

## **What makes a man of God? (2 Corinthians 11:16-33.)**

### **Introduction (16-21):**

Two words occur frequently in this section, particularly in verses 16-18. These words are “fool” and “boast”. In v.16 Paul began with the plea, “*let no one think me a fool*”, but then, in case people did think of him in that way, Paul asked permission “*to boast a little*”. In v.17, the two ideas are linked. Speaking “*foolishly*” goes hand in hand with “*this confidence of boasting*”. Paul was faced with a group of men who had tried to seize control of the Church in Corinth, who had been boasting about their achievements, albeit “*according to the flesh*”. The apostle felt that the time had come for a little boasting of his own, though his boasting would take a different form and be carried out for different reasons (18). So Paul made a direct comparison between himself and his opponents. In effect, he asked permission from his readers to descend to the level of his rivals and employ the tactics they had employed. Ordinarily, Christians should not give way to self-promotion. The meek man does not parade his achievements. But Paul felt that his critics had left him with no alternative. What follows, as far as 12:13, is a reluctant summary of his ministry intended to shame his critics into silence. Paul’s catalogue of achievements must have taken his readers by surprise. It is the exact opposite of the approach taken by his rivals. They listed their triumphs, but Paul produced a catalogue of defeats. How do you measure the man of God? The obsession with success is still with us. Look at the promotional literature for many of the big events on the evangelical scene and you will see that star-studded celebrities, each with a flattering photograph and a paragraph describing a career of unbroken accomplishment. I don’t mean to decry success for one minute. I wish I could point to more souls saved through my own preaching, but were Paul still with us, how would he react to the modern taste for hype?

There is a strong note of irony running through verses 19-21. The believers in Corinth had no right to complain about Paul’s “*boasting*”. They had accepted much worse from his rivals. The phrase, “*you put up with fools gladly, since you yourselves are wise*” (19) means that the Church had such misplaced pride in its maturity and such unjustified confidence in its capacity for discernment that it had allowed itself to be exploited by impostors. The expressions in v.20 tell us that a gullible Church had allowed itself to be taken in. “*Bondage*” suggests that Paul’s opponents had deceitfully gained the confidence of the members and taken the church prisoner. They proceeded to “*devour*” the Church, feeding off it, enriching themselves by fleecing the flock of God. The same idea is conveyed by the third expression. They had not given themselves to the Church through service, toil and prayer but had “*taken*” from it. Had these unscrupulous men really taken to striking believers “*on the face*”? Some commentators argue that this is a vivid way of describing some act of humiliation. Perhaps they had abused the Church members with cruel words that stung like a slap across the cheek. Two considerations prompt me to take Paul’s words literally. Firstly, when Paul himself was on trial before the Sanhedrin, the chief priest objected to something he said and ordered that he be struck on the mouth (Acts 23:2). Was this, at that time and in that culture, a way of expressing disgust at the words of another? This might help to explain Paul’s insistence that the Elders of Christian Churches should control their emotions and not lash out at those who

displeased them (1 Timothy 3:3). If I am correct, things had gone badly adrift in Corinth for the Church to accept the authority of men who resorted to their fists. The most telling statement in v.20, “*you put up with it*”, is a disturbing reminder that the Church had been weak and supine in the face of the take-over bid mounted by Paul’s detractors. Yes, the Church had been targeted by ruthless predators, but it had been easy prey. And for all that his rivals said that Paul was “*weak*” (21) he would not have enslaved a church by deceit and then oppressed it.

**A. Paul boasts about his weakness (22-30):**

Paul wrote in verse 22 that he was as much a “*Hebrew*”, an “*Israelite*” and the “*seed of Abraham*” as his opponents. Essentially, the issue concerned Paul’s status. He had not been born in Palestine, but in Cilicia on the South coast of Asia Minor. It was therefore easy for his opponents to allege that his Jewishness was deficient, that he was not a Hebrew of the first order. These people made much of their Jewish ancestry. It gave them status. Even so, Paul had no cause to feel ashamed when measured alongside them. He was “*circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews*” (Philippians 3:5).

As far as his ethnic origins went, Paul was the equal of his critics. In every other area, he surpassed them. When I was a boy, it was widely accepted that it was unseemly to parade your own achievements. This was one area where Christianity had influenced the culture of Western civilisation. Boasting was not acceptable! There has been a marked change over the last two decades. If you go to a job interview, it is no longer enough to let your qualifications and achievements speak for you: you must sell yourself! In this respect, our society resembles that of Paul’s day. Public figures were expected to produce an encomium, a boastful record of their triumphs. (The Emperor Augustus composed one, which was inscribed on most of his statues throughout the Empire.) These encomiums were often detailed and precise. A general would record how many cities he had besieged, how many battles he had won, how many provinces he had conquered and so on. In the verses which follow, Paul used the literary form of the encomium, but first century readers who were used to such things would have been greatly surprised. No doubt they were expecting a list of triumphs. What they got was more like a list of disasters. Paul would only “*boast in the things which concerned (his) infirmity*” (30), his weakness and vulnerability.

What should be entered on the CV, or the résumé, of a man of God? Paul’s opponents thought they knew. They had bought into the triumphalism of the secular world of their day. It would include his charisma, dramatic signs and wonders that accompanied his ministry, visions and so on. And today there is no shortage of people who are impressed by powerful personalities who claim to be the special instruments of God. For some time, Paul’s opponents had been laying down a challenge, “Paul, what about your credentials? How do they compare with ours?” So the apostle responded. He began in v.23 with “*labours more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequently, in deaths often*”. The first qualifications on his list were hard work, beatings, imprisonment and frightening experiences where he had looked death in the face. These themes are elaborated in verses 24-25. “*Forty stripes*” was a Jewish punishment meted

out to those who broke the law of the synagogue. A whip of three cords was used. Two thirds of the blows fell on the offender's back, the other third on his chest. The victim would be left raw and bleeding. It was even possible that the offender might die under the lash, so one stroke less was given in case the officer in charge lost count and gave too many. Most people would be so traumatised after one such beating that they would be extremely reluctant to face another. (The whole purpose of the punishment was to terrify the victim into submission.) Yet Paul endured it five times. God must have given him strength of heart and mind as well as a strong constitution. And Paul could have side-stepped each punishment by claiming that his Roman citizenship made him exempt, but if he had refused to accept Jewish laws and punishments, no Jew would have accepted him as a fellow Israelite. This is part of what it meant for Paul to become like a Jew for the sake of winning Jewish converts (1 Cor 9:20). The apostle paid a heavy price for his willingness to identify with his countrymen in order to bring them to Christ. But then, he paid a similar price in his efforts to share the gospel with Gentiles. The beatings "*with rods*" (25) were a Roman punishment given by the civil authorities. In theory, as a citizen, he could not be flogged in that way, but overenthusiastic local officials sometimes overstepped their authority, as they did in Philippi (Acts 16:37-40) Stoning is also mentioned in v.25. This was actually a Jewish mode of execution, but in Paul's case it was not a legal sentence passed by a court but the spontaneous action of a mob at Lystra, which left him almost dead (Acts 14:19). To sum up thus far, in effect, Paul has said to his rivals, "What have I done for the Lord? For what it's worth, I've been on the receiving end of eight floggings and one lynch-mob. Which of you can say that?"

Paul went on in verses 25b & 26 to mention that his life as a travelling preacher had exposed him to constant danger. This section describes incidents that are not mentioned in the book of Acts, and was written before the famous shipwreck off Malta described in Acts 27. Imagine the horror behind that brief statement, "*three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep.*" People who have survived a shipwreck are often in a state of profound shock. Shortage of food and fresh water, exposure to the elements and the fear of dangerous predators such as sharks all take a formidable toll of even a strong man's resources yet Paul casually dismissed a whole world of trauma and fear in half a sentence. Next, his phrases "*perils in the city*", "*in the wilderness*" and "*in the sea*" (26) are very comprehensive. Paul was in danger wherever he went. He must have spent his entire missionary life looking over his shoulder, never able to drop his guard. Nor did it matter what kind of company he kept. His reference to "*perils of my own countrymen*" (the Jews) and "*Gentiles*" is one way of saying "everybody", and if he felt able to relax among believers, there was always the disturbing possibility that some might turn out to be "*false*". The apostle was not completely safe even in Christian company. Verse 27 follows this up with a description of the evangelist's lifestyle. Paul had to combine his evangelism with tent-making. There were never enough hours in the day. The "*weariness and toil*" were unrelenting. He often had to go without. There was "*hunger and thirst*", "*fastings ... cold and nakedness*". Comforts were few; it was an intense, busy life lived at breakneck speed. To sum up once more, it is as though Paul challenged his accusers and declared, "What have I done for the gospel? I've lived in constant danger with my life at risk again and again. But I don't suppose you'll be impressed. What is all that worth compared with a vision or two? My critics say that riches are proof of God's blessing but I've been getting by on the minimum for years!"

In addition to all these problems raging on the outside, Paul was often in a turmoil within (28-29). “*Deep concern for all the churches*” (28) gnawed at him. There was the Church in Thessalonica which he had been forced to leave after just a month, or the Church in Rome which he had neither founded nor visited. Half the time he was in suspense waiting for news and when that news came, as in the case of Corinth, it often left him feeling distressed. His heart was big and his sympathies large. Every assembly of Christians was continually on his mind. His questions, “*who is weak and I am not weak? Who is made to stumble and I do not burn with indignation?*” (29) reveal something of Paul’s inner life. If news came that someone was in difficulties, he felt for them. If there was a report that someone had slipped back, Paul’s spirits sank and his cheeks glowed red along with theirs. We can sum up Paul’s defence of himself in this section as follows, “Do you want to know what my record is? I’ve been anxious every day, troubled in my soul. There isn’t a Church I don’t pray for. My mind is always ranging from country to country, situation to situation, fellowship to fellowship.” It was unglamorous, it offered little in the way of spectacle, but Paul cared. And the Church in Corinth was perilously close to throwing him over in favour of a gang of cheap swindlers! Modern Churches need to resist the Corinthian syndrome too. It often rears its head when pastoral vacancies need to be filled and churches act like corporations appointing a Chief Executive Officer and oblige their favoured candidate to sing his own praises. But who will achieve more for God in the long run, the man with star quality, a big name and a high profile, or a man who cares enough to suffer?

#### **B. An embarrassing memory (31-33):**

These verses refer to a time at the very outset of his ministry, soon after his conversion, when Paul became trapped in Damascus. (See Acts 9:23-25.) The Jewish authorities requested that the secular authorities seize him for questioning. The city walls were manned, the gates barred to prevent his escape. At last the scene is set for a spectacular act of deliverance which would help Paul gain credibility among the believers in Corinth. Imagine their excited queries, “Paul, how did you get out? Were angels involved? Did you become invisible to the guards? Were they overcome by a thunderstorm sent in answer to your prayers?” And Paul replied, “No, it was nothing like that. We waited until nightfall, then my friends stuffed me into a fish-basket and lowered me to the ground from a window high in the wall. Then I slipped away into the night.” This was the man who had approached Damascus with all the self-assurance and pomp of visiting monarch, yet he left it with an element of farce. Why did Paul include this episode, with its comical overtones, in this section of his epistle? Two things stand out. First of all, this was a sign to Paul, God’s way of telling him what life was going to be like from then on. A man who had dazzling prospects must yield to a future of living hand to mouth, moment by moment, with danger never far away. A proud man would have to say goodbye to his dignity and self-importance. Secondly, it is a sign to Paul’s readers, then and now. Do we want to live lives that will count for God? We must not assume that this will go hand-in-hand with applause, recognition and the limelight.

## **Conclusion:**

This passage leaves the modern reader facing some uncomfortable questions. Are we, for instance, like the Corinthians, much too ready to be taken in by spiritual leaders who do not so much resemble Paul as his rivals? The churches of the future would do well to be wary of eminence and to remember what Jesus had to say about ambition, “*you know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant.*” (Matthew 20:26)

Secondly, do we resemble Paul in glorying in weaknesses? Few Christians in the West can identify with Paul because our experience is so unlike his. While British Christianity can look back with gratitude on its martyrs of the Reformation era and those who bore heroic sufferings in other periods, but we ourselves have not been required to suffer as he did. Perhaps we could at least be more realistic in our assessment of ourselves. Suppose we had faced the same challenges that Paul faced, how far would our patient endurance have matched his? Modesty about our own levels of commitment, consecration and achievement for the gospel would not come amiss. After all, the time may not be too far away when we have to recover the apostle’s perspective on true greatness, that our vulnerability is the theatre in which the great drama of the glory of God is played out.