

“Through Many Dangers”
2 Corinthians 11:16-33
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Text Comment

- v.16 Paul reminds his readers that in all of this “boasting” about himself he is only playing a role. By making a point about himself he is exposing the bogus apostles for what they are. Remember, in what ever area of life we may speak about, there are always those who have it wrong, deadly wrong. They may be sincere in a human sense, but, as Pascal reminds us, most of the real harm in this world is done by people who are sincere. So no one can avoid personalities in the final analysis, because the real harm to people is done by people. So here.
- v.17 That is, this is not the language a Christian would ordinarily use. His is fitted to the circumstances in the Corinthian church.
- v.18 The NIV’s “in the way the world does” is, once again, literally, “according to the flesh,” that is, “sinfully.”
- v.19 Biting sarcasm here.
- v.20 The sophist philosophers and itinerant philosophers of that day could be rough on their audience. There is quite a bit of material from the classical world describing this behavior, even, interestingly, in Corinth. Paul’s spirit was too gentle for that.
- v.22 The false teachers obviously made a great deal about their being authentic Jews. But Paul, the disciple of Gamaliel, the Pharisee of the Pharisees could make that boast too.
- v.23 What follows is a more elaborate list than that already given in chapter 6, describing the hardships of the apostle’s life as proof that God had protected him as his servant. The false teachers obviously saw Paul’s suffering as a sign of his weakness. He saw it as a sign of God’s strength.
- v.24 40 lashes was the maximum allowed in the Mosaic law. Think of our decisions today to give so many months or so many years for this infraction or that. By the rabbinical principle of fencing the law, the Jews of that day gave 39. That way you wouldn’t break the rule even if you miscounted one. Unfortunately, that spirit usually leads to a situation in which you give precisely the right number of lashes to the wrong person.
- v.25 The rods were the Roman form of beating. So Paul got it from both the Jews and the Romans. He shouldn’t have been beaten as a Roman citizen but we know from Acts and first century evidence that citizenship did not always protect as it should have.

- v.26 One scholar has calculated that Paul would have traveled nearly 10,000 miles making the trips that we know about from the NT. He would have shared the roads and ships with government officials, pilgrims, letter-carriers, sightseers, runaway slaves, athletes, business men, teachers, and students. [Jeffers 34-35] Residents of the Roman empire traveled extensively. They traveled more in that region of the world than anyone would again until the 19th century. Travel was made possible by the *pax Romana*, the Roman peace, and by the transportation infrastructure built by the Romans: a magnificent road system and thousands of ships plying the waters of the Mediterranean. However, travel was not easy and not always safe. Weather related hazards, such as flooding, and man-made ones such as thievery were common enough. And, of course, at sea, storms were always a danger. We know from Acts only one of the shipwrecks to which Paul makes reference here. To Paul was added the danger of bringing a controversial message. So he had also to deal with the wrath of mobs in the streets of the cities in which he preached.
- v.27 Paul spent himself on behalf of the gospel. He held nothing back. In this, of course, he was a faithful servant of his master, who lost nights to prayer and many times went without food or drink because of the pressing obligations of his ministry.
- v.29 Further, he feels the pressure of all his responsibilities for the progress of the gospel and the welfare of the churches he has established. He receives reports of the failure of a Christian or a church he knows and it worries and discourages him. All of this bearing of burdens, however, makes Paul the more sympathetic. He knows his own weakness and so bears with the weaknesses of others.
- v.33 Paul concludes this catalog of his sufferings by describing one particularly humiliating experience, when he had to flee for his life from his enemies in Damascus. It almost seems to be an anti-climax, coming at the end of this long list of much greater sufferings. Augustine thought that Paul's rhetorical use of what seems almost an afterthought was an outstanding example of his literary skill. "I cannot sufficiently express how beautiful and delightful it is when after this outburst he rests himself, and gives the hearer rest, by interposing a slight narrative." [*City of God*, IV, vii, 12ff.] But, clearly Paul is doing more than interposing a rest for his reader. He tells us in v. 30 what he is illustrating with this narrative, what point he is making by it. The event itself, of course, as everyone would have known, came early on in his life as a Christian. We read of it in Acts 9 shortly after the account of Paul's conversion. Here was the great Saul, who had come to Damascus to persecute the church, being lowered ignominiously in a fish-basket to escape his erstwhile Jewish friends, determined now to eliminate the man they saw as a turn-coat. Paul is talking about what his experiences have taught him of his own weakness, his own dependence upon the help of God. The man who was lifted up to the third heaven – as we will read in chapter 12, is the man who was lowered in a basket in the dead of night, running from his enemies. God's power was demonstrated through Paul's weakness. That was a message the false teachers did not understand and for which they had no sympathy. But it is the message of the gospel. The good news is that we who are dead and helpless can find life, not by ourselves, but by Jesus Christ. Our helplessness was the very antithesis of the fundamental principle of the message of the false teachers, but it lay at the heart of Paul's message.

There are, of course, a very large number of Christians who could write such a catalog of trial and suffering as Paul wrote here. Think, for example, of a man who could speak of his suffering for Christ and the gospel's sake, like this: I was attacked by a lion, lost my infant daughter to sickness, spent years apart from my wife and family, traveled thousands upon thousands of miles through uncharted and inhospitable territory, suffered fevers and sicknesses of many kinds. I was deathly ill on more than one occasion, witnessed many severe setbacks in my gospel work that tried my soul, I was often misunderstood and criticized. I made some serious mistakes of judgment that were costly to my work and deeply sorrowful to me. After many years of separation, when I was reunited with my wife, it was only for her to die shortly thereafter. My 18 year-old son died of his wounds as a soldier in the Union Army, half a world away from me at the time. I was often disappointed by a failure to persuade others either to embrace the gospel or to live with simple justice or kindness toward others, and then I died myself far from home, my last days delirious from fever, finally in a coma.

And, yet, it was this same David Livingstone, missionary, explorer, crusader against the slave trade, who wrote in the midst of his life:

“I never made a sacrifice. Of this we ought not to talk when we remember the great sacrifice which He made who left his Father's throne on high to give Himself for us.”

Paul would have said the same thing. He spoke of his sufferings because there were some fools abroad in the Corinthian church that had to be taken down a peg. It embarrassed him to speak in that way. But he spoke comfortably and often of the Lord's faithfulness to him and of his willingness to endure any sacrifice, if only he might faithfully serve and so love his God and savior.

He who can part from country and from kin,
 And scorn delights, and tread the thorny way,
 A heavenly crown, through toil and pain, to win –
 He who reviled can tender love repay,
 And buffeted, for bitter foes can pray –
 He who, upspringing at his Captain's call,
 Fights the good fight, and when at last the day
 Of fiery trial comes, can nobly fall –
 Such were a saint – or more – and such the holy Paul!

But, my friends, let your memory run through Holy Scripture; remind yourselves how every saint we know from its sacred pages lived such a life more or less. Famine, grasping enemies, long years of keen disappointment, terrible trials, that was Abraham's life, the father of the faithful. And time fails for me to speak of Jacob or Moses or Samuel or David or Elijah or Jeremiah or John the Baptist or the Lord Jesus himself, the Man of Sorrows. And then what of the saints who had bridged the long years from the New Testament to our own time. Let them tell you in their own words, as many of them have in books and journals, of the long struggle it was for them to live a faithful, holy Christian life. The enemies they had, the trials they endured, the sorrows

they suffered, this is beyond time or energy to tell. Every Christian is “weak” in the same way that Paul said was true of him. He suffers, he loses what is precious to him, he is battered by the circumstances of life, his lot is made much worse by the behavior of others, the trials of life of one kind or another he or she must bear.

In my experience, we Christians tend to minimize this in the account of the lives of God’s saints in Holy Scripture and often the saints of Christian history because those people have become larger than life to us because of their place in Holy Scripture, because of their role in the history of salvation. We have great difficulty relating to them in their sufferings because they seem to live in a different world than we do.

So, we hear Paul saying that he had been cast into prison more frequently than those Johnny-come-lately teachers in Corinth. But Paul in prison somehow does not mean to us what it should. We don’t by any means know the whole story of Paul’s life. There are periods not covered in any detail in the Book of Acts. We don’t know how many times he was cast into prison. But we know from Acts that he spent two years in prison in Caesarea, waiting for some resolution of his case. Two years. Does anyone of you know what it like to be in prison for two years? Well, yes, I am happy to say that there are some in our congregation nowadays who can tell you. And they will tell you how hard it is to live in prison and what life is like there, living among the dregs of society, endless days stretching ahead of you.

But there were things that made it still worse for Paul. He was innocent of any wrongdoing, which made the entire matter of his incarceration still more galling. He was a man with a mission to fulfill in his life and was being kept from fulfilling it. No doubt he made the best use of his time in the prison that he could, but it was not carrying the gospel westward as he had hoped. What is more, he was in prison because of a conspiracy of his enemies and every day he remained there it seemed that their triumph over him was more complete. And, of course, in Paul’s case, he had no idea when he would be released. And so a few weeks became a few months, and months turned into years. Imagine for a moment a man like Paul sitting in a stone cell, day after day, month after month, for two long years. And that was but one of his trials.

I have observed through the years, first in my own life and then in yours, that we are generally prepared, theologically prepared, for suffering in life, but that we are strongly inclined to prefer someone else’s sufferings to our own. I have told some of you that I want to die a martyr. I don’t suppose there is a serious Christian in the world that has not had that thought or aspiration. What better, what more perfect way to seal our love and devotion to our Redeemer than to give up our lives in an act of loyalty to him. However, I am honest enough to admit that I want to die a martyr’s death just after I have learned that I am terminally ill and the day before the painful symptoms of that illness begin to bite. That is how unrealistic we can all be about suffering, whether persecution for Christ’s sake or any of the trials that God’s providence appoints for us. We accept them in the generality. We even embrace them from a distance. But when they fall on us like a ton of bricks we find it a different story. We don’t deny that, as Paul himself once said, “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God,” but we prefer someone else’s hardships to our own.

But God will and must decide at what point each of his children will enter the valley of the shadow of death and at what point each of them will escape from it. He must decide how long we must remain beset by troubles, how severe those troubles will be, and of precisely what sort. Nathan was a prophet and had some difficulties in his life, but he served during the reign of a spiritually sympathetic king. He certainly didn't have Elijah's troubles. No royal edict was ever published demanding his death. Moses had many difficulties and frustrations through a very long and healthy life. He had to leave the world in full possession of his physical, mental, and spiritual powers. Job and Hezekiah fell ill. All of Jacob's children lived to a ripe old age; Eli's sons and some of David's died young. He is the Lord; he will do what pleases him in heaven and on earth. Even among the apostles, it does not appear that John had nearly so difficult a life as Paul did. He lived longer and suffered less.

But, what is that to us who confess a God who does all things well and wisely, however his counsel lies far beyond our understanding. Whatever trials perfect wisdom appoints for each one of us, trials there will be. This is the simple point of this sermon this morning because we need to hear it, be reminded of it, believe it, and then live in the truth of it. We must accept that Paul's life and ours will be alike in this respect *and for the same reason*: the principle of weakness is fundamental to everything: to our understanding of our own salvation, our understanding of the way in which we must live our lives, to our love of Christ our Savior and our sympathy with others in this vale of tears. It is not simply so for a missionary like Paul. In this Paul is every Christian, his life our life.

A 19th century Anglican bishop is said to have complained of a non-conformist minister referring to the great man simply as Paul instead of Saint Paul. He added, "He might at least have called him Mr. Paul." Well, I have no problem with calling the great apostle to the Gentiles Saint Paul, so long as we understand that the title applies to each one of us. But we are very much less likely to speak this way: "Saint..., or Saint..., or Saint..." But, it is so, and in this way as in many others. Paul was a saint because he was a child of God, he was tried in many ways because those trials are an essential characteristic of the Christian in this world, an essential part of the gracious work that God does in his children's lives. An essential part of our being made holy, which is what a saint is: a holy person. Trials endured as only Christians can endure them – in faith and holy love – are the identification card of believers, of all believers, just as they were of apostles. Paul's heroism was precisely his fidelity in the face of adversity. But so it is of every faithful Christian, of every saint.

So take Paul to heart and take the difficulty of his life to heart. And then accept whatever trials the Lord has appointed for you, whatever means he uses to prove your weakness to you and your utter dependence upon him. Listen to Samuel Rutherford [*Trial and Triumph of Faith*]:

"We would have a silken, a soft, a perfumed crosse, sugered and honeyed with the consolations of Christ, or wee faint... But Christ's crosse did not smile on him, his crosse was a crosse, and his ship sailed in bloud, and his blessed soule was sea-sicke, and heavie even to death.... The crosse to all the saints must have a bloody bit, and lyons teeth, it was like it selfe to Christ, gallie and soure, so it must be to us. We cannot have a Paper-crosse."

Here is the final answer to all our complaints about the trials of our lives, the difficulties we must face – painful, sorrowful, wearying as they may very well be, as they were in Paul’s case – they are only a shadow of what our Savior endured for us and, like his trials, they have a holy and happy end. For the joy set before him he endured the cross and its shame, and for the joy set before us we must follow him in that. A servant is not greater than his master!

And we can. It is one of my most urgent tasks as your minister to remind you, over and over again, that you can! Not you in yourself, of course. Your trials are the demonstration of your weakness, even your helplessness in yourself. But their purpose is to awaken and strengthen your faith, your grip on Christ and his presence with you. “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me,” Paul said in another place.

No, it is not for us to shift our trials, not for us to long for the trials of another. It is ours to wear the trials we are appointed to suffer as a crown, take them for what they are, the proof that our heavenly father is at work in our lives and waiting for us to prove his love, his grace, and his power by our trusting in him. Trials taken in that spirit, and borne with the faith of Jesus Christ, are burdens such as wings are a burden to a bird. They become, when borne by faith, *the great opportunities, the great measure, the great heroism* of our lives.

The Lord knows how much they hurt. As one preacher put it, “Some of us live by the sweat of the brow, and some by the sweat of the brain, and some by the sweat of the heart, and that, Thou knowest, O Lord, is the hardest sweat of all.” [A.M. Fairbairn in Gammie, *Preachers I Have Heard*, 28]

But, you want to do something great for Jesus Christ, don’t you? You want to finish your life knowing that you have stood for him through both thick and thin. You want it to be said of you that when your faith was tested, it passed the test. You want him to know that your faith is not of words only but of deeds. You want to have *done* something that only a *real* Christian does in the way only a *real* Christian does it. That is a large part of what trials are for. To give you the opportunity to do something great for the Lord in this short life you have been given to live by faith before eternity puts an end to all such opportunity.

“What,” asked Richard Baxter, “is a candle made for but to be burnt?”

Or, we might paraphrase, What is the Christian life for but to be lived to the hilt? And where is it so lived more wonderfully, more nobly, more beautifully, more faithfully, more authentically, more fruitfully, and more to the glory of God, than when Christ is love and trusted and served in the midst of trial.

No, brothers and sisters, there is much, much more to our lives in this world than being comfortable, happy, and content. There is far too much at stake for that, too much evil around us and in us, too many who are lost, a roaring lion and a dying world. And what is needed more than simply the demonstration of God’s grace in the lives of his people and the power of faith in Christ to overcome the world.

You know Maltbie Babcock, the author of the hymn *This is My Father’s World*. Babcock was a Presbyterian minister, I just learned; I had always thought he was a Methodist. He died at just 43

years of age in Naples on his way home from a trip to the Holy Land. He was a man who took Paul's example to heart as we must.

We are not here to play, to dream, to drift;
We have hard work to do, and loads to lift;
Shun not the struggle – face it; Tis God's gift.

Be strong! Say not, "The days are evil. Whose to blame?"
And fold the hands and acquiesce – O shame!
Stand up, speak out, and bravely, in God's name.

Be strong! It matters not how deep entrenched the wrong,
How hard the battle goes, the day how long;
Faint not – fight on! Tomorrow comes the song.

Paul would later say, I have fought the fight, I have kept the faith. But, remember 2 Corinthians 11. That is what it took for him to fight the good fight of faith. And it will take you something like it. But that is as it should be in a world such as ours. And to be able to say "I have fought the fight" will make the struggle well worth it. "Faint not – fight on! Tomorrow comes the song." And we first hear that song, we will think, with Samuel Rutherford, "It were a well-spent journey though *seven* deaths lay between."