

Answering the Fool, Part 1

2 Corinthians 11:16–29

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Introduction

Well we return once again to our study of Paul’s Second Letter to the Corinthians, so please turn with me in your Bibles to 2 Corinthians chapter 11. One of the great privileges of my life has been to serve for these past nearly-seven years as the Pastor of Local Outreach Ministries here at Grace Church. The attention that I’ve had to give to meditating on the Gospel, considering how to proclaim it most faithfully, and helping to train other believers to engage in evangelism has been nothing but good for my soul. And because I occupy that role at the church, I also have the privilege of teaching Apologetics and Evangelism at The Master’s Seminary. And in that class we speak about the same things: how do we most faithfully proclaim the Gospel, how do we best train others to evangelize, and how do we defend against the attacks unbelievers launch against Christ and against Scripture.

One of the questions about evangelism that I get most often—both from students at the seminary and from folks here at the church—is: How do I know when to engage with an unbeliever’s arguments, versus when to just move on in the conversation or even just walk away? And the passage that I go to most often in response to that question is Proverbs chapter 26. Proverbs 26:4 says, “Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself.” So that seems like a pretty clear answer. If someone you’re preaching the Gospel to begins mocking the Gospel, mocking Christ, mocking Scripture—if it becomes plain that they don’t want to genuinely engage, but simply want to use the opportunity to give vent to their foolishness—the sage says, “Don’t answer them. If you answer a fool according to his folly, you’ll become like him yourself.”

And there are plenty of instances where I’ve seen that happen. The unbeliever is goading the believer by mocking and attacking, and the believer takes the bait. He takes personal offense—as if this was about him and not about the truth—and, rather than let a soft answer turn away wrath, he responds in kind, escalates, and before you know it, starts sounding just like the fool mocking the truth. “Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself.”

But then, in the *next* verse, Proverbs 26 verse 5, the text says, “*Answer* a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes.” In other words, if a fool brings his objections to the truth and they go unanswered, he’s going to go away from that interaction wise in his own eyes, patting himself on the back for advancing an argument that “the Christians” just don’t have an

answer for. He's going to go away reinforced and hardened in his unbelief, because he thinks he's made the smoking-gun argument against Christianity.

Now, these verses appear back-to-back—the one following right after another! Proverbs 26:4: “Answer *not* a fool according to his folly.” Proverbs 26:5: “*Answer* a fool according to his folly.” What's going on here? Is Solomon a schizophrenic? Is Scripture contradicting itself? No. Just like throughout the rest of the Book of Proverbs, Solomon is calling for wisdom. He's teaching us that there are times when we must answer the fool, lest we give him reason to cement himself in his folly, and yet there are other times when we must not answer the fool, lest we stoop to his level and succumb to his folly. There are times when we must make a defense to everyone who asks us to give an account for the hope that is in us, 1 Peter 3:15, and yet there are other times when we must refuse to cast our pearls before swine, as Jesus says in Matthew 7:6. And discerning which time is which is the work of wisdom.

Well, in 2 Corinthians 10 and 11, as the Apostle Paul continues dealing with the false apostles, Paul has had to discern whether this was a time to answer fools according to their folly. In chapter 11 verses 13 to 15, Paul has unmasked these false apostles as Satanic deceivers who disguise themselves as apostles of Christ and servants of righteousness. They are Judaizing legalists, aiming to bring the Corinthian Christians back under the bondage of the ceremonies of the Mosaic Law—insisting on circumcision and on other ritualistic obedience to supplement the righteousness received through faith in Christ alone. But they are also fleshly triumphalists who boast in their ministerial accomplishments—their rhetorical skills, their large crowds, their high speaking fees, their mystical spiritual experiences. And the Corinthians had been dazzled by that outward flashiness, that foolish, fleshly boastfulness.

And so Paul decides that if he's going to win the Corinthians back to faithfulness, he's going to have to answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes—and lest he be wise in the eyes of his dear Corinthians. Paul's going to have to engage in some boasting, because the Corinthians are so enamored with the boastful claims that the false apostles are making about themselves.

But you can see that Paul is uneasy about doing this. It's not what he wants to do. It's not in his nature to be boasting about himself or his accomplishments. That's what marks the fleshliness of the false apostles, but as a genuine follower and servant of Christ, Paul wants only to boast in the Lord—only in the cross. And you can detect this backwardness by noticing how long it actually takes Paul to get going. He spoke of it first in chapter 10 verse 8. He said, “For even if I boast somewhat further about our authority...I will not be put to shame.” In verse 13, he says, “We will not boast beyond our measure.”

In chapter 11 verse 1, he seems like he's going to get down *to* it when he asks the Corinthians to "bear with him in a little foolishness." But then he digresses to explain why he's so exercised about their infatuation with fleshliness. It's tantamount to spiritual adultery! They're being deceived and led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ by those who have come preaching *another* Jesus, another spirit, and another gospel. So he's started once in chapter 10 verse 8, a second time in chapter 11 verse 1, and now, in chapter 11 verse 16, you'd think he'd go ahead and get on with the boasting! But it's so distasteful to him that he once again feels the need to explain what he's about to do. And that's where we pick up our text for this morning. Let's read 2 Corinthians chapter 11, verses 16 to 29. "Again I say, let no one think me foolish; but if you do, receive me even as foolish, so that I also may boast a little. What I am saying, I am not saying as the Lord would, but as in foolishness, in this confidence of boasting. Since many boast according to the flesh, I will boast also. For you, being so wise, tolerate the foolish gladly. For you tolerate it if anyone enslaves you, anyone devours you, anyone takes advantage of you, anyone exalts himself, anyone hits you in the face. To my shame I must say that we have been weak by comparison. But in whatever respect anyone else is bold—I speak in foolishness—I am just as bold myself. Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they descendants of Abraham? So am I. Are they servants of Christ?—I speak as if insane—I more so; in far more labors, in far more imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death. Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren; I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure on me of concern for all the churches. Who is weak without my being weak? Who is led into sin without my intense concern?"

What we have here is Paul's final preface to his foolish boasting in verses 16 to 21, and then his answering the fools according to their folly in the so-called "Fool's Speech" in verses 22 to 29. And this is a large chunk of text to cover, so we'll take at least two sermons to work through it all. But the way that I'm going to present this text to you is first, I'm going to walk through all 14 verses to explain the meaning of the text, and then I'm going to draw several lines of application from the text. And so in our time this morning, I hope to make it all the way through the explanation and begin some of the application, which we'll eventually have to finish up next time. First, the explanation. And we'll aim to open up the meaning of this passage along **five points**.

I. A Serrated Appeal (v. 16)

First, there's a **serrated appeal**. And you see that in verse 16. Paul writes, "Again I say, let no one think me foolish; but if you do, receive me even as foolish, so that I also may boast a little." "Again I say," looks back to chapter 11 verse 1, where Paul appeals to the Corinthians to bear with him in a little foolishness—to be patient with him as he engages in the folly of boasting. Well, as I said, he couldn't bring himself to do it just then, and so verses 2 to 15 intervene. As he works up the nerve once more in verse 16, he **appeals** to them once again: "Let no one think me foolish." "I'm about to engage in some foolish boasting, but I **appeal** to you: don't get the wrong idea. Please don't think I'm *actually* a fool just because I'm temporarily wearing a fool's mask. What you're about to see is not the real me!"

Just as these heretical interlopers had been donning the mask of apostles of Christ and servants of righteousness but really were no such thing, so now does Paul put on a mask; he disguises himself as a boastful fool. They tried to dress up like him; now he's going to dress up like them. But he **appeals** to the Corinthians to recognize that it's only a mask; the appearance of foolishness ought not to be mistaken for his true character.

But notice, it's a **serrated appeal**. "Let no one think me foolish; but if you do, receive me even as foolish, so that I also may boast a little." He says, "Don't think I'm an actual fool just because I wear a fool's mask. But even if you do—even if you do regard me as a fool because I start to boast like one, that's fine. In that case, all I ask is that you receive me like you receive fools. And we all know how well you do that! As is evident by your infatuation with these showboating false apostles, boastful fools get a warm reception with you!" As we'll see, Paul has moved past the point of pulling punches—whether with the false apostles or with the Corinthians themselves. He's going to do what he can to forcefully shake the Corinthians out of this stupor that the intruders have gotten them in.

II. An Important Clarification (v. 17)

And so we have a serrated appeal. Second, we have **an important clarification**. Look at verse 17: "What I am saying, I am not saying as the Lord would, but as in foolishness, in this confidence of boasting." Paul has only spoken one sentence of this third preface to his boasting, and he has to stop again and clarify something before he continues. You see how intensely uncomfortable he is to be doing this? Do you see how the boasting that is so natural for the false apostles to engage in—and which finds such a willing audience with the Corinthians—do you see how foreign and alien such boasting is to Paul's character?

He gives the caveat that his imminent boasting is not coming at the direction or the prompting of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is something that Christ would never do. The Lord Jesus, who had more to boast about than any person in the history of the world, never vaunted Himself or bragged about His accomplishments. No, though He was existing in the very nature of God, He

did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, Philippians 2. Jesus didn't puff out His chest and flaunt Himself. He *emptied* Himself. He *nullified* Himself. He made Himself *of no effect*. Christ was not marked by self-exaltation, but by self-abnegation.

And so Paul says, literally, “What I am saying, I am not saying *according to the Lord*.” “I'm not doing this at the Lord's prompting; I'm not imitating Jesus in doing this—which means the false apostles aren't imitating Jesus when they do it. This is not the Christlike thing to do!”

III. A Desperate Rationale (vv. 18–19)

And you say, “My goodness, Paul. Then why are you doing it?!” And that leads us to our **third point** in verses 18 and 19. After the serrated appeal and this important clarification, we come, number **three**, to a **desperate rationale**. Verses 18 and 19: “Since many boast according to the flesh, I will boast also. For you, being so wise, tolerate the foolish gladly.”

Even at the end of verse 17, he says, I'm not doing what the Lord would do, I'm speaking “*as in foolishness*.” And there again, he underscores that, even though he's going to be acting like a fool, he's not really a fool. He's speaking *as in* foolishness. He's answering a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes. You see, there are many boasting according to the flesh. And the Corinthians are totally enamored with it and duped by it. And so Paul feels **desperately** forced to lower himself to acting like these fools in order to win the Corinthians back to the truth.

He speaks here of boasting *according to the flesh*. This is the opposite of speaking “according to the Lord,” as he's just said in verse 17. To boast according to the flesh is to boast according to a fleshly point of view, according to worldly standards, paying special attention to the way things looked outwardly and externally rather than internally and spiritually. In 2 Corinthians 5:16, Paul says that the one who is a new creation in Christ regards no one according to the flesh; that is, the man or woman who is genuinely born again no longer operates according to fleshly, merely-human, merely-external canons of appraisal. We don't concern ourselves with outward appearance, but with internal reality.

But that's exactly what these fleshly false apostles are doing. Paul says that just a few verses earlier in 2 Corinthians 5:12. He calls them “those who take pride in appearance and not in heart.” In chapter 10 verse 7, he chides the Corinthians, “You are looking at things as they are outwardly.” This is what characterizes the false apostles' boasting: it is fleshly, it is worldly, it is focused on outward externals rather than on inward, spiritual realities. And so it is foolish.

But the Corinthians, verse 19, “tolerate the foolish gladly.” And listen to the way Paul says this. “For you, being so wise, tolerate the foolish gladly!” You see, one of the Corinthians' besetting

sins was their thirst for worldly wisdom. That's why in First Corinthians there's such a heavy emphasis on God making foolish the wisdom of the world, and how the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and how God has chosen the foolish to shame those who are wise in the eyes of the world. Corinth stood in the shadow of Athens, where those who were thought to be the greatest philosophers in the world congregated and discussed their ideas. Both the Athenian and the Corinthian cultures had made an idol out of human wisdom. And so when the Corinthians were saved, they still struggled mightily against that fleshly externalism that had totally dominated the culture they were living in.

Paul mocked them for this in First Corinthians as well. Listen to 1 Corinthians 4, verses 8 to 10. He says, "You are already filled, you have already become rich, you have become kings without us." This is clearly a reference to how the Corinthians were thinking of themselves more highly than they ought. Then Paul contrasts himself to them: "For, I think, God has exhibited us apostles last of all, as men condemned to death; because we have become a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men." See how much these students had surpassed their teacher! Yeah, right! Paul goes on: "We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are prudent in Christ; we are weak, but you are strong; you are distinguished, but we are without honor." And he takes up that same kind of ironic mockery here. "You Corinthians think you're so wise, so discerning, so much more mature than other believers because of your spiritual gifts! But look at you! You're so wise that you choose fools for leaders!" "You tolerate the foolish gladly!" Or, as he said back in chapter 11 verse 4, "If one comes and preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted, *you bear this beautifully.*" It's a cognate form of the same root word. "You bear this beautifully! You tolerate the foolish gladly!"

And since they tolerate the foolish, Paul—in a bit of **desperation**—reasons that he'll become like a fool. This, he believes, is the most effective way, given the spiritual immaturity and gullibility of the Corinthians, to bring them to their senses and prevent their apostasy (Harris, 782). It is a **desperate rationale**, but it's also driven by his loving pastoral care for these precious believers.

IV. A Striking Contrast (vv. 20–21a)

Number four, we have a **striking contrast**. And we see this in verses 20 and 21. Let's read starting in verse 19 again through to the first part of verse 21. "For you, being so wise, tolerate the foolish gladly. For you tolerate it if anyone enslaves you, anyone devours you, anyone takes advantage of you, anyone exalts himself, anyone hits you in the face. To my shame I must say that we have been weak by comparison." And of course his "weakness" is manifest in the following paragraph of trials and afflictions that he's endured in the service of bringing the Gospel to the Corinthians and others like them. This **striking contrast** is between (a) the

tyrannical, domineering lordship of the false apostles, and (b) the servant-hearted weakness of the Apostle Paul.

And the oppressiveness of the false apostles is illustrated by five attributes of lordly leadership. First, Paul says, “You tolerate it if anyone *enslaves* you.” *Katadouloōō*. The only other place this word is used in the New Testament is Galatians 2:4, where Paul, speaking of the Judaizing heresy that had taken hold of Galatia, says, “But it was because of the false brethren secretly brought in, who had sneaked in to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, in order to bring us into bondage,” to enslave us. In Galatians 5:1, Paul describes that standard of *faith plus works* as “a yoke of slavery.” Because the false apostles in Corinth were also Judaizers, that enslavement language certainly refers to that false teaching. The Corinthians, who had been freed from the burdens of the Mosaic Law through faith in the righteous work of Christ, were tolerating being enslaved once again to a yoke that even the Jews themselves were unable to bear.

But the enslavement Paul speaks about goes beyond that. It refers to the tyrannical authoritarianism that the false apostles were exerting over them. One commentator writes, “Most likely they were subjecting the Corinthians to themselves, demanding unqualified allegiance and total obedience to their every whim” (Storms, 164). And the Corinthians, who were all-too-impressed with worldly notions of power, likely believed that this was the way triumphalist leaders were supposed to act. They were supposed to be heavy-handed and authoritarian! That’s what made them the high-powered cultural elite in the first place! And so they tolerated being enslaved.

Second, they tolerated being devoured by the false apostles. This word is used in Galatians 5:15, where Paul admonishes the Galatians, “But if you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed.” And so it speaks of being eaten up. It’s used in Luke 20:47, where Jesus denounces the Pharisees as those “who devour widows’ houses.” And how did they do that? By bilking old widows out of their money for the temple offerings. We mentioned in the sermon that covered verses 7 to 12 that the false teachers were accusing Paul of being a phony apostle because he refused to accept financial support for them. See, genuine servants of God have a right to make their living from the Gospel, 1 Corinthians 9. And Paul was refusing money, so he must not have been a real apostle! And that of course implies that the false apostles *were* accepting financial support from the Corinthians. The reality was they were devouring them—parasitically attaching themselves to the church there, demanding their large speaking fees, and eating the Corinthians out of house and home, as it were.

Third, the Corinthians tolerate it if “anyone takes advantage” of them. This is a word that means to “bring someone under [your] sway by craftiness” (Harris, 786), to take someone in. It’s used in Luke 5:5 to speak of catching fish. Paul uses this word again in 2 Corinthians 12:16 when he

sarcastically says, “Crafty fellow that I am, I took you in by deceit.” With their flashy, puffed-up prosperity ministry, these false apostles had taken the Corinthians in by deceit. They had, as the apostle goes on to say, exalted themselves over the Corinthians, talking up their large crowds and their eloquence and their mystical experiences. They had caught them like a fish on a hook. And the Corinthians tolerated it gladly.

And finally, Paul says they tolerate it if “anyone hits you in the face.” Now, this phrase could be a figurative expression referring to some sort of verbal assault, or even just humiliation in general. Paul could be saying that the false apostles treat the Corinthians about as well as someone who would actually hit them in the face! But many of the commentators agree that it’s equally, if not more, likely that Paul is referring to actual physical violence here. After all, as Philip Hughes says, “It was not uncommon at that time for those who held positions of ecclesiastical authority to strike, or to cause to be struck, on the mouth any whom they considered to be uttering impiety” (400). And we see this even in the New Testament. In Acts 23, when Paul tells the Sanhedrin that he’s lived with a perfectly good conscience before God, Ananias the high priest commanded that Paul be struck on the mouth. And when Paul was giving the qualifications for an elder in Christ’s church, he commanded that the elder not be pugnacious, which in the Old King James was translated: that he be “no striker.”

And in Jewish culture, to be hit in the face was among the most offensive ways to humiliate someone. Job 16:10 says, “They have slapped me on the cheek with contempt.” This was a contemptuous action. Lamentations 3:30 says, “Let him give his cheek to the smiter. Let him be filled with reproach.” To be treated like this was full of reproach. Which was why it was so revolutionary to hear Jesus say, in the Sermon on the Mount, “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also.” Commentator George Guthrie says, “He would be hard pressed to find a more offensive image, or one that communicates the concept of abuse more forcefully” (541). This is what the Corinthians tolerated from the false apostles.

And now Paul comes to the peak of his sarcastic ridicule, verse 21: “To my shame I must say that we have been weak by comparison!” And what’s that comparison? The false apostles enslave the Corinthians. Paul says, chapter 4 verse 5, “For we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus’ sake.” They devour them? Paul says, chapter 11 verse 7, “I preached the gospel of God to you without charge.” They take them in by craftiness and deception? Paul says, chapter 4 verse 2, “We’ve renounced disgraceful underhanded ways and refuse to practice cunning.” They exalt themselves and slap the Corinthians in the face? Paul ministers in “the meekness and gentleness of Christ,” chapter 10 verse 1. The **contrast** couldn’t be more **striking**.

“Tyrannical authoritarianism! Parasitic greed! Deceptive trickery! Bold arrogance! And physical violence! Yup! That’s ‘ministerial *strength*’ all right! That’s visionary leadership! If that’s the standard, I must confess to my shame that I am a failure and a weakling! Shame on me!”

V. A Foolish Boast (vv. 21b–29)

Well, we’ve seen a serrated appeal, an important clarification, a desperate rationale, and just now a striking contrast. Finally, at long last, we come, number **five** to Paul’s **foolish boast**. Paul says in verse 21, “But in whatever respect anyone else is bold—I speak in foolishness—I am just as bold myself.” And this boast runs from the second half of verse 21 really all the way to chapter 12 verse 10. But we’re going to cap our text at verse 29 for today. And as we work our way through the rest of this text, working through this extensive catalogue of Paul’s sufferings, I imagine that it’s easy for you to be tempted to find it as tedious. And I would just encourage you to reflect on the fact that Paul didn’t merely have to endure reading about these trials, or hearing a sermon about these sufferings. He had to endure these afflictions themselves, and the Holy Spirit thought it profitable to enumerate them for us.

Now, this portion of Paul’s **foolish boast** breaks down into two uneven components, in response to two of the boasts the false teachers make to legitimize their apostleship. First, being Judaizers, they boasted in the purity of their Jewish heritage; and second, they boasted in their successes in ministry as so-called servants of Christ. Paul responds by countering that he is as much of a Jew as they are, and that he is even better of a servant of Christ.

We see the first response in verse 22. Paul says, “Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they descendants of Abraham? So am I.” He uses three terms that all point to his genuine Jewishness. Now, the false apostles couldn’t dispute that Paul was a Jew by birth and spoke both Hebrew and Aramaic. But perhaps they would have pointed to the fact that Paul was not born in Israel, but grew up in Tarsus of Cilicia, and therefore was of the dispersion. And many Jews of the dispersion were Hellenists, those influenced more by the Greco-Roman culture of the rest of the known world. The Hebrews, on the other hand, were fastidious to protect their social and cultural customs from the corrupting influences of Hellenistic political and social culture. They would have attended a synagogue that spoke in Hebrew and not Greek, among other things. Well, Paul says, “Are they Hebrews? So am I.” In Acts 22:3 we learn that, though he was born in Tarsus, he was brought up in Jerusalem, educated under Gamaliel, strictly according to the law of the fathers. He was, Philippians 3:5, “a Hebrew *of* Hebrews.” His parents had raised him so as to be kept from the corrupting influences of Gentile culture. Paul was pure. The false apostles couldn’t one-up him there.

He goes on. “Are they Israelites? So am I.” The term *Israelites* focuses on the Jews as the people of God, with all the rights, privileges, and heritage that entailed (Carson, 113). Paul recounts

those privileges in Romans 9:4–5 when he speaks of his kinsmen according to the flesh, “who are Israelites to whom belongs the adoption as sons, and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises, whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh.” And then in Romans 11:1 Paul says, “I too am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham.” And that last phrase picks up the next phrase in our text: “Are they descendants of Abraham?” “Are they rightful heirs of the covenant promises made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? So am I.” In every area that had to do with Jewish privilege, Paul was on a level with these Jewish false teachers.

But then, when it’s no longer about Jewishness, and it comes to being a servant of Christ, Paul ups the ante. He says, “Are they servants of Christ?—I speak as if insane—” literally, I speak as one outside of my mind; I must be beside myself to talk like this—“Are they servants of Christ?

I more so.” And what you expect—if you’re a false apostle, if you’re a Corinthian, or if you’re a 21st-century American Christian enamored with the glitz and glam of prosperity theology and evangelical celebrities—you expect a litany of accomplishments on Paul’s ministerial CV. You’d expect: “I’ve established more churches; I’ve preached the gospel in more lands and to more people groups; I’ve traveled more miles, won more converts, written more books, published more articles, raised more money, spoken to more crowds, and performed the most spectacular miracles” (Carson, 116). And in fact, those kinds of lists were popular among the pagans. The Caesars especially would write out the eulogies for their own funerals, and it would take the form of a list of accomplishments. Instead of that, what follows here is an avalanche of hardships that, as one commentator put it, “sweeps the reader along in dazed disbelief” (Harris, 798). He uses the accepted formula, but instead of talking about his victories and successes he speaks about his sufferings and his shame.

He begins, “in far more labors.” “Labors” speaks of laborious toil to the point of exhaustion, and refers both to Paul’s strenuous manual labor as a tentmaker to support himself in ministry, as well as to the rigors of his evangelistic work. “In far more imprisonments.” The only imprisonment recorded in the Book of Acts up until the writing of 2 Corinthians is his imprisonment in Philippi in Acts 16. That tells us that Luke’s history isn’t exhaustive but selective; he’s left some things out. And in fact, Clement of Rome in his First Letter to the church in Corinth, written about 95 AD, mentions that Paul had been imprisoned no less than seven times (1 Clement 5:6). And then Paul adds “beaten times without number.” Paul will speak about these beatings more thoroughly in a moment. For now I’ll just observe that a competitive boxer would have boasted of the injuries he inflicted on his opponent. Paul boasts of the beatings he’s taken (cf. Harris, 800).

At the end of verse 23 he says he’s been, literally, “often in deaths,” which is to say, as the NAS puts it, “often in danger of death.” He spoke about his brush with death in Asia in 2 Corinthians 1:8–10. He says in chapter 4 verse 11, “We who live are constantly being delivered over to death

for Jesus' sake." Death was Paul's constant companion. His life was a living death, a continual martyrdom for the sake of Christ and His Church.

And then he gives some examples of some near-death experiences. He says in verse 24, "Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes." This was the official punishment of the synagogue, as outlined in Deuteronomy 25, verses 2 and 3. In both Matthew 10:17 and Matthew 23:34 Jesus warned the disciples that for the sake of their testimony to the Gospel they would be scourged in the synagogues. It was a punishment that would have been levied for disregarding food laws and teaching others to defile themselves with unclean food, something Paul surely was guilty of, given his recognition that those rituals had been fulfilled in Christ. Blasphemy was another crime for which a man received the 39 stripes, and certainly Paul's preaching Jesus as Yahweh would have qualified as blasphemy. Carson describes what this was like. He writes, "Such flogging could kill a man. It took place by binding the prisoner's arms, as he lay on his back, to two pillars, one on either side. The minister of the synagogue then tore open the prisoner's clothes, baring his chest. One third of the blows were then administered, the whip ends long enough to extend from the prisoner's shoulder to his navel. The prisoner was then released, rolled over, tied down again; and the remaining two thirds of the prescribed number of blows was administered to his back" (119). The ancient historian Josephus called the 39 lashes a "most ignominious" punishment for a free man (*Ant.* 4:238). Maybe fit for a slave, but terribly shameful for a free man. And Paul boasts in this.

He goes on: "Three times I was beaten with rods." If the 39 stripes was the Jewish beating, being beaten with rods was the Roman version. And unlike the lashes, there was no divine law that mercifully prescribed a maximum number of blows. Acts 16 records Paul and Silas being beaten with rods in Philippi. Technically, it was illegal for Roman citizens to be beaten with rods. The philosopher Cicero had written that it was an abomination to flog a Roman citizen, but Paul submitted himself even to this. One commentator remarked that "The same of these public beatings was matched only by the agony they inflicted" (Carson, 120).

Paul continues, "Once I was stoned," referring to the episode of the angry mob in Lystra recorded in Acts 14:19–20. He says, "Three times I was shipwrecked." And though Acts makes no mention of these, Luke records at least nine sea voyages that Paul had made between Acts 9 and Acts 18, which would have provided ample opportunity. At least one of those shipwrecks resulted in his spending a night and a day in adrift at sea, at the mercy of the waves, likely clinging to some of the ship's wreckage, fighting not to succumb to drowning.

Verse 26 begins a series of dangers associated with travel. Paul says, "I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers." In Paul's day, when bridges weren't abundant, especially in remote areas, attempting to ford flooding rivers posed a significant threat. And both in the mountains and at sea, brigands and pirates would lie in wait to terrorize

travelers. Paul endured them both. He goes on and speaks of “dangers from my countrymen, [and] dangers from the Gentiles.” Numerous attempts had been made on Paul’s life by the Jews. As you read the Book of Acts, you see that the Jews followed Paul into every city he went, looking to silence and destroy him. Acts 9:23 says, “When many days had elapsed, the Jews plotted together to do away with him.” Acts 14:19: “But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having won over the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead.” Acts 17 in Thessalonica, Acts 18 in Corinth: it never ended. But it wasn’t limited to the Jews. We’ve spoken about the beating and imprisonment in Philippi in Acts 16. There was also the riot in Ephesus in Acts 19. Whether Jew or Gentile, Paul faced dangers from everyone he encountered. And everywhere he went. He says he faced “dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, [and] dangers on the sea.” Jew and Gentile encompassed all people; city, wilderness, and sea encompass all places.

And then he speaks about “dangers among false brethren,” an item that stands on its own in this grouping, being singled out likely because it was the most personally hurtful and strategically damaging of all. He could deal with external threats to his own life well enough, but the pain of betrayal from those who claimed to be his brothers in Christ but were not—that was on a whole different level for a man with a heart as large as Paul’s.

In verse 27, he speaks again of having “been in labor and hardship,” and then lists some of those labors and hardships. “Through many sleepless nights,” he says. If the occasion called for it, Paul gladly gave up his time to sleep to devote himself to the ministry of the Word among the brethren and to prayer to God. “In hunger and thirst.” Between (a) traveling long distances on foot across often uninhabited terrain, and (b) refusing to receive any financial support from those to whom he was ministering at the time, it shouldn’t surprise us to learn that food and water had been scarce on a number of occasions. “Often without food,” is literally translated, “in fastings often.” But this doesn’t speak of the spiritual discipline of fasting as much as it speaks of skipping meals for the sake of not interrupting the ministry of the Word. Just as his devotion to his ministry would drive him to give up sleep, so also were there times when he’d rather skip a meal than lose an opportunity to preach, teach, or exhort in the Word of God. And he closes out these labors and hardships with the phrase, “in cold and exposure.” Surely this recalls his night and day adrift at sea, in verse 25. Perhaps he had been drenched by a flooding river, or stripped bare by an assailing robber, of verse 26.

And then, “Apart from such external things,” he says in verses 28 and 29, “there is the daily pressure on me of concern for all the churches. Who is weak without my being weak? Who is led into sin without my intense concern?” Deeper, more intense, and more burdensome than any of that avalanche of sufferings was the daily pressure of concern for the spiritual health and stability of all the churches. Beatings, shipwreck, cold and exposure are no match for the pain that assails the heart of the genuine shepherd for the welfare of his flock.

We see that in the churches of Galatia, where Paul calls them, “My children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you!” We see it in the church of Thessalonica, where he hears of the afflictions facing that young church, and he is so distressed that he can’t be there. He says in 1 Thessalonians 3:5: “For this reason, when I could endure it no longer, I also sent to find out about your faith, for fear that the tempter might have tempted you, and our labor would be in vain.” In verse 8 he says, “For now we really live, if you stand firm in the Lord.” Verse 10: “We night and day keep praying most earnestly that we may see your face, and may complete what is lacking in your faith.” We see it for the dear saints in Corinth as he says in chapter 11 verses 2 and 3 that he is jealous for them with a godly jealousy, and that he’s afraid that, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, their minds would be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ.

We even see it in churches he’s never been to, with Christians he’s never met. Colossians 2:1–2: “For I want you to know how great a struggle I have on your behalf and for those who are at Laodicea, and for all those who have not personally seen my face, that their hearts may be encouraged.” No one, in any church, endures any spiritual weakness which Paul does not feel as his own weakness. No Christian is led into sin without Paul burning with compassionate concern for that believer, and with fiery indignation against the one who has caused him to stumble. And there’s so much more to say about that catalogue of sufferings. We’ll get to some of it next time.

But: is that list of sufferings tough to get through? Are they mentally and emotionally taxing to read about? To hear about? To meditate upon? Imagine how tough it was for Paul to *live* through it. But he did. And he did it because his love for the glory of Christ and the health of His Church fueled and animated and drove him—like it drove his Lord—to lay down his life as a sacrificial offering so he could present every Christian complete in Christ—so that Christ would be formed in them, so that he could complete what was lacking in their faith, so that their hearts would be encouraged, so that they wouldn’t be led astray from devotion to Jesus!

Conclusion

If we were Puritans, we’d have three-hour sermons, and I’d spend the next two drawing out all the numerous lines of application that arise from this text and press them on the conscience of each one of you. But alas, we’re not Puritans, and so we have to save that for next time. But before we close, I *will* mention what simply can’t go unmentioned after working through a text like this. Two brief exhortations.

First, as you survey Paul’s example of sacrificial service for the sake of the Gospel, recognize that *this* is the picture of the faithful Christian life. *This* is the model of faithful Christian ministry. It is not the easy life, full of comforts, at home in and accepted by the world. It is not

story after story of success and victory and health and wealth and prosperity and fame! It is the story of *suffering*. It is the path of *affliction*. It is that living martyrdom of laying our lives down as willing slaves of Christ to serve His people. Dear friends, we must forever banish from our minds that prosperity-celebrity-triumphalist heresy that lay at the heart of the false apostles' corruption: that Christianity is supposed to be easy. It is not easy! "A servant isn't greater than His master. If they persecuted Me they'll persecute you." "In this world you will have tribulation." "It has been granted to you not only to believe but to suffer." "All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." Matthew Henry commented on this passage: "When the apostle would prove himself an extraordinary minister, he proves that he had been an extraordinary sufferer." And GraceLife, if you are faithful to the calling to which you have been called, life will be difficult.

Now, granted, few of us will suffer precisely as Paul has. I'm not sure anyone in the history of the world, aside from Jesus, has suffered the way Paul has. But friends, we *will* suffer—if we're faithful to the ministry that God has called us to. And that's my second exhortation to you, which I'll frame in the form of a question: Does your heart beat with the Apostle Paul's for the sanctification and holiness of Christ's Church? Do you know what it means to be in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in your brothers and sisters? Do you know what it is to say, "We really live, if you stand firm in the Lord"? Is your heart so knit to your fellow-believers that you have so great a struggle on their behalf? So much so that you'd be willing to endure the afflictions that must come on the path of sacrificial ministry to one another? Or can you not even be bothered to go to Bible study every other week?

Brothers and sisters, we must look at this list of sufferings that Paul endured on behalf of the body of Christ, and we must all hang our head in shame. We have not pressed this far. We have not sacrificed this much. We have not lived this selflessly. But friends, we *have* been saved by the same Gospel that Paul was saved by. We have received the same grace that he had received. We are united to the same Christ! We are filled with the same Spirit! We are loved by the same Father! All the resources needed to live this way are at our disposal, no less than the Apostle Paul's! The question is: Will we be faithful to avail ourselves of those resources? Will we be faithful to make the conscious sacrifices necessary to see the Bride of Christ purged from her spots and wrinkles and to present her holy and blameless to her Lord? That is the call of this text. May God give grace to answer it.