

SPIRITUAL STRENGTH IN WEAKNESS

2 Corinthians 11:16–33

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We finish our study of 2 Corinthians this month. Today, open your Bibles to 2 Corinthians 11:16–33. This particular section of Scripture is in the middle of a whole passage of chapter 10 through chapter 13, which deals with Paul’s defense of his apostleship. I’ve called today’s message “Spiritual Strength in Weakness.” Is there anybody here who wants to be spiritually strong or stronger? I think all of us would say, “Sure. That includes me.” What does spiritual strength mean to you? How would you describe it?

For some, spiritual strength may mean possessing spiritual gifts. That seems to be the spirit of a lot of people in the Corinthian church. To be spiritually strong is to be spiritually gifted. I know how much, in my own life, I’ve always desired the spiritual gift of miracles and healings. I do not seem to have these gifts. For others, spiritual strength means having spiritual influence.

Spiritual influence means affecting other people for Christ—persons are drawn to the Lord because of you. If you are a young person, it means that instead of your peer group affecting you, you’re affecting them. Still for others, spiritual strength is saying no to temptation. “If I could only have mastery over self, I could be truly holy.” For others, spiritual strength is faithfulness in spiritual disciplines, “I would be spiritually strong if I had a regular devotional life or a regular prayer life or a regular Bible study life or regular stewardship.” That’s spiritual strength.

Certainly, all of these characteristics I just described are part of spiritual strength. Paul definitely had these facets operating in his life. He’s a person endowed with spiritual gifts. He certainly has great influence. He had a lifestyle that was holy, and personal discipline in his life that was very marked. But my concern today, in looking at this passage and having it speak to us, is not so

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much to define spiritual strength or even to give all the steps to getting to spiritual strength. My concern is to show the three insights that arise out of 2 Corinthians 11:16–33; three spiritual insights that Paul gives us in regard to growing into spiritual strength. My message is not a complete A to Z of how to get there, but three basic insights from the passage, which are: our thirst for spiritual strength may lead us astray (11:16–21); secondly, spiritual strength develops through spiritual stretch (11:22–29); and third, spiritual strength is available even to basket case Christians (verse 30–33).

I. First: Our thirst for spiritual strength may lead us astray.

“I repeat: Let no one take me for a fool. But if you do, then receive me just as you would a fool, so that I may do a little boasting. In this self-confident boasting I am not talking as the Lord would, but as a fool [Literally when the word “fool” is used here it’s not quite as strong as that. I wish they had used the words “senseless person.” That’s more the idea of the word]. Since many are boasting in the way the world does, I too will boast. You gladly put up with fools since you are so wise! In fact, you even put up with anyone who enslaves you or exploits you or takes advantage of you or pushes himself forward or slaps you in the face. To my shame I admit that we were too weak for that!” (2 Corinthians 11:16–21, NIV).

The enemy has a way of taking our good intentions and twisting them so that we pursue perverse paths. Having spiritual strength is a good intention. The Corinthians wanted to be spiritual. There’s nothing at all wrong with wanting to be spiritual, with wanting to be like Christ. The problem was the twist they took to get to spirituality. They began holding up as models of spirituality persons whose lifestyle was not like the lifestyle of the Lord. You grow toward that which your vision is. You become like the thing or the person you admire. The great difficulty

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with the Corinthian believers is that they had selected some very poor models of the Christian life, and held those models up as spiritual examples of what it means to be strong in the Lord. Paul, in fact, in verse 20, gives us five characteristics of the spiritual models which they had, who were taking them down perverse paths. Notice these five characteristics.

A. These leaders, these models of the Corinthians enslaved. “In fact, you put up with anyone who enslaves you.”

What does it mean that these leaders “enslaved”? That is, these so called spiritual leaders of the Corinthian church motivated others to do their Christian duty by means of guilt—by adherence to legalistic standards. It’s very clear, in looking at qualifications for these leaders, that they prided themselves in their Jewishness, and they were looking for the Corinthian Christians to lay aside this doctrine of being freely justified by grace—they wanted them to earn their way through obedience to the Law. You motivate people to do that by enslaving them with legalistic standards and motivating them by guilt. Enslaving leadership is always authoritarian leadership. Christians need to learn the balance between authority and authoritarianism. I would dare say that the body of Jesus Christ, as it is reflected in the New Testament, doesn’t have room for authoritarian leaders. It has room for leaders who move in the humble authority the Lord gives to them. Authoritarian leaders demand to be the master and they enslave God’s people.

B. The second characteristic of this spiritual model is that they followed people who had exploited them. The NIV has “swallowed up.” The implication is that these so-called spiritual models were parasites of the body of Christ. They were not in it to serve Jesus, but their own belly, as Paul says in Romans 16:18. The Corinthians were very impressed with the high living standards in their spiritual leaders. Maybe many of them were from a lower class kind of

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background and it somehow seemed to them to be a compliment that they could have leaders that could live in such a high lifestyle. They took it as a credit that this was happening.

Therefore, Paul is saying, “These leaders really exploited you.” Maybe they would say, “It’s not my business what those spiritual leaders do with the money. They’ll have to answer to God for what they do with it. That’s between them and God. It’s ok.” Paul’s response would be, “Yes, what’s true. It is between them and God. But when you give to support their lifestyle, you’re going to have to answer to God as an unwise investor. When there are so many needs in the world and in the dissemination of the gospel, and the makeup of the body of Christ—that you should be a foolish steward—you will have to answer to that.” Don’t support leaders who exploit you with their high lifestyle.

C. The third characteristic of these false leaders, these models of spiritual strength, is that they ensnare or they take advantage of. That is to say that their followers, because they’re blind followers—they’re dupes—are asked for blind obedience, and the leaders themselves are not held accountable to anyone. Beware of leaders who ask for blind obedience and who do not submit to a standard of accountability.

D. Fourth, they exalted themselves or pushed themselves forward. Of course, when what you admire is a pushy kind of a person, that’s what you become—pushy and insisting on your rights. I love Billy Graham—the way he conducts his ministry. I’ve always appreciated the fact that, whenever he goes into an area, he works with the body of Jesus Christ. Whenever he holds crusades, his organization meets with the pastors and with the lay representatives of the churches in the area he’s going to visit and it even secures an invitation from them before officially coming in. He knows that the local body is going to be there long after he’s gone, and his purpose is to build the local body, not to pull people out of it and pull resources out of it.

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How different from some freelance ministries that totally ignore cooperation with the local church and simply push themselves forward, not caring about the purpose of the body of Christ in a particular area, but simply looking at it as an audience to be fleeced.

E. Fifth, these so-called spiritual leaders actually slapped others in the face. Literally, the Greek says, “Beat you on the face.” Who in the world would do a thing like that? An intemperate, angry religious leader would do a thing like that. Acts 23 talks about Ananias, who struck Paul because Paul protested about something Ananias said. Paul, in writing to Timothy (1 Timothy 3:3) and Titus (Titus 1:7), tells both of them that they are not to allow persons in the office of elder who are strikers. Persons who physically strike. Or shall I even say, who verbally abuse the flock of God.

Some people, on the spiritual level, appear to have a broad streak of spiritual masochism, which almost invites punishment, and doesn't feel like it's spiritual unless they are being punished by an authoritarian figure. Why do God's people allow themselves to be treated that way? I'm sure the question must have baffled Paul. Nothing hurts a sensitive and godly leader more than to see members of the flock of God come in under the influence of religious hustlers. “How do you wake up these Corinthian Christians?” is Paul's concern. How do you stir them to action? Paul tries to do it with some irony. He shows a little bit of his satirical side, and basically what he says is something like this, “You've gladly listened to senseless persons. So if I have to imitate them to get a hearing, that is, be senseless—even though I am not senseless and you are wise—let me become senseless. Give me the same favor you give them. Hear me boast. If boasting reaches you, let me boast.” Paul realizes that all such boasting in the self is not after the Lord, but after the flesh. With a touch of irony, he apologizes in verse 21 for not treating them the way the super-apostles did—tricking them or abusing them or ensnaring them. He indicates, by his

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apology for boasting, that such an activity does not come naturally to a person who follows the Lord and practices a life of self-denial.

Again and again, here and elsewhere in the New Testament, we are warned of false teachers. They look like the genuine article, but their spirit, their lifestyle and their doctrine, are not of Christ. They're accountable to no one except themselves. But the person who has gone astray like these Corinthians does not have to be condemned to stay there and have these false models. That's why Paul gives the appeal, to draw these believers back to true spirituality and to excite them about a wholesome walk with the Lord. The whole purpose is not to condemn them, but to keep them from following that kind of example for the rest of their experience, to help them come back and have a right example.

I'm sure there must have been great grief in the apostle's heart that the persons he loved had followed after spiritual models that led them astray. They were looking for spiritual strengths, and they would end up not getting it because of a perverse path.

II. The second insight from this passage of Scripture is that spiritual strength develops through spiritual stretch.

The claim of the super-apostles was twofold: They were better Jews than Paul, and they were better Christians than Paul. So he responds. "What anyone else dares to boast about—I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast about. Are they Hebrews? So am I [They took pride in the fact that they could speak the Hebrew language without the Greek accent]. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham's descendants? So am I [Paul's real concern here is not to defend his Jewishness, but to simply note that he's every much a Jew as they are. His real concern is to defend his Christianity and his Christian experience]. Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more" (2 Corinthians 11:21–23, NIV).

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Then Paul goes on to give us five spheres in his life where he has been stretched as a Christian.

And in the process of that stretching, he has grown greatly in the Lord. The five areas are these:

A. His ministry in general. He says, “I have worked much harder. I have been in prison more frequently, [and] been flogged more severely” (verse 23, NIV). That’s real intriguing as you read this list and cross reference it with the life of Paul as described in the Book of Acts. Many of these occasions in this list and the words yet to come are not ever found in the Book of Acts. There’s a lot that Acts doesn’t record that obviously happened. Paul’s giving us a little insight, and simply saying, in general, that the life he’s had has been a life of intense pain and effort and self-denial, as he’s served the Lord.

B. Having talked about his ministry in general then he gives us the second phase of his Christian ministry—the times he had faced death. The problem with false teachers is all they were doing was being parasites in the body and they were not paying the cost of being an apostle, and yet claiming the title. Paul says, essentially, “Here are the times I’ve faced death.” “Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one” (2 Corinthians 11:24, NIV). Deuteronomy 25:1–3 prescribes forty lashes for certain offenses. And a person who was administering the beating had to take responsibility for keeping count, so it became Jewish practice that rather than going to the fortieth stripe, lest there be a mistake on the fortieth lash, that he stop at thirty-nine. Can you imagine, in a synagogue, having your hands tied to the posts? This was the custom—and your feet spread and being beaten in a very methodical pattern—“Five times” Paul says, “I’ve faced this.” “Three times I was beaten with rods [sticks or canes, probably by Gentile or Roman administrations], once I was stoned [and that word has a whole different meaning in our culture—“Pelted with rocks” is what we say now, “Once I was pelted with rocks”], three times I was shipwrecked [and that, by the way, occurs before the shipwreck described in Acts 27; that

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would have been his fourth shipwreck], I spent a night and a day in the open sea [What he means by that might be a mystery, but the most common idea is that in one of his shipwrecks, he was afloat a night and a day, holding on to a log, as he wrestled with the swells—“a night and a day in the deep”; the terrorizing experience of being lost with no sea search equipment that is present in the world today]” (2 Corinthians 11:25, NIV).

All together, these occasions of facing death add up to eleven times. Eleven times he had been at death’s door for the sake of the gospel.

C. The third category of his ministry was the danger of his journeys. He lists eight things that had been dangers to him: rivers, trying to ford swollen streams; robbers; Jews; Gentiles; danger in the city, teeming urban ghetto areas; the country; in danger in the sea; in danger by false brethren (2 Corinthians 11:26).

D. A fourth category—deprivation. Often, of his own choosing: in labor, in toil, hard work, sleeplessness, hunger, thirst, fasting often, being cold and naked (2 Corinthians 11:27). Most likely, the reference to being cold and naked refers to those times when he was in a damp and cold prison cell without adequate clothing. That’s his situation later, when he writes the second letter to Timothy. He asks Timothy to bring him a coat before winter. He knows what it’s like to be freezing with his teeth chattering. Suffering for the gospel.

E. Then he says, the fifth category: “I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches” (verse 27, NIV). When he goes through a list like that, my immediate response is: “What have I ever done for Christ?” Here’s somebody who’s really done something for the Lord. Paul gives this list, not to dump guilt on other people, but to give us a right standard for measuring true service to Christ. These struggles have made him an empathetic believer. He says, in verse 29, “Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?” (NIV). I

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feel shame for the person who has fallen into sin. I feel shame for the person who's led them into sin. A person who's been stretched in life, who's suffered in life, has an ability to empathize with those who are going through similar passages.

Paul points to these times when he has been weak. When he speaks of his record as a Christian, he doesn't give a list of his miracles—and there would have been many. He doesn't give a record of the conversions. Nor does he simply give the statistical sheet on the church growth of the churches he founded—all the things that would have made him a speaker at church growth conferences today. He omits all that paraphernalia and simply talks about his sufferings.

I think our own willingness to walk away from responsibility because our feelings get hurt needs to be measured against Paul's refusal to walk away, even when his body is hurt. He might have said, after his first whipping, "One whipping is enough for me. If this is the kind of thanks you're going to get for serving Christ, forget it!" Always, in the body of Christ, we face the fact that when we do things, maybe people don't appreciate what we do and say careless things to us—and they can sting just as much as a whip or a lash can sting. We need to have that indomitable spirit that we're not serving another person. We're serving the Lord.

Why was Paul such a strong Christian? Because he went through so much. Because there was so much need for stretching in his life, and spiritual strength goes with spiritual strength.

III. The third great insight from this passage is that spiritual strength is available to basket case Christians.

"If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, who is to be praised forever, knows that I am not lying. In Damascus the governor under King Aretas had the city of the Damascenes guarded in order to arrest me. But I was

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lowered in a basket from a window in the wall and slipped through his hands” (2 Corinthians 11:31–33, NIV).

For me, this is one of the most delightful passages in all of Paul’s writings. Here is a Scripture that teaches the importance of doing small things well, doing good works in whatever we’re called to do. Can you imagine if the basket weaver had been careless, what would have happened to Paul as he was lowered over the city wall? We would have lost the apostle of the church. Can you imagine the influence on, not just Christian history, but the history of the world, if the basket weaver had been careless? Here is a marvelous Scripture that teaches us, in the common, mundane things, to do what we do with quality. We never know what purposes they might be used for.

But there is also this beautiful thing in this passage that presents Paul as a basket case. How different from the hot-shot Saul, the persecutor. The confident man, who has got a small army with him to go pull Christians out of synagogues. How different from the eloquent Christian apostle, Paul, who begins his preaching ministry in the city of Damascus by challenging the leadership of the synagogue. What he remembers is not what a hot-shot he used to be, but the fact that, at the very beginning of his Christian apostleship, he had a foundational lesson of vulnerability. He began to encounter the strangeness of God, this dark side of God, or this side of God where there is mystery and impenetrability.

Why is he led to go over the city wall in a basket? Miracles had happened to him while he was in Damascus. Blind eyes had been healed. He’d been baptized in water, he’d been filled with the Spirit, he’d experienced the body of Christ. But now, as he’s getting ready to leave the city, there are guards at the doors. Why didn’t he just say, “Lord, I call upon You to send Your angels and to blind the eyes of the guards as I walk through. I will not sneak out of town. That doesn’t befit

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Your servant, to sneak out of town in a basket lowered over a wall. Your church needs to be here, watching their great apostle go out with power and glory, and seeing how the Lord blinds everybody, left and right, and binds their arms with invisible ropes, so that they can't lay a glove on me. That's what your apostle needs"? Instead, he winds up ignominiously dumped over the city wall in a basket—a basket case. He might have said, "Lord, this isn't the way I wanted it. This could never glorify You."

But now as he looks back, he glories in it. He basically says to these Corinthians, "If you want to know what a great apostle I am, let me tell you about my basket case. Let me boast in my weakness. Let me tell you that when I am weak, then I am strong."

Maybe you haven't had the experience you anticipated, like the apostle. Maybe your marriage hasn't turned out like you expected. I'm sure getting out of town was not what Paul expected, as a Christian and an apostle. Maybe your job has not turned out the way you expected it, or your family, or even your church, has not turned out the way you expected. Some experience you thought would turn out for good, instead found you feeling like a basket case. But like Paul, God wants you to be able to look back on that adversity, and say, "I did not leave the way I wanted, but I am alive! I lived to serve God another day."

Our difficult experience in life can either train us or maim us. Paul could have spent the rest of his Christian experience stuck, wondering why God didn't do something special for him. It could have maimed him. Instead, he let it train him to know that God sometimes changes our circumstances but many, many other times, He gives us strength in our circumstances without changing them.

Immediately following this passage, Paul, in chapter 12, will go on to tell us of an opposite experience, when he is caught up in the heavens. The same man that descends, also ascends. The

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same man that is let down, gets caught up. We all need to know that God is with us in the valleys and with us in the mountains. He's not just the God of the mountains and the hills. He's the God of the valleys as well.

When it is safe to get out of the basket, leave. Paul left as soon as the basket was on the ground. The experience did not destroy him. Your basket experience will not destroy you. We never read of Paul ever returning to Damascus. He'll never return to that particular basket case. But God will use that time in your life to place an unusual strength that would not have been there in any other way. Go on with your life journey, descending and ascending. And knowing that, in the final day, the only direction that counts at the end is up. Sure, there will be times when we go down. But the Christian always knows what the last trip is going to be like.

I was in a prison elevator one time, with the prison chaplain. He greeted the trustee, the convict, who was operating the elevator. He told him what floor he was going to. They made small talk—the chaplain and the prisoner. The chaplain said to the prisoner, “Life is filled here with its ups and downs, isn't it?” The convict sort of laughed. He operated that elevator eight hours a day, and he knew that life was filled with ups and down. As we got out of the elevator, the chaplain turned to the prisoner and said, “May your last trip be up.”

I've thought of that many times when I'm in a down situation. In a basket, over a city wall. A situation I would not have wanted, which I didn't seek out. It happened. It came because of the weakness of life, the vulnerability, even of Christians. We know that there is an upside to every downside. Spiritual strength in weakness. God develops spiritual strength in spiritual stretch, and even basket case Christians can be spiritually strong.

Closing Prayer

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Our gracious heavenly Father, we thank You today for Your love and mercy and for the truth that You've communicated to us through this passage. We especially pray, our Lord, for those in this service who are going through very difficult times in their life. They feel very trapped. They would have preferred to walk out of the situation they are in personally by having some visible manifestation of Your presence, some revelation of Your glory, some angelic revelation. Things haven't turned out in that way. But that is not a sign that You have abandoned us. For Your Word comes to us with strength again. "I will never leave You nor forsake You" (Hebrews 13:5). "I am with You always" (Matthew 28:20). "Be of good cheer" (Matthew 9:2). You comfort and you help. Let us also, Lord, grow into spiritual strength. Help us to even examine our own life and see what it is in us that needs to be stretched in activity for You, that we might do the works of Him who has sent us while it is yet day (John 9:4). Stretch Your people. In a tender way, Lord, those who, at this moment, are simply coasting in their Christian experience and are not involved with You or with Your work, through Your gentle love, draw them to the desire to have the kind of life that gets out on a limb and risks and trusts and finds You faithful at every juncture. We ask this in the name of the Lord. Amen.