

**God's Power in Our Weakness (Part 1):
Sufferings, Stress, and A Story
2 Corinthians 11:16-33**

Strength through weakness is one of the great paradoxes of the Christian faith and it is a dominant theme, if not the dominant theme, in 2 Corinthians.

In fact, if you were to pick a verse to summarize 2 Corinthians it would be **12:9 or 12:9-10.**

- Much of what Paul has been saying, funnels into these verses.
- So while we're not looking at them today, it's important to keep them in view.

In the verses under consideration, we read of various examples of Paul's weaknesses, which provide the backdrop for the grace of Christ and the power of Christ to shine.

If you're not a Christian, I pray you will consider the grace of Jesus.

- You're not beyond the reach of nor the need for the saving grace of Jesus.
- This is the good news of Christianity.
- You don't need to get your act together before you come to Jesus; come to him as you are and allow his grace to change you.

If you are a Christian, I pray you will be encouraged today: the Lord uses weak saints to magnify his grace and power.

Weaknesses are not sins.

- They can be a number of things (see v. 10).
- The verb **"to be weak"** has a wide range of meanings.

These weaknesses are things that God may give you so that you may depend on him.

- **You may have**
 - **a health condition that frustrates you.**
 - **little money**
 - **a learning disability**
 - **terrible headaches**
 - **No Christians in your home**
 - **a career that makes it difficult to be faithful**
 - **need for employment**
 - **No ability to get through to your kids?**
 - **no ability to have kids?**
- **You may not be a good speaker**
- **Maybe English isn't your first language**
- **You may be socially awkward or shy**
- **You may feel lonely**
- **You may feel exhausted**
- **You may not be able to see well,**
- **Or you don't think you look well**

- Maybe your hairline is receding ... or beyond receding — mine went on Spring break and never returned?

Paul here actually affirms what he's being mocked for: He *is* weak and unimpressive.

But it is in this weakness that the power of God and the glory of the gospel shines.

Weak saints have a strong Savior.
And his grace is enough.

It's an astonishing reality: God uses weak people to serve the church and bear witness to the world.

- He has done this throughout history and continues to do it today.
- You feel a bit unimpressive? Then you're a great candidate to be used by the Savior.

Paul's boastings about his weakness and hardships is a boasting in the Lord.

- He knows it's only right to boast in *the Lord*.
- Boasting in weakness is to say *all glory to God*.

He says, "Do you want to see my resume?"

- Look at my back! See those **scars**!
- Look at my pastoral **stress**.
- Look at my unimpressive **story** in Damascus, when I escaped in a basket!

The Introducing to His "Boasting" (11:16-21)

Read vv 16-21

- Paul is engaging in what he thinks is foolish boasting.
- He intentionally mocks the false teachers by mimicking their strategy: boasting of their credentials.
- He is stepping into a character, the character of his opponents, which he thinks are fools.
- He's not appealing to them as normal: "the meekness and gentleness of Christ" (10:1)
- Instead he's engaging in satire.
- He calls himself a "**madman**" for talking like this. (v. 23). "This is crazy."

Paul doesn't want to defend himself at all, but he's left with no other choice, and he chooses this approach.

- The foolish boasting of the false apostles has backed him into a corner (12:11).
- He doesn't want the church to be led astray so he is trying to convince them of his true apostleship – for their good.

Different situations lead to different kind of speech.

- The **prophets** often engaged in sarcasm as they spoke of the folly of idolatry.
- **Parents don't speak to their kids the same way when they're running in front of a car as they do when they tuck them in at night.**

- Paul knows what's at stake, and he knows the context, so he adapts his method to emphasize his point: "Don't be duped by these false teachers — discern who a real apostle is!"

16: So he's saying, "Heads up, I'm about to engage in some boasting."

- You want to hear of my credentials, here you go...
- And by doing so, he shows how shallow and superficial the false teachers are and the shallowness of those who have been impressed by their boasting.

17: Paul clarifies [read]

- His strategy is uncomfortable for hi, and is only doing this for their good, so that he may break through to them.

"not according to the Lord" – This approach is a temporary strategy; it's not the usually pattern (10:1).

18: To boast in the flesh is to draw attention to ourselves.

- Boasting in the flesh is natural to us, but boasting in the Lord is unusual.

19: You can hear the sarcasm.

- The problem he is pointing out is their lack of discernment.
- They are not like the Bereans who test things by the Scriptures.

20: Paul lists five actions that the false teachers took:

1. Make slaves of you
2. Devours you – relationally, financially, etc.
3. Takes advantage of you
4. Puts on airs – is arrogant toward you
5. Strikes you in the face – a reality according to some commentators

- Strong words about the abusive work of these false teachers.
- The Corinthians may have been physically mistreated by these intruders.
- The false teachers may have looked outwardly impressive, but they were destructive.

How much different is this from Paul's ministry, and all true ministry?

1. We are to liberate people with the good news.
2. We are to heal, not devour.
3. We are to empower, not take advantage of
4. We are display humble compassion that elevates others, not be arrogant toward others
5. We are to embrace with affection, not slap in the face.

21: Paul avoided these demonic tactics for the good of the churches.

- With a sarcastic rebuke, Paul says "we were took weak" to follow their ways.
- *Kruise: The Corinthians had entertained the criticisms of Paul's opponents that he was weak (10:10). Paul now throws that back at them, saying in effect, 'Yes, I am ashamed to say, we*

were too weak to make such a despicable display of overbearing authoritarianism as that provided by those intruders!

21b: Now Paul prepares us for one of the most remarkable passages in his writings, as he speaks of his sufferings.

- He basically says, “**Are we in a boasting contest?**” (with a smile and raised eyebrow)
- **Are we trotting out accomplishments?**
- Okay. But again, there’s a twist. It’s not as they would expect.
- He unveils his weaknesses.

And by so doing he shows us that when we are nothing, God does something. When we are weak, God’s power shines through.

3 Expressions of Weakness (11:22-33)

We may break it down in these three parts: Paul highlights his (1) [diverse] sufferings, his (2) [daily] stress, (3) A Story of Weakness

God uses people like this — people who (1) experience diverse sufferings for the gospel; who (2) experience daily stress for the spiritual well being of others, and who have (3) experienced ‘Damascus stories’ — that is, specific stories that show forth human weakness and God’s power.

#1: Sufferings (11:22-27)

Paul cites some 28 hardships he endured for the sake of Christ.

- It is a diverse and comprehensive list.
- It covers all of Paul’s life essentially.
- In so doing, he exposes the Corinthians fault way of thinking – as those who were impressed by outward appearances.

The following list is almost inconceivable.

- **If you’re having a bad day, read this!**

22: His old resume: it includes three elements related to his ethnicity.

- It’s similar to **Phil 3:5**.
- This may indicate that the super-apostles were claiming that Paul was not a real Jew, being the apostle to the Gentiles.
- But Paul denies this.

23-28: He now shifts from what he was born into, to what he has experienced.

23: His big idea is that he is a true apostle, a true minister of the gospel: “**a servant of Christ**”

“**I am talking like a madman**” – he’s not comfortable doing this.

- “**a better one**” but it’s not how you think... now the sufferings

Application

It highlighting who true servants of Christ are (11:23), we see the kinds of people that God uses.

As we prepare to look at Paul's sufferings, there are a few things we need to know.

**The point is not to praise Paul as heroic,
nor to feel guilty for not suffering in all the ways Paul did.
You may not experience all of these!**

The take-aways are these. 3 E's.

1. **Endurance.** **Endure hardship for the sake of Christ.** We will suffer in some ways; be faithful to endure (2 Tim 3:12)
2. **Evaluation.** **Don't evaluate success the same way the world does!** The super apostles boasted in appearances and accolades. We don't number accomplishments like the world does.

D. A. Carson comments that his opponents would expected his boasting to be 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 more fervently and seen more visions; I have commanded the greatest crowds and performed the most spectacular miracles." But he doesn't. That would magnify Paul, not the Lord.

"What qualified him was not heroics, but hurts. Not degrees, but dangers." (KD)

3. **Encouragement.** See the grace of God working in human weakness and be encouraged, and remain dependent on God's grace.

Consider them in four categories

Category 1: Reoccurring Sufferings (v. 23)

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

Notice the strong language: not just imprisonment, but **far more**; **far greater** labors **countless** beatings, and **often** near death.

These were not one-time experiences for Paul.

His endurance highlights his commitment to his calling.

Labors — this recalls the previous statement to the Corinthians (15:10; Col 1:29).

• But he leaves out any specific boasts: converts, churches painted, people healed, superb training, etc.

Imprisonments — Acts 16 is one example (Philippi)

Yet he keeps going.

“The proof of one’s God ordained training and education was not a diploma or the ability to compose rousing speeches following the rules of rhetoric but the worthy response to adversity.” (D Garland)

Category 2: Enumerated Sufferings (v. 24-25)

i. Whipped by Jewish leaders five times (v. 24)

- The law allowed for no more than forty lashes so they would do 39 in case they miscounted or as a mocking sign of mercy.
- The flogging involved bits of metal and wood tied to a whip used to strike one’s back.
- This came as a result of his preaching of Jesus as Messiah
- Jesus promised this kind of thing would happen (Matt 10:17).

ii. Three times beaten with rods (v. 25)

- This was a type of Roman punishment.
- Stiff instruments of pain.

iii. Stoned once (v. 25)

- Not with weed, but rocks.
- In Acts 14:19, Paul was left for dead, but he was nursed back to health.

iv. Shipwrecked three times (v. 25)

- This happened as a result of his commitment to get the gospel to the ends of the earth.
- No life jackets or coast guard – a truly terrifying experience as we read in Acts 27.
- In one account he was “**adrift at sea for twenty-four hours.**”
- **Life at sea was brutal.**
- The ancient philosopher Secundas answered Hadrian’s question, “What is a boat?” like this: a boat is “... a well-crafted tomb “What is a sailor?” Secundus replies, “A neighbor of death.” (in Garland)

Category 3: Suffering from Being in Dangerous Situations (v. 26)

26: He shifts to more general hardships, but also severe hardships [**read**]

Frequent journeys

Five dangers from particular threats: **rivers, robbers, my own people, Gentiles, and false brothers**

- **Rivers** — danger on the water
- **Robbers** — a big threat when out in the country (eg., **Athens to Corinth**)
- **Kinsmen** - Just read Acts: Damascus (Acts 9:23), Jerusalem (9:29), Antioch Pisidia (13:5), Iconium (14:5), Lystra (14:19), Thessalonica (17:5), Berea (17:13), Corinth (18:12), and Jerusalem again (21:26-25:12)
- **Gentiles/Pagans:** Great social unrest as a result to his preaching (Acts 19)
- **False Brothers:** present context, and many other illustrations of betrayal

Three dangers at certain locations: **the city, the wilderness, the sea**

- That is, everywhere he went!

This had to take a lot out of the apostle: constant danger.

Category 4: Physical Suffering Due to His Calling and His Craft (v. 27)

- He worked all day and preached all night sometimes (1 Thess 2:9; 2 Thess 3:8; Acts 20:7-12)
- He was often without necessities
- Without food/clothing and in exposure probably occurred in route to places where there were no Christians to care for him.

These “super-apostles” were like prosperity preachers — and like them — they would have never boasted in such physical deprivation.

Paul says every time I travel, I may get robbed, beat up or drown... I face all manner of physical persecution, and I’m sure if my last sermon will be my last. I’m weak. And I haven’t slept much.

Compare this with Caesar Augustus’ Autobiography

Scholars have pointed out that Paul’s words read like a parody of Augustus:

“Twice have I had the lesser triumph...three times the [full] curule triumph; twenty-one times have I been saluted as ‘Imperator’...Fifty-five times has the Senate decreed a thanksgiving unto the Immortal Gods...Nine kings, or children of kings, have been led before my chariot in my triumphs...thirteen times had I been consul.”

- The original inscription was erected on bronze pillars at the emperor’s mausoleum in Rome, and copies were distributed throughout the provinces. - Clinton Arnold, *Romans to Philemon* (Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary)

Paul says, you want to see my credibility: look at my sufferings.

His weaknesses highlight the grace of God!

- God’s grace is enough! His power is perfected in our weakness!

And the glory of Jesus compels him to press on!

#2: Stress (11:28-29)

28: Paul distinguishes what he’s just said with what is about to say by saying “”And apart from these other things, there is...”

Martin, “This statement of Paul’s pastoral regard stands at the high-point of the “list of trials.”

Now the internal pressure is highlighted...

This tops off the list: of sufferings **“the daily pressure on me of my anxiety of all the churches.”**

- This refers to the psychological stress placed on him from worrying about the health and vitality of the churches.
- The word “anxiety” is *merimna*, (anxious/worry) — the same word in Matt 6.

Kruise: “It should be noted that Paul’s anxiety here is not the unwarranted concern about oneself which Jesus cautioned his disciples against (Matt. 6:25–34), but rather that healthy concern for the welfare of others which Jesus himself experienced (Luke 13:34)”

We may call this anxiety, pastoral anxiety — deep concern for the spiritual well being of others. I’m encouraged Paul felt this.

- Philippians 2:25–30 (ESV): 25 I have thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, and your messenger and minister to my need, 26 for he has been longing for you all and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill. 27 Indeed he was ill, near to death. But God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow. 28 I am the more eager to send him, therefore, that you may rejoice at seeing him again, and **that I may be less anxious**. 29 So receive him in the Lord with all joy, and honor such men, 30 for he nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me.
- Galatians 4:19–20 (ESV): 19 my little children, for whom I am **again in the anguish of childbirth** until Christ is formed in you! 20 I wish I could be present with you now and change my tone, for I am perplexed about you.
- 3 John 4, “I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.”
- **But there’s no greater anxiety when they’re not.**

Paul had a lot to be anxious about. Just read his letters!

- Galatians wanting to add to the gospel (legalism)
- Colossians – false teaching, syncretism
- Crete – Titus dealing with immorality, “lazy gluttons, evil beasts, liars”
- Timothy in Ephesus – all sorts of challenges, including the threat of false teachers
- Thessalonians being caught up in fanatical ideas about the return of Christ
- Corinthians being led astray by false teachers, and given to the immorality and idolatry of the city (license)
 - **Ralph Martin, “No church gave Paul more anxiety than Corinth.”**

This burden was more of a burden than his dangers and his beatings.

He has already noted some forms of this: not getting news from Titus (2:12-13; 7:5); later, having “fear” that when he comes to Corinth, things won’t be well. (12:20-21)

Paul has to write letters, make visits, preach sermons, and respond to criticism, like here in Corinth. They say of him:

- He’s “Too harsh”
 - “Too weak”
 - “Too worldly”
 - “Too firm”
- They complained of his teaching and his lack of credentials
- They compared him to the super-apostles.
- What did he do?

- He preached the gospel to them, planted the church, loved them like a father, refused to take support, and risked his life for them.
- Yet, they're board and frustrated with him and question him.
- They don't like the way he handles money, they don't like his preaching, they don't like his travel schedule, they don't like his methodology.

There was no weight like the weight of caring for the church.

Ask any pastor, and they will tell you this: budgets, people leaving, new people needing welcomed, people who fall through the cracks, lack of unity, lack of knowledge —

- The need to train leaders, champion programs, manage staff, oversee worship, listen to concerns, be ready to help
- And then they're only problems in their life and family.

Most pastors will tell you they deal with guilt for all that they're not doing.

There was no weight like this weight for Paul.

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

- He is concerned for those who are spiritually weak — weak in faith and faithfulness —
 - He feels their vulnerability in that moment of thought.
- And when he sees that others have led them astray, he feels indignant!

True servants of Christ feel deeply.

- You care for your kids, for people in the church, for lost family members. Let us pray for one another. (Phil 4:6-7)
- Let us pray for peace, and for endurance.

#3: A Story (11:30-33)

Now for the basket ride story...

- He tells this story as a specific example of weakness.
 - It may at first read seem like a heroic James Bond scene!
 - But it's the opposite.
- There's not much to be proud of!
- He is lowered down like a bundle of merchandise!
- The focus is not on the precise danger as much as his manner of escape.
- One wonders if Paul didn't even laugh a bit when he told it.
- "Look how impressive I am!"

30: if he is forced to boast he will boast in his "**weaknesses**" [read]

- This is the place where ministry begins.
- "I cannot, but he can."
- "I am powerless to change a heart, but the gospel can."

31: He appeals to God to attest to the truthfulness of his statements [read]

- He is saying, “God knows my heart. He knows my integrity. He knows of these experiences that I’ve just rattled off.”

32-33: Kind of out of nowhere comes another autobiographical example

- It’s an example that highlights his weakness: the mighty apostle being lowered down in a basket, similar to God’s servants being lowered out of a window in a wall in Joshua 2:15.
- Look at this apostle!

Paul is likely turning the idea of a Roman soldier scaling a wall on its head.

- They received rewards for such heroics.
- Prov 21:22 may have also been in Pauls’ mind.
- These strong men scaled walls, but Paul is let down in a fish basket.

King Aretas IV was ruler of the Nabataeans, an Arabian nation that once included the city of Damascus.

- Eventually the city was incorporated into the Roman province of Syria.
- However, it seems that during the reign of the Emperor Caligula (ad 37–41), Aretas was given control over Damascus and appointed a governor there.
- If so, this story occurred between ad 37–39.
- According to **Acts 9:23–25**, some Jews reacted against Paul for his preaching of Jesus as Messiah and tried to kill him.
- They were watching the gates of the city in order to seize him.
- The Jews apparently succeeded in getting the governor to take action against Paul.

- **But Paul got away! (v. 33)**
- This was probably Paul’s first taste of persecution, and he never forgot it
- It would typify the rest of his ministry: strength through his weakness.

Think about this:

1. Jesus Changes lives!

- Previously Paul had approached Damascus as a persecuted of Christians (Acts 9:1-2), but now he had to escape persecution for preaching in the name of Jesus!

2. The Lord’s Purposes for His Church Will Prevail!

- Paul’s attempt to kill the church was fruitless, just as fruitless as the Jews attempt to kill him!
 - Jesus will build his church against all threats!

3. The Lord uses weak servants!

- This scene makes us think of the OT.
- Rahab hid the spies, and let them down by a rope through a window in the wall (Josh 2:15),
- David escaped Saul’s soldiers with the help of Michal, who let him down through the window (1 Sam 19:12).

- In each case, what appeared to be a humiliating escape in fact led to great things.
- And now, Paul, let down through the window, but would eventually make converts everywhere, including Corinth.

So What?

Here is what true servants of Christ do:

1. **Boasting** — do you recognize your weakness and boast only in the Lord? We don't boast in ourselves.
2. **Blessing (12:31)** — can you bless God in your weakness?
 1. Thank you for humbling me
 2. Thank you for sanctifying me
 3. Thank you for keeping me reliant on your grace
 4. Thank you for the privilege of sharing in the sufferings of Christ
 5. Thank you for allowing it so that you may receive glory.