

2 Cor 11:16-32 Paul's Foolish Boasting, part 2

2 Cor 11:22-33 amounts to Paul's resume. His purpose in describing all these experiences is that he wants to prove to his readers that he is a genuine apostle and that the church should retain its loyalty to him and to the Gospel, and not to the false teachers.

Paul's frustration with the people of the church is showing through in this section of the book. He seems to be really disappointed that the people of the church are putting up with these false teachers. So he uses some rather severe language here in an effort to show how foolish it is to follow the false teachers.

In fact, he admits (.17) that he's speaking "not according to the Lord." That is, he knows that he's not following Jesus' example of meekness or gentleness (cf. 10:1). He's defending himself in a way that Jesus never did—"according to the flesh" (.18). He's speaking foolishly and not in a Christ-like manner. But he's resorting to this kind of language in an effort to get through to the people of the church. They "put up with fools gladly" (.19), so Paul is going to act the part of a fool so they'll listen to him. And part of that foolishness is boldly boasting about his experiences in serving the Lord (.18).

The passage contains two main parts. First, last week we saw

I. The foolish errors of the church

A. Gladly putting up with fools .18-19

This was the major problem—tolerating the false teachers and allowing them to have influence within the church. Paul was very upset about it.

B. .20 Tolerating abuse from the false teachers

1. Enslavement, i.e., bondage/tyranny/domination
2. Exploitation/extortion
3. Taking advantage/theft/craftiness/entrapment
4. Self-promotion/arrogance
5. Insulting behavior/slaps in the face

Trans: The people of the church were foolish for tolerating this kind of behavior from the false teachers.

II. The “foolish” and bold boasting of Paul .21b-33

.21b – Here is what Paul can boldly boast about; here’s his resume. If the false teachers can boast, so can he.

The experiences that Paul mentions here are the marks of a true apostle; they are his credentials, his resume’. The point is that the church should be loyal to him; they should listen to his words and not to the words of the false teachers.

Paul is comparing himself here with another group – “they” (.22a). Paul is likely referring to the false teachers. He’s showing that he has the credentials and experiences to prove that he is a genuine apostle, unlike the false teachers. They are claiming certain things for themselves, but Paul outstrips them in every category.

A. He can boast about his ethnic and religious descent/ancestry. .22

1. Notice for each of these claims in vs. 22, Paul says “so am I.” So these are the things that the false teachers are boasting about; they were boasting about their Jewish pedigree/heritage/traditions.

Your pedigree and parentage were very important in the ancient world. Many people boasted about their noble birth or good breeding. Paul has plenty to boast about in that regard.

2. Paul is here claiming a pure Hebrew background. Regarding history, culture, language, and national origin, he was a real Hebrew, a true Israelite. He’s just as Jewish as any of the false teacher are, if not more so. Over in Phil 3:4-6, he describes himself as “a Hebrew of the Hebrews” and of the tribe of Benjamin.

3. The fact that Paul says this about the false teachers tells us that they were Jewish converts to Christianity. Perhaps they were teaching that Christians had to keep the OT law to be saved. We typically call such people “Judaizers.” Paul wrote the book of Galatians to address this very problem.

App: Ethnicity and ancestry do not commend us to God. Many are under the mistaken notion that they inherit their spiritual status from their parents or their family background. We might indeed receive a religious tradition from our parents/family, but that does not insure that we are genuinely saved. Neither your parents nor your ancestral line have anything to do with your spiritual condition. In Christianity, ethnic and religious descent are not important. Each person must believe individually and personally.

B. He can boast about his service for Christ. .23

1. The emphasis here seems to be on how much more Paul has experienced in service to Christ than the false teachers have. Note how often he uses the word “more” or “often.” He had previously said, “so am I” (.22), and now he’s claiming even “more.” Paul far outstrips the false teachers in his service for Christ; none of them had served Christ better than Paul.

Quote: In intensity and scope of ministry no apostle or even group of apostles (cf. 1 Cor. 15:10) could match Paul’s record of service.¹

2. In fact, from Paul’s previous comments about these people, we know that they were *not* genuine servants of Christ. In 11:13, Paul calls them “false apostles, deceitful workers.” So these false teachers had not done anything of value for the cause of Christ.

¹ David K. Lowery, “2 Corinthians,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 580.

App: One of the marks of false teachers is that they claim to be servants of Christ, but are not. Remember that many of those claiming to have prophesied, cast out demons, and done many wonderful works will hear Jesus say, “Depart from me, ye who work iniquity, I never knew you” (Mt 7:15-21). We should not be led astray by those claiming to be servants of Christ but who behave like false teachers.

C. He can boast about the ways he’s suffered persecution. .23b-25a

Paul begins a long list of ways that he’s suffered as an apostle in service to Christ. Enduring all this persecution demonstrates Paul’s strength and commitment.

When people boast or brag, they usually talk about their achievements, their successes, their victories. But that’s not what Paul does here.

You’ll notice over the next few items that these are all more defeats than they are successes. Paul is not bragging about all his achievements; he’s boasting about how much he’s suffered for Jesus’ sake. These all pertain to Paul’s weaknesses and afflictions.

App: When was the last time you heard Christianity advertised in this way? Who links Christianity with weakness and persecution? Have you ever heard these descriptions from the health, wealth, and prosperity preachers? No.

Let’s look at how Paul was persecuted.

1. .23b He mentions labor, stripes, prison, and death. He’d experienced such things abundantly, excessively, exceedingly, and often. Ever since his conversion, his life had been filled with labor, danger, and abuse. This kind of experience was normal for him; he’s talking about recurring situations—they were “abundant” and “frequent.” This was his normal experience.
2. Notice .23end “in deaths often” – probably speaking of the perils/dangers of death or being near death. He may actually have died on at least one occasion. He was stoned once (.25), and in Acts where that event is described, it says

Ac 14:19 Then Jews from Antioch and Iconium ... persuaded the multitudes, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead.

He may very well have been dead; he certainly looked like he was dead. Stoning usually resulted in death.

Paul describes an experience of a man caught up into the third heaven (1 Cor 12:2). Perhaps this was a near-death experience.

It's remarkable that after that stoning, he got up and went back into the city and then continued his journey the next day. That looks to me like a remarkable, miraculous healing or even resurrection from the dead.

Note that Paul says "in deaths often," which suggests that the threat of death was frequent for him. He was exposed to death or in danger/threat of death regularly. The Bible records several attempts on his life. His life was in constant jeopardy.

3. .24 Much of this mistreatment had come "from the Jews..." The Jews had a tradition that if someone were sentenced to 40 lashes, they would give the victim 39, just to make sure that they had not miscounted (Deut 25:2-3).

The tradition called for 13 lashes on the chest and 26 on the back. Whipping was considered to be a very disgraceful penalty, and Paul experienced it five times.

4. The Jews whipped him, and the Romans beat him.

.25a To be "beaten with rods" describes the Roman practice of punishing a criminal by beating him with clubs. Paul experienced that three times, even though, as a Roman citizen, he should have been exempt from that kind of cruel treatment.

Quote: A heavy beating with rods was generally imposed ... on members of the lower classes who could not afford to pay a punitive fee.²

App: Those who serve God often suffer in various ways. In some places, persecution and threats of death are very common. Christians are killed all around the world for their faith in Christ.

- D. He can boast about the various dangers and hardships he's endured. .25b-27, 32-33

In our modern age, we don't appreciate the hazards and dangers of travel in the ancient world. Many of us find extended travel in cars or airplanes exhausting; imagine what it was like before all the modern conveniences.

1. .25b Paul traveled all over the Mediterranean world, often by ship; and in his travels, he experienced all sorts of dangers and threats.
2. .25b Shipwreck, floating for a day and a night "in the deep," probably clinging for dear life to the wreckage of the ship. Those who survived shipwreck were often either killed or enslaved. Imagine surviving shipwreck, only to be enslaved.

Quote: Secundus, [a] philosopher, was asked in a dialogue with the emperor Hadrian, "What is a boat?" His response was that a boat is "a sea-tossed object, a foundationless home, a well-crafted tomb, ... a flying prison, ... a plaything of the wind, sailing death, an open cage, uncertain safety, the prospect of death." A modern [writer] defined the sea as a large body of water surrounded by trouble.³

² David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, vol. 29, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 498.

³ David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, vol. 29, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 499.

Paul was not going out on relaxing ocean cruises when he was sailing around the Med. He was risking his life every time he boarded a boat.

3. .26 Both Jews and Gentiles were against him in his ceaseless travels.

.26b The words “city,” “wilderness,” and “sea” cover just about everywhere. He was exposed to peril and hardship everywhere he went—on the road, on the sea, and in the city.

.26end Paul was in danger even from “false brethren.” People claiming to be Christians betrayed him and attempted to hurt him.

4. .32-33 He mentions having to flee Damascus by being let down from a window in a basket (cf. Acts 9:19-25). Besides being an exciting and dangerous event, this was also an example of humiliation and weakness. It’s a rather embarrassing story, a very close call, a narrow escape. It’s another example of weakness, not power.

5. Paul led a very dangerous, perilous, and exciting life. If they made a movie of his life, it would be an action/adventure film. Paul’s life was exciting in many ways, but it was also very unpleasant and uncomfortable. He had many humiliating and even embarrassing experiences.

- E. .27 He can boast about his experiences of labor, adversity, and infirmity.

He’d worked hard and suffered great inconvenience and discomfort because of it.

1 Corinthians 4:11 *To the present hour we both hunger and thirst, and we are poorly clothed, and beaten, and homeless.*

The book of Acts describes only part of Paul’s life. In Acts, we have several descriptions of the difficulties and dangers that Paul experienced. But he endured far more hardships than what Acts records.

It's amazing that Paul lived through all of these trials. Imagine the stamina, strength, and commitment necessary to endure all of this mistreatment. I can't imagine the pain he endured because of all the various injuries that he'd sustained. E.g., like an old football player nursing his injuries.

Galatians 6:17 ... *I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus.*

App: In comparison to what Paul endured, our inconveniences for the sake of Jesus amount to just about nothing. It's not very difficult for us to serve the Lord compared to what it cost our forefathers.

And yet, many will do virtually nothing for the Lord or for his church if it is in the least inconvenient or costly. They see the church as a service organization for their benefit. They are consumers of services that the church provides. They are not servants of Christ or his church; they are consumers who make demands of Christ and his church. We ought to be servants like Paul rather than demanding consumers like so many people are these days.

F. He can boast about his concern for the churches. .28

1. Along with all the *external* problems, Paul had many *internal* or personal pressures. Besides the physical pain that he's already described, Paul also experienced spiritual afflictions or problems because of his compassion for fellow believers. In addition to everything else, he's weighed down by his concern for "all the churches."
2. He's busy planting churches and trying to keep churches alive. He's interacting with a number of churches, all of whom have a variety of problems that he's trying to solve.
3. .28 Because Paul is an apostle, he has a "deep concern" for all the churches. The word (μέριμνα) means "anxiety, worry, apprehension, distress, distraction." These were his people, and he was very concerned about them.

4. Many of these other troubles were temporary or occasional; they cropped up from time to time. But his concern for the churches was constant—they came upon him “daily.”

The words “what comes upon me” (ἐπίστασις) refers to “pressures, concerns, cares, burdens.” These were not trivial matters like food and clothing. These were eternal matters of salvation and sanctification.

G. He can boast about his sympathy for the weak. .29-30

1. .29 “who is weak” (ἀσθενέω); Paul was compassionate and sympathetic. He is concerned for those who are struggling in the Christian faith. He identifies with the weak in their failures.

Quote: Paul was at one with all his converts (cf. 1 Cor 12:26), sympathizing with their weakness in faith, conduct or conscience.⁴

2. .29b The words “made to stumble” here is σκανδαλίζω – scandalized. When others fail and fall, Paul is struck with grief. He “burns” inwardly with a deep sense of grief over the spiritual failures of those he loves.

Like Paul, we should be deeply grieved when professing believers fall into sin and unbelief. It should bother us when they leave the church and neglect the faith. We should have a sense of compassion and sympathy for those who stumble.

⁴ Murray J. Harris, “2 Corinthians,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Romans through Galatians*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 10 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), 392.

App: One thing Christians often lack is sympathy for the weak. We tend to “shoot the wounded.” Instead of restoring those who fail and fall (Gal 6:1), we tend to punish them and push them away. We need to be more sympathetic toward those who struggle. Not saying that we neglect church discipline when necessary. But our main desire and goal should be restoration of weak believers, not their punishment.

3. .30 Paul boasts in his infirmities because suffering makes him more like Christ. Jesus was a “man of sorrows and acquainted with grief” (Isa 53:3). Paul boasted in the fact that he was suffering because of his commitment to Christ.

2 Cor 12:10 I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ’s sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong.

Let’s compare Paul to the false teachers.

Vs. 20—here is the character and behavior of the foolish false teachers.

Vss. 22-33—here is the description of what Paul has endured as a servant of Christ.

Why did he put up with a church that was so disloyal and confused? Because he cared about people and their spiritual condition. He wanted the church to be faithful to Christ and to the word of God. He served God by serving these people.

And in spite of all these threats and dangers, Paul was faithful to his calling. That is the true definition of success—being faithful to the job that God has given you. You might not be successful in worldly terms, but if you persevere in the job God has given you, you are successful. Faithful endurance even under threat and through hostility and persecution is the mark of a genuine servant of God.

I wonder how many of us would be willing to endure any kind of difficulty and abuse for the Gospel. Would we persevere through even mild persecution? Do we care enough about others to risk such dangers and adversity? Are we willing to put up with any kind of inconvenience for Christ and his church? I hope we are like Paul in his endurance and commitment.

We should be like Paul in his willingness to endure opposition, dangers and obstacles to bring the Gospel to those who need to hear it. We should be so committed to serving God that nothing can stop us from faithful service to our Lord and his church.