very people who were denying Paul’s credentials with their triumphalist, prosperity theology.

e) Volitional Sufferings (11:27)

²⁷*in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.*

Third, his physical hardships exceeded those of others, for he knew what it was to go without sleep, to be hungry and thirsty, cold and exposed. Verse 27 brings together a number of experiences that would take their toll of Paul’s physical constitution. The fact that he mentions ‘hunger and thirst’ and then says he has often gone without food suggests the latter refers to fasting.

Paul summarizes the overall experience of his apostolic lifestyle, recollecting immense suffering over a period of years. Obviously Paul had freely chosen to live out a counter-prosperity lifestyle. Paul labored night and day with his own hands to preach the gospel (cp. 1 Th. 2:9). His sleepless nights were a voluntary insomnia because his manual labor and his prayers and his preaching often curtailed his sleep. He suffered hunger and thirst and cold and exposure because of his extreme travels for the sake of the gospel. Paul volitionally chose all of this. So we see that while the false apostles taught a prosperity-drenched gospel replete with large honoraria and the good life, Paul chose to live hand-to-mouth.

In verse 27, Paul turned away from the dangers that constantly threatened him to the ‘labor and hardship’ that was also the normal routine of his life. Earning a living to support himself and sometimes his fellow missionaries (Acts 20:34) often meant working ‘through many sleepless nights.’ In spite of Paul’s diligent, hard work, the demands of his ministry sometimes made it difficult for him to earn enough to sustain himself. As a result, he experienced ‘hunger and thirst’ (cp. 1 Cor. 4:11), was ‘often without food’ (cp. 11:9), and faced ‘cold and exposure’ (cp. 2 Tim. 4:13).

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Paul's sufferings set him apart from the money- and comfort seeking false apostles and marked him as a true apostle of the Lord Jesus.

Such sufferings! Certainly others have suffered worse pain in the moments of their martyrdom. But is there anyone in recorded history who has suffered so much over the course of years—the multiple near-death floggings, the gruesome stoning, the frequent shipwrecks, the dangers on the road from both places and people, the great suffering over an extended period of time? Is there an equal to Paul's suffering? I think not. The annals of the world's epic lives and journeys contain nothing to rival the courage and endurance—and love—of the Apostle Paul. Paul is not only the church's great hero, but the world's great hero.

f) Ministerial Sufferings (11:28-29)

(1) His Concern 11:28)

²⁸*And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.*

Fourth, and significantly, the greatest burden he bore, far exceeding any other, was the pastoral and spiritual care of the churches. This brought him the greatest cost as he indicates by the phrase 'apart from other things.' Paul felt deeply his identity with God's people, as any true pastor does. Part of our hidden, but often most significant, service of the Lord Jesus is struggling in prayer for others, and especially those for whom we have spiritual responsibility.

The phrase, apart from such external things' could be better rendered 'apart from the things not mentioned.' In other words, Paul could have listed far more external hardships had his humility permitted him to do so. All of them, however, paled into insignificance in comparison to the internal, 'daily pressure' he felt 'of concern for all the churches.' Paul felt deeply the pain of the church's weakness and suffering. He devoted his life to the saints. He agonized over them, prayed for them, and exhorted them. He was greatly burdened by their moral, spiritual, and doctrinal needs. The constant pressure that burden exerted on him assaulted his peace, joy, and satisfaction.

Nevertheless, for Paul the catalog of sufferings was not the sum of it. His greatest suffering rested in his pastoral heart. Paul's opening, 'And, apart from other things,' indicates that his catalog of sufferings is illustrative and not complete. Chrysostom believed that Paul had not told the half of it. Certainly his anxiety over the churches was his greatest suffering of all (cp. 7:5b; 1 Th. 3:5).

Verse 28 startles us. It is so different from all that has gone before it. Perhaps our own concern is too shallow to realize that for Paul concern for all the churches was actually painful. This concern for the churches was being expressed in Paul's actual writing of this letter. We can see at point after point that it was born out of this concern, for he gives plenty of evidence of it earlier in the letter. He writes in 2:13 about the fact that he had not been able on one occasion to find Titus and of the dispeace he experienced then. He alludes to this again in 7:5-6, saying he had no rest, with conflicts on the outside and fears within, but that then God had comforted him with the coming of Titus. This concern for the churches was a daily one for Paul. Some of his other sufferings, intense as many of them were, would not have been long-lasting, but there was no remission of this. It was with him all the time. The more effective his evangelistic work, the greater the burden of concern would become, because every new church established added to his pastoral responsibilities. The fact that this burden was incessant and that he mentions it last

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gives it the function of a climax, and, perhaps, was meant to show the Corinthians how deeply he cared for them.

(2) His Empathy (11:29)

²⁹*Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?*

What does verse 29 mean? He is developing the thought of verse 28 and describing his deep sense of identification with the churches in all their frailty and liability to sin. His intercession for these people was not just the recitation of a list of names in the place of prayer but a function of a profound spiritual and emotional sense of oneness with them. All Christians, in their local churches, are members of God's great family, and cannot but feel with other members of their fellowship in all kinds of situations.

Paul's great heart rose and fell with his people. His greatest pains were heart-pains over his people! This is driven home by his rhetorical questions. Paul's becoming weak when his people were weak testifies to his empathy—he felt with his people. There was not an ounce of indifference in Paul's heart. The fierce counterpart to Paul's empathy was his indignation over the thought of someone falling away from Christ. Literally, the question reads, 'Who is entrapped into sin, and I do not burn?' His people's fallings set Paul's heart ablaze with pain. Paul's pastoral heart (his matching his weakness to his people's weakness, his burning pain at their fall) was the primary proof of his apostleship.

Paul further expressed his passionate concern for the churches by asking two rhetorical questions. The first expressed his empathy with the pain and suffering of weak, immature believers. Paul was also concerned about the 'unruly' (1 Th. 5:14) as his second rhetorical question reveals. 'Intense concern' translates a form of the verb *puroō*, which literally means, 'to set on fire,' or 'to enflame.' Paul burned with righteous indignation when God's people were led into sin, as did Jesus.

We can be sure that the presence of false teachers in the Corinthian church had caused Paul considerable anxiety for the well-being of vulnerable new Christians. Here is an insight into the deep pastoral concern of Paul for the churches. As one who confessed to being 'weak' he stands with the weak or 'vulnerable' new believers. He 'inwardly burns' at the prospect of such Christians falling away from Christ.

C. Paul's Weakness (2 Corinthians 11:30-33)

1. Paul's Boast (11:30)

³⁰*If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.*

The way Paul puts his thought in verse 30 shows he was under some definite constraint. He must boast (cp. 12:1). This constraint may have been external, for there may well have been some at Corinth who were demanding he produce his credentials. It seems highly likely from 12:11 that the constraint was outward, arising from the Corinthians themselves.

This verse also sums up the events and factors in his life of which Paul has been 'boasting.' They are evidence, not of his powerful personality or towering gifts, the kind of evidence to which the false apostles would probably have pointed in their own case, but rather of his human frailty. They therefore witnessed to the fact that God was at work in him.

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The Corinthians might have expected Paul to defend his apostleship by showing his ability to take charge of any situation. Surprisingly, Paul gave an embarrassing illustration of his weakness instead.

To counter the folly of boasting, he determines that if he must boast, then it will be about the events that show his weakness rather than his strength. At the same time, he affirms his truthfulness before God in what he says (v. 31).

Paul introduces his concluding thoughts with a summary sentence. The apostle does this by recounting a very low point in his life, when he was lowered in a basket from a window in the city wall to escape.

2. Paul's Oath (11:31)

³¹*The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, he who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying.*

The telling of this event would be so incredible to his triumphalist detractors that he uses an oath to assure them that it is true. This oath ensured that his detractors would listen. Why the oath? we wonder. The story is patently benign. How can this story merit an oath?

That Paul would introduce the seemingly mundane story of his escape with the forceful declaration in verse 31 seems strange. One would have expected such a vehement declaration of Paul's veracity to lead directly into the dramatic story of his trip to heaven (12:2ff.). That he used the declaration here emphasizes the significance of this event to him.

The statement in verse 31 is most solemn. To what does it refer? Some commentators think it applies to the sufferings to which he has just referred. The list is so extensive and the sufferings so great that Paul feels it necessary to appeal to God's all-seeing knowledge for support in case his readers think he is exaggerating. Others, however, think he is referring to his decision, expressed in verse 30, to 'boast' only in things that will reveal his sense of weakness. In this way, he was so utterly different from his opponents, for, instead of using words to create an image of himself as a man confident in his strength, he has revealed how weak and vulnerable he is. Either interpretation makes good sense in this context.

3. Paul's Example (11:32-33)

³²*At Damascus, the governor under King Aretas was guarding the city of Damascus in order to seize me,* ³³*but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall and escaped his hands.*

The key to the answer comes from the identification of the city as Damascus. It was to Damascus that Paul first went to as a proud Pharisee to seek out and destroy the people called Christians. But it was on the road to that city he met Christ and received his call. And when he left the city it was like a lowly criminal, lowered like a catch of dead fish in a basket whose smelly cargo he had displaced. In effect, Paul views the incident in Damascus as a paradigm for his life. God's strength would be perfected in his weakness. Paul tells us this story that weakness was at the heart of his calling from the very beginning of his apostleship.

Paul introduces, right at the end of his account of his sufferings and almost as an afterthought, a story with a humorous touch to it. In so doing, however, he makes a most telling point. The incident is also recorded by Luke in Acts 9:23-25. There are some differences between the two accounts, but not of a character to render the accounts incompatible. According to Acts the Jews had conspired to kill Paul, keeping watch on the city gates, presumably thinking he would try to

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get away from the city. Here King Aretas was guarding the city in order to arrest him. There is no unlikelihood in this situation, however, for Aretas the king of the Arab kingdom of Nabataea, a vassal of Rome, was related by marriage to the Herod family, which had played an important part in governing the Jews. The Jews who were determined on murder may well have contacted him to secure his support.

The escape Paul recounted took place after his Damascus Road conversion, when he returned to Damascus after spending three years in Nabataean Arabia (cp. Gal. 1:17-19). Enraged by Paul's bold, fearless preaching of Jesus as the Messiah, the unbelieving Jews in Damascus plotted to take his life (Acts 9:23-24). As would happen throughout Paul's ministry, they enlisted the aid of the Gentiles). It is not known for certain whether Damascus was under Nabataean rule or Roman rule at this time. If the former, the ethnarch was the governor of the city under Aretas the king; if the latter, he was the leader of Damascus' Nabataean community, who had been appointed by Aretas. In either case, he cooperated with the Jews in their attempt to kill Paul. The ethnarch's willingness to help the Jews suggests Paul's ministry during his three years in Arabia had aroused the Nabataeans hostility.

With the aid of fellow Christians (Acts 9:25), Paul escaped from Damascus and fled to Jerusalem (Acts 9:26). That many years later he used this event to illustrate his humility reveals how embarrassing this undignified experience was for him. Lest anyone (including himself) should think too highly of Paul, this incident graphically illustrates the truth of his weakness apart from God's power.

Here, surely with tongue in cheek, Paul is making the point that he, the apostle of the Gentiles, had been prepared to suffer the indignity of such a descent from a city wall. How would the false apostles, with their arrogance and delusions of spiritual grandeur, have taken to that? It is perhaps his way of saying he was prepared for loss of dignity as well as physical sufferings in the service of Christ. To end this long 'boasting' catalogue in this way shows that Paul's concern to be recognized as a true apostle was quite unconnected with ideas of status.

Incidentally, we note that Paul received not only inner strength to face suffering, but also outward protection from capture, so that he might continue his work for the Lord. Special grace was given for the trials within and special divine providence for his outward circumstances. The servant of Christ today may likewise look for that strength and protection when working for Him.

Caesar's *Res Gestae* was the cultural model for the false apostles whose self-promoting vitas read like this: 'I have six letters from prominent people in Athens and Rome who extol my virtues. Three times I have spoken before imperial legates. Once I was received by Pompeii. Twice I have received honoraria beyond my peers. In every quarter I am esteemed.' But Paul, instead of extolling his achievements, boasted in bearing the cross of Christ in suffering and weakness. Today we too find it easier to interpret the gospel in terms of our received culture rather than interpreting the culture by the gospel. We need to be wary of our Christianity becoming a Christianized version of our own culture. We must not write our résumés after the example of Caesar but after that of Paul. As Christians we must acknowledge and embrace our weaknesses, because as we give them to Christ, they become occasions for His strength and glory. Can we embrace our weaknesses? Will we embrace our weaknesses?

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This passage teaches us two things about Paul as an example. The first is that as Christians we are humbly to serve others in the gospel. The great apostle is a good example of one to whom authority was given but who did not become manipulative or authoritarian. The application to Christian ministers is clear. It is a temptation to use one's position or gifts or both, to create a circle of admirers. Such a person exercises his ministry in the name of Christ but is really involved in an 'ego trip.' Further, this passage teaches us about the zeal of Paul which disregarded both discomfort and pain. Paul's zeal raises the questions about *our* zeal; *my* zeal in particular. Are we not embarrassed by the lack of it in the church and in ourselves? Let the love and fear of Christ that 'controlled' Paul also control us and kindle the fire of zeal within us.

For next time: Read 2 Corinthians 12:1-10.