



**Adult Sunday School Lesson Summary for November 30, 2008
Released on Wednesday, November 26, 2008**

"Grace in Times of Trouble"

DEVOTIONAL READING: 1 Corinthians 1:18-25.

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: 2 Corinthians 11:16-12:10.

SCRIPTURE LESSON: 2 Corinthians 11:17, 21b-30; 12:9, 10.

2 Corinthians 11:17, 21b-30

17 That which I speak, I speak it not after the Lord, but as it were foolishly, in this confidence of boasting.

.....

21b Howbeit, whereinsoever any is bold, (I speak foolishly,) I am bold also.

22 Are they Hebrews? so am I. Are they Israelites? so am I. Are they the seed of Abraham? so am I.

23 Are they ministers of Christ? (I speak as a fool,) I am more; in labors more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequent, in deaths oft.

24 Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one.

25 Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep;

26 In journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren;

27 In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness.

28 Beside those things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily, the care of all the churches.

29 Who is weak, and I am not weak? who is offended, and I burn not?

30 If I must needs glory, I will glory of the things which concern mine infirmities.

2 Corinthians 12:9, 10

9 And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

10 Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong.

TODAY'S AIM

Facts: to be aware of the many things Paul suffered during his ministry and the personal problem God used to teach him how to be strong though weak.

Principle: to realize that although both natural and man-made problems may oppose believers, our sovereign Lord gives grace to endure and ultimate deliverance.

Application: to encourage believers to accept divine challenges in spite of anticipated obstacles.

Introduction

No Pain, No Gain

The world of athletic competition has contributed a modern proverb to us: *no pain, no gain*. Originally, this spoke to the need for intense, painful training as preparation for competition and victory. The saying is now applied to everything from financial matters, to academic pursuits, and even to weight-loss programs. The principle is that sacrifice and delayed gratification can lead to better results in the long run.

Yet most people do not willingly endure hardship. If I have the choice of sitting in a hard, metal chair or a soft, comfortable recliner, I'm likely to choose the recliner. I would rather do yard work on a pleasant, sunny day than a cold, wet one. Choosing hardship for hardship's sake is seen as aberrant, unhealthy behavior.

To choose the Christian life, however, is to make a choice for suffering. Christ called us to deny our own desires and follow Him while shouldering our own cross (Matthew 16:24). A central belief of the church is that persecution and suffering in the present life will be replaced by great reward in Heaven (see Matthew 5:12). Unlike the training athlete, though, we cannot always pick our pain. Hardships may come at us from unexpected places, hitting us where we are weak and vulnerable. This week's lesson looks at some very personal words from Paul on this subject. Paul suffered greatly over a lifetime of ministry, yet he always counted it as joy to serve Jesus (see Acts 20:24). Our stories will be different, but we too may find joy in serving the Lord in the midst of difficulties.

Lesson Background

Paul first visited the city of Corinth on his second missionary journey in about AD 52. He founded the Corinthian church and stayed with it for about 18 months (Acts 18:11).

During Paul's third missionary journey, he settled in Ephesus for about three years (Acts 19; 20:31). Located across the Aegean Sea from each other, Ephesus and Corinth shared regular communications and commerce. While Paul was in Ephesus, he learned of several issues that were troubling the Corinthian church. So he wrote to help correct the problems.

The book of 2 Corinthians is especially concerned with outside teachers who have come to Corinth. These men have established themselves by minimizing Paul and his teachings and claiming to be more authoritative than Paul. Paul sarcastically referred to these men as "the very chiefest apostles," a description they may have used for themselves (2 Corinthians 11:5; 12:11). Paul was not frightened by their tactics, and he was never willing to claim anything less than full apostolic authority.

In this week's lesson, we find Paul responding to these opponents by giving his credentials. His résumé is not full of degrees and honors, however, but of multiple

instances of suffering for the gospel. His point is that his ability to survive hardship was not due to his own personal strength, but to the grace of God that had sustained him throughout his ministry.

GLORIOUS STRUGGLES—2 Corinthians 11:17, 21-27

1. Why was Paul forced into boasting as he did (2 Corinthians 11:17)?

Boasting is normally seen as an unpleasant mannerism. Paul views boasting as dangerous. He is particularly negative about any boasting that implies that we earn God's favor by our good deeds (see Romans 4:2). Paul wanted to expose those who were foolishly boasting.

This being so, Paul was driven to do a little boasting himself. He was not doing this with the Lord's express authority. "Christ never boasted, nor did he send his apostles to boast, least of all of worldly things" (Allen, ed., *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, Broadman). Paul wanted his readers to know that he was lowering himself to this practice only because this is what seemed to impress them (2 Corinthians 11:19). He compared it to speaking like a fool. What the false teachers boasted in, Paul could boast in too. In short, he was borrowing their methods to make a point about his own ministry.

2. Who were the likely opponents Paul was contending with in Corinth?

Although we do not know a great deal about Paul's opponents, reading between the lines leads to a number of conclusions about them. They were apparently very egotistical and were boasting in a worldly fashion (v. 18). Like worldly people and the spiritually immature, the Corinthians were impressed with the superficial credentials of these false teachers.

Even today, many churches and individual believers are impressed by the wrong things when deciding to call a pastor or to support a particular ministry. Such things as integrity, honesty, faithfulness, and dedication should always be priorities. This is not to say that peer recommendations, academic degrees, and experience are unimportant; but the success of Christian workers depends more on character than on credentials.

3. Why did Paul bring up the question about heritage (vs. 21, 22)?

As will be shown abundantly, Paul is as *bold* as anyone is. With the terse statement *I am bold also* Paul casts down the gauntlet to those who challenge his commitment and credentials. He is inferior to no one in his service to Christ.

First, Paul's authority cannot be trumped just because his opponents are Jewish Christians. Paul is as Jewish as one can be. He uses three synonyms to describe this: Hebrew, Israelite, and *seed of Abraham*, all pointing to the same thing. Paul's Jewish heritage is undeniable.

4. What were some of the problems Paul faced in his ministry (vs. 23-25a)?

"Are they ministers of Christ?" (2 Cor. 11:23), Paul asked. If the test of being a servant of Christ was measured by sacrifice, Paul certainly qualified. He worked harder, was beaten and jailed more frequently, and faced death more often than any of these false teachers. Of course, Paul was not the kind of person who liked to talk about the privations he had endured. So again he reminded them, "I speak as a fool."

"In intensity and scope of ministry no apostle or even group of apostles (cf. 1 Cor. 15:10) could match Paul's record of service. What is remarkable about Paul's catalog of achievements is his focus not on what might be called the triumphs of his ministerial experience but on its defeats" (Walvoord and Zuck, eds., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, Cook).

Concerning the "forty stripes save one" (2 Cor. 11:24), his own Jewish countrymen had laid these upon his back (cf. Deut. 25:3). Lest a miscount be made in carrying out

this punishment, the number was usually reduced to thirty-nine. In all likelihood, these whippings were carried out by Jewish authorities in some of the towns Paul visited on his journeys. Since it was his usual practice to preach in the synagogues first, he may have received these beatings for saying things that were rejected by the synagogue elders.

In addition to the lashings with whips, Paul was flogged three times with heavy sticks. He and Silas suffered this common Roman punishment after they were brought before the magistrates in Philippi (Acts 16:22-23).

5. How many times did Paul suffer stoning? Where and why did this occur (v. 25b)?

Paul was stoned in the city of Lystra (Acts 14:19). At first the people of this town believed Paul and Barnabas were gods come down from Mount Olympus, and they attempted to offer sacrifices to them (vs. 8-18). Jewish antagonists came from neighboring towns and convinced the people to stone Paul. Stoning is intended to cause death. Paul's escape from this intended execution can be seen only as miraculous (v. 20).

While the book of Acts mentions one shipwreck (chap. 27), which would have occurred after the writing of 2 Corinthians, the three shipwrecks mentioned here (11:25) would have occurred sometime prior to the writing of this epistle. While sea travel was fairly common in the Roman world, it was nevertheless very dangerous. We can only imagine the overwhelming sense of hopelessness caused by drifting in the ocean for many hours, far from land.

6. Was Paul shielded from the problems of life? Should we expect any different treatment?

In addition to the specific difficulties mentioned by Paul, there were general perils faced by the apostle. Unlike those today who claim that true believers never face difficulties, Paul realized that Christians are not immune to robbers, false brethren, or the kinds of problems inherent to either city or rural life. Besides that, Paul experienced weariness, pain, sleepless nights, hunger, thirst, and inadequate clothing. To listen to some media evangelists, one might conclude that Paul was not even a true Christian, considering all the problems he faced!

GOSPEL SERVICE— 2 Corinthians 11:28-30

7. What kind of concern did Paul have for the churches he planted (vs. 28-30)?

The difficulties Paul had just mentioned were primarily "things that are without," that is, external things over which he had no control. As with all of us, Paul had to face daily problems too.

Besides the aforementioned hardships, Paul also had a deep concern for the churches he founded and worked with. Although many pastors move several times during their ministerial careers, they often maintain contact with former churches and pray for them regularly.

As seen in the book of Acts, Paul's practice was not to simply start a church and then move on to new fields. He would make regular visits to the church, send coworkers to assist them, and give them counsel, both in person and via written correspondence. Hence, Paul continued to feel a great burden for the congregations he planted. Unlike the detached professional, Paul could personally identify with the weaknesses, burdens, and offenses of those in his circle of concern.

If Paul was going to "glory," or boast, it would be in his "infirmities," or weaknesses. This, of course, was quite opposite the approach taken by the false

teachers who gloried in their supposed accomplishments. Paul brought up his own difficulties only because the Corinthians had forced him to do so (12:11).

GRACE SUFFICIENT— 2 Corinthians 12:9-10

8. What was Paul's thorn in the flesh (2 Corinthians 12:9)?

If boasting about persecutions and privations was not enough, Paul took it a step further by mentioning "visions and revelations of the Lord" (2 Cor. 12:1). Here he related the experience of being "caught up to the third heaven" (v. 2). While in paradise, he "heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter" (v. 4). While Paul did not immediately identify himself as the recipient of these special revelations, he was in fact referring to his own experiences.

To keep him from being overly boastful about magnificent greatness of the revelations, Paul was given a "thorn in the flesh" (v. 7). While the precise identification of this thorn is a mystery, most believe it was a physical affliction that made his life and work more difficult (cf. Gal. 4:13-15).

Paul prayed to be healed from this condition, but his request has been denied. Why would this man, who heals others, be denied personal healing? The answer is that God has been using the infirmity to humble Paul and to teach him the power of *grace*. The person who recognizes his or her many weaknesses becomes a ready tool whom God can use. We believe that "all things work together for good to them that love God" (Romans 8:28), even our weaknesses. God can use any person with a willing and obedient spirit. In the end, Paul takes no credit for his remarkable ministry career. As he says, "By the grace of God I am what I am" (1 Corinthians 15:10).

9. What are some ways that God's strength is made perfect in your own weakness?

When Christians face difficulties or become aware of weaknesses, naturally we want an immediate fix for the problem. But God may not want to "fix" the problem! He may have a bigger plan in mind.

As we seek God to work in and through our weaknesses, we can practice patience. Scripture reminds us that "they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint" (Isaiah 40:31). Trusting God's knowledge of what is best for us allows us to find strength in our weakness. Just as we realize that we are not able to save ourselves, but rather rely on God's grace, so we learn to trust Him in all things.

10. How did Paul view his suffering for Christ (v. 30)?

Paul's identity and self-worth cannot be separated from his dedication to the service of Christ. For Paul, suffering for Christ is a privilege (Philippians 1:29).

When we pray, God may answer yes, no, or wait. Even when God answered no to the great apostle, it was not an absolute no, for He promised Paul His sustaining grace. Nor was it a lack of faith on Paul's part that prompted this negative response from God. Instead of removing the thorn, God promised Paul strength to endure.

That being so, Paul could glory in his infirmities so that the power of Christ might rest upon him. This led him to even delighting in infirmities, insults, and hardship. It was in times of weakness that Paul felt most powerfully God's strength.

The body of Christ is full of *weak* people. We are disabled, disturbed, diseased, distressed, and dying. Paul calls the Corinthians to recognize God's strength coming out of human weakness. We too should hear his plea. We can support and help one

another through the grace and mercy of God. We can bear one another's burdens with the spiritual strength that only Christ will grant to each believer.

CONCLUSION:

It Can't Get Any Worse?

More than once I have heard people in the middle of terrible circumstances say, "Well, it can't get any worse than this." Let us not fool ourselves. It can always get worse. We can be driven to our knees and then knocked flat by life's circumstances. On any given Sunday, churches are populated by men and women who have been beaten up terribly all week. Although we rarely share the true depths of our troubles, many of us live day to day with fears. Joy can be elusive and fleeting.

"Why does God allow suffering?" is a popular question. A better question may be, "How does God use suffering?" The Bible teaches that all people suffer at one time or another. God may use our suffering to "break" us. Just as a horse has no value for human use until it is "broken," we are not useful to God until we have been broken, for God is able to use "a broken and a contrite heart" (Psalm 51:17).

The psalmist teaches us not to be afraid to walk through the "valley of the shadow of death" because God is always with us (Psalm 23:4). Paul teaches that the church should be a community of shared suffering and joy (1 Corinthians 12:26). May we always walk with God, and may we walk with our brothers and sisters through those dark nights of the soul.

PRAYER

Father, our boasting is ridiculous when we consider Your power and magnificence. Our suffering is minor in light of Your grace. When we feel strong, help us to understand that we are still weak. Your grace is sufficient for us. May our confidence be in You and You alone. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

PRACTICAL POINTS

- 1.** Boasters in their own accomplishments are not truly faithful servants of God (2 Cor. 11 :17, 21-22).
- 2.** The evidence of faithfulness is often persecution (vs. 23-27).
- 3.** We should diligently pray for church leaders, for they bear burdens we often are unaware of (vs. 28-29).
- 4.** We have no room to boast, for if God accomplishes anything through us, it is in spite of our weaknesses (v. 30).
- 5.** God's grace is sufficient to see us through anything (12:9).
- 6.** Our weakness is the Lord's opportunity to demonstrate His power through us (v. 10).

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

We are weak without the grace of Jesus Christ.

ANTICIPATING NEXT WEEK'S LESSON:

Next week starts a new quarter. The lessons will be on commitment. Prepare for next week's lesson by studying Luke 1:26-38 and 46-55 **"A Life of Total Commitment."**

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