

"Graffiti On the Life and Death of Jesus"
2 Corinthians 11:16-33
26 September 2021

Erik Raymond recounts, *"The Dumbest Thing I Ever Said"*-

I remember the dumbest thing I ever said. I was a fairly new Christian, and my wife and I were going to a church that emphasized a lot of outward conformity without a whole lot of understanding. In other words, I was getting really good at keeping all the rules but did not have a robust understanding of the Christian life.

One Sunday after morning worship, in a moment of shameless self-congratulation, I told my wife, "You know, Christianity is really pretty easy. You go to church, read your Bible, stay out of trouble. It's not that hard."

What an idiot.

My Christian eyesight was pretty bad. I was unable to see and understand the glory of Christ in the gospel because of this monument of self that was blocking my view.

On this particular Sunday I was reclining back admiring my mural of self-righteousness. I had no idea that it was actually graffiti on the life and death of Jesus, where righteousness was earned and self-righteousness was impugned (Is. 64:6; 2 Cor. 5:21).

This is where understanding the holiness of God pervades everything. God's Word instructs us as to who we are and who God is. Without understanding the Scriptures we will never rightly understand God or ourselves.

I would have been in a much better Christian posture had I said, "This Christian life is really hard. I really stink. I can't do anything right. The more I look at God's Word the more I see my sin. If it wasn't for the perfect righteousness of Jesus, I would be done!"

I then, and do now, have a lot to learn. Therefore, I need to give myself to the Word of God that I might know him better while scrubbing those hidden crevices of my heart that are ripe for self-glory. As Christians we need heart surgery every day. We need a sermon from God everyday. We need help every day. Pray that the Holy Spirit would not leave you alone but that he would keep convicting you and driving you to the Word that you might know, enjoy, and worship God in a manner that is befitting and consistent with his holiness.

When we boast, when we brag, when we walk with a swagger, and rely on our strength, and rely on our own wisdom, we're essentially spray-painting the life and death of Jesus with graffiti. Think about that. That's sobering! We graffiti the Gospel when we boast in self.

And that's what the super-apostles were doing. They were boasting and bragging. But what they failed to understand is that the Christian life is not about being strong. The Christian life is all about owning your weakness.

That's what we'll see today, so turn in your Bibles to 2 Corinthians 11. What the apostle Paul will show us today is that all boasting is foolish. It is absurd to boast of any of our accomplishments because we are who we are because of God's grace, not because of us or what we've done! He gave us life, He gave us breath, He gave us gifts, He gave us talents, etc. So, it is absurd, it's crazy, it's ludicrous, it's ridiculous, it's senseless, it's irrational, it's insane to boast of our accomplishments. In other words, it's crazy!

And you will sound like a madman if you do it. And that's exactly how Paul will describe himself today. Paul is going to boast today, and mid-boast, he will pause and say, *"I'm boasting. This is crazy!"* But because the Gospel is at stake in Corinth, Paul will lower himself to the level of these super-apostles and boast. But Paul will only boast of things that show his weakness. That's Paul's testimony. And it's yours too.

And that's our big idea today-
WEAKNESS IS YOUR TESTIMONY.

As musician Charlie Peacock said, *"It took me far too long to discover that my weakness is my testimony."*

Weakness *is* your testimony, Christian. And that means that you will never graduate beyond weakness. You will never grow up beyond weakness. Spiritually mature Christians never rise above need. Spiritually mature Christians go down deeper into weakness. Spiritually mature Christians, the longer they live, realize more and more just how weak and needy they are. And that causes them to collapse on Jesus.

Listen, weakness is not something to avoid. It's not something to escape and leave behind. It *is* life as a Christian. Weakness *is* discipleship. Weakness *is* the way we stumble and limp home to glory. That's where the Spirit meets

us. The Spirit meets you in your weakness- because grace flows downhill. Grace does not defy gravity and flow uphill. Grace flows downhill to weak, needy, dependent sinners.

And that's why Paul will say that he will only boast in the things that show his weakness. Paul can rejoice in his weakness because that is precisely where Jesus meets him. The GPS coordinates, the pinned location of where you will encounter the power of the Gospel in your life is smack dab in the middle of your weakness. Smack dab in the middle of your fears. Smack dab in the middle of your suffering and your I-don't-think-I-will-make-it-I-don't-think-I-can-go-on-anymore. Smack dab in the middle of your tossing and turning and can't eat and can't sleep because you're so overwhelmed and stressed out.

That's where the Spirit meets you. So, weakness *is* how the Christian life works. Weakness is the wardrobe that leads you into the Narnia of God's sufficient grace. And that's why you can boast, and you can rejoice, and you can exult in your weakness.

LOOK AT VERSES 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. What I am saying with this boastful confidence, I say not with the Lord's authority but as a fool. Since many boast according to the flesh, I too will boast. For you gladly bear with fools, being wise yourselves! 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. To my shame, I must say, we were too weak for that!

Paul will now stoop to the level of the super-apostles and play their "boasting game." Of course, Paul despises boasting because it is foolish. But he must do it. The super-apostles boasted in their accomplishments, their credentials, their speaking abilities, their theological degrees, and they want Paul to flash his resume to prove that he is an apostle. But Paul doesn't want to do this, but he knows that he must stoop to their level, in order to expose these false teachers.

Paul even states that he is boasting not with the Lord's authority, but by his own choice to be foolish. In other words, he wants to make sure that the Corinthians understand that the Lord does not condone foolish boasting. But Paul will boast according to the flesh, he will boast like the super-apostles do, but only in order to save the Corinthians from the clutches of the super-apostles.

And here's what's so surprising to Paul. The Corinthians were actually putting up with the spiritual abuse by the super-apostles. They were becoming enslaved, devoured, taken advantage of, and abused. And how does Paul respond? He says, "*We were too weak for that!*" What does Paul mean when he says this? He's taking a jab at those who are aligned with the super-apostles. It's like he's saying, tongue-in-cheek, "*You know us. We're just spiritual weaklings. We were too weak to take advantage of you, exploit you, enslave you, devour you, abuse you, hit you, hurt you. We were too 'weak' to do any of those things to you.*"

And by saying this, Paul wants the Corinthians to see just how abusive and overbearing the super-apostles are! He's pointing out how these so-called "spiritual giants" had this church in a headlock. So, in order for their grip to be broken, Paul will do something foolish.

LOOK AT VERSES 21b...

But whatever anyone else dares to boast of—I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast of that. Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they offspring of Abraham? So am I. Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman...

Paul will now talk about how "foolish" boasting is, but it's foolish from different perspectives:

Paul will boast of his credentials (vv. 22-23). This is "foolish" according to Paul.

Paul will boast of his weaknesses (vv. 24-33). This is "foolish" according to the super-apostles.

In vv. 22-23, Paul will compare his resume with the super-apostles, even though he thinks all of this is foolish. He even prefaces all this boasting by saying, "*I am speaking as a fool!*" But notice that Paul then interrupts himself as he's talking about himself. In the middle of sharing his resume, Paul declares, "*I am talking like a madman!*"

It's as if Paul is saying, "*Do they want to boast of their credentials? Okay. If they want to boast- I can't believe I am doing this! I am acting like a fool!- if they want to boast, then I'll boast too.*" Then, after starting to share his resume about how he is a Hebrew, and an Israelite, and an offspring of Abraham, and a better servant of Christ, Paul interrupts himself and says, "*Wait a minute. This is crazy! I'm talking like a madman!*"

Understand this: Anytime a Christian boasts about himself, and does boast not in the cross, and does boast in his weakness, then they're acting like a madman! Anytime a Christian talks about himself, and boasts and brags, then

that person is talking like a crazy person! And it's crazy to boast of anything except the Lord because all that we have and are comes from Him. Who are we to toot our own horn? It's all of grace! That's humbling.

So, Paul boasts foolishly in his own eyes about his credentials, but he only does so with 2 verses. He can only do it for 2 verses. He shares 4 things about himself in 2 verses, and then he can take it no longer and says that he's crazy for talking like this. Then, Paul will spend the next 11 verses- *and the Corinthians and the super-apostles thought this was foolish*- he will spend the next 11 verses boasting about his weakness. And all this will culminate with one of Paul's most humiliating and humbling experiences of his life.

LOOK AT VERSE 23 AGAIN...

Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; 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; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.

While the super-apostles declared that spiritual experiences and seeing visions and having impeccable speaking abilities qualified them for ministry, Paul shows us that the opposite is true. Suffering is the mark of a true minister of the Gospel. As D.A. Carson said, "*It is almost as if the primary (if not the only) incontestable criterion of true apostleship is massive suffering in the service of Christ.*" What Paul boasts about in these 11 verses- *his suffering*- which was considered "foolish" by others, is the primary criterion of his apostleship.

So, verses 23-33 are in the Bible to remind you that-

WEAKNESS IS YOUR TESTIMONY.

And, here's the thing about weak people: *weak people have to trust*. They have to rely on someone or something for outside help. So, admitting your weakness, admitting your need, is the key to Gospel freedom. Our strength comes from the One we trust. We lean on Jesus when we aren't strong, which is always!

That means that being scared, and helpless, and frail, and hopeless takes you to Jesus. Despair takes you to Jesus. Suffering takes you to Jesus. Being despondent takes you to Jesus. Feeling overwhelmed takes you to Jesus. These situations and circumstances that we fear and that we dread are actually what usher us to Jesus. This is the pathway home, Grace! This is how Paul experienced Jesus: through suffering.

So, Paul says that he was thrown into prison numerous times. And he received countless beatings and was often near death!

5x times Paul says that he was whipped with 39 lashes by the Jews! Paul received 196 lashes! Wow. Think about that. And 3x times he was beaten with rods by the Romans. And once he was almost stoned to death. In fact, they thought he was dead (see Acts 14:19). And 3x he was shipwrecked. And there is still one more shipwreck coming Paul's way after he writes 2 Corinthians. In Acts 27, Paul will experience one more shipwreck, a 4th shipwreck. Stay off of a boat, Paul!

And he says that he also spent a night and a day floating in the ocean, perhaps clinging to a piece of the ship. Think about that. 24 hours just floating in the ocean. And he was also in constant danger-

*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*

Everywhere Paul went, he was in danger. What a life! How would Paul describe ministry? *Dangerous*. Think about that. And he experienced many sleepless nights and was often hungry and thirsty and cold.

This is what Paul boasts in: the suffering that clearly shows his weakness. By listing these things, the Corinthians should realize that there is no way Paul can boast about enduring all of this by his own strength. He can only point to Jesus and say, "*It's because of Him that I survived.*"

That's why Paul said that he was a better servant of Christ. He endured all of this *for Christ*. What made Paul endure all that he endured? He loved Jesus. Paul never got over the fact that God made Jesus, who knew no sin, to

become sin for Paul so that in Him, Paul could be counted as righteous in God's eyes. He just never got over that! And I hope you never get over it too!

Paul rubbed the Gospel deep down into his pores and that's why he endured what he did. He never got over the love of God for sinners. He suffered for His Lord because he loved His Lord.

I think, perhaps, one reason the Holy Spirit inspired Paul to give this list of his sufferings is so that we would be encouraged. Paul went through intense suffering and yet he emerged, still standing! As Ralph Davis says, *"Sometimes the clearest evidence that God has not deserted you is not that you are successfully past your trial but that are still on your feet in the middle of it."*

We may be tempted to think that God has abandoned us *because* we are still in the middle of a trial. But the fact that we are still standing in the middle of the trial is proof that the Lord has not deserted us. The fact that you are here today is proof that God has not abandoned you! And Paul knew that he was not abandoned as he experienced all of these things that he mentions here.

Let me ask you a question: Who got Paul through all this suffering? Who enabled Paul to endure hard labor and numerous imprisonments and countless beatings and multiple near-death experiences? Jesus did! And who will get you through what you are going through right now? Jesus will.

Who sustained Paul as he was whipped 196x? Who sustained Paul as he was beaten 3x by rods and was once stoned with rocks so severely that they thought he was dead? Who sustained Him? Jesus did! And who will sustain you as you suffer? Jesus will.

Who calmed Paul's heart as he was shipwrecked 3x and then floated in the ocean for 24+hours? Jesus did! And who will calm your heart as you experience the sufferings of this life? Jesus will.

Who was with Paul as he experienced danger after danger after danger after danger after danger after danger after danger? Jesus was! And who will be with you as you experience danger after danger after danger after danger after danger after danger after danger? Jesus will.

The Holy Spirit met Paul during, and in the aftermath of the long days of ministry, and the imprisonments, and the beatings, and the left-for-dead moments, and the shipwrecks, and the danger-danger-danger. The Spirit was never absent as Paul went through all of this suffering, and He was with him in the aftermath, like when it was hard to walk, and his back was oozing pus and scabbed over, and when he couldn't see well, and when he didn't think he could make it one more day. The Spirit was there. Sustaining him. Moment-by-moment. Day-by-day.

And the Holy Spirit will do the same for you. Moment-by-moment. Day-by-day. And you'll have days where you don't think you can go on anymore, but you will. Not by your strength, but by the Spirit's. Don't you just love the Holy Spirit? What tenderness! He gently picks us up and sustains us moment-by-moment. Listen, if you're still standing on your feet in the middle of intense suffering, it's because the Holy Spirit is holding you up.

The Holy Spirit wanted me to tell you today that whatever you are going through right now, whatever you are suffering, He is with you and He will strengthen you by His grace. The Holy Spirit wants you to have assurance today, as you walk out of these doors, that you are going to make it. That His grace is sufficient. That He is working through all of the pain and the drama and the sorrow and the suffering. That though you are in the middle of intense and deep suffering, you are still standing on your feet and you have not been abandoned.

So, all that Paul went through was recorded by the Spirit in Scripture to remind us that the same God will be with us, whatever we go through. I'm sure you have your own kind of paragraph like Paul. We all do. Our sufferings may be different, but we have all experienced some 2 Corinthians 11:23-29 kind of stuff. And how did we survive? Jesus. When's the last time you sat down and thought about all the ways that Jesus has sustained you through all those crazy "2 Corinthians 11:23-29" paragraphs of your life? Today would be a great day to give glory to God for sustaining you.

So, Paul's boasting will culminate in calling on God as a witness to one of the most humiliating experiences of his life.

LOOK AT VERSE 28...

And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant? If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, he who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying. At Damascus, the governor under King Aretas was guarding the city of Damascus in order to seize me, but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall and escaped his hands.

On top of all of this physical suffering, Paul feels the weight of all the churches he is involved in. He's weak like every Christian. And when someone falls into sin, Paul's passion burns for this church to move from the triumphalism being peddled by the super-apostles to maturity in Christ.

Then Paul gives a supreme example of weakness. He tells of the time when he was in the city of Damascus and he was a wanted man for preaching the Gospel. You can read about this in Acts 9. King Aretas was waiting on him to walk through the city gates. Paul was on the T.V. show *Damascus' Most Wanted* that night in Damascus.

And yet Paul escaped by hiding in a basket that was lowered through a window in the city wall. Why does Paul see this as one of his most humiliating moments? Because he originally set out for Damascus to round up Christians and throw them in jail. But on the way to Damascus, Paul experienced conversion. He was born again. Paul saw the Lord and was regenerated and became a Christian.

So, Paul originally was headed into the city of Damascus in pride and arrogance. And he left in humility. Hiding in a basket. Escaping the city at night. Paul came to Damascus to arrest Christians, but his heart was arrested by the Holy Spirit. And this embarrassing run-for-your-life-and-hide-in-a-basket moment is what Paul will boast about. His weakness.

Paul is telling you that, like him-
WEAKNESS IS YOUR TESTIMONY.

And that means that the weaker you feel, then the harder you will lean into your Savior. The weaker you feel, the quicker you will collapse onto Jesus.

Self-righteous people spray-paint graffiti on the Gospel. Self-sufficient people vandalize the Gospel. But those who know just how weak and sinful they are simply cry out, *"This Christian life is really hard. I really stink. I can't do anything right. The more I look at God's Word the more I see my sin. If it wasn't for the perfect righteousness of Jesus, I would be done!"*

Listen, your weakness, your suffering, your helplessness will drive you crazy and turn you into a madman unless you understand the Gospel of Jesus. The Gospel is the story of a strong, all-powerful, and all-sufficient Savior who pours out His sufficient grace on weak people. And God put 2 Corinthians in the Bible to expose your weakness so that you would run to Him for strength and quit trying to do it all in your own.

Let me ask you: Where do you feel weak and helpless today? Identify it and then throw yourself on Jesus.

Weakness is your testimony and this is a good thing because weakness is what connects you to Jesus. We all want to discard our weakness and helplessness, but that's the key to coming to Jesus. So our weakness and failures and embarrassing moments are good things because they drive us to the throne of grace.

So whatever is going in your life right now, whatever suffering you are experiencing, my guess is that God is lovingly getting your attention to remind you that you cannot do life on your own. Jesus is telling you today, *"Stop being allergic to helplessness. Stop trying to be strong. Stop trying to carry the burden. Stop worrying. Stop biting your nails. Stop pacing the floor. Stop panicking. You can trust Me. Embrace your weakness because that's exactly where My grace will meet you."*