

Through Many Dangers, Toils and Snares

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[0 : 00] So we are looking at 2 Corinthians 11. It's something, this section of 2 Corinthians is called the fool's speech. It's the first half of Paul's fool's speech.

In New Zealand, we have something called the tall poppy syndrome. I don't know if you've ever heard of it. Imagine you can look out and you see a field of poppies, and there's one poppy that's taller than all the rest of them.

You just want to cut that one down, right? You want to cut that one down to size? Well, that's basically what the tall poppy syndrome is. It's a social phenomenon where people who are successful are resented, cut down, criticised.

Now, I did some reading up on this this week because I knew it was a big part of our culture. I was wanting to know where it came from. Apparently, imported from Australia. This is just history.

This is not personal. This is just history. So let me continue with some history lesson. So, as you know, the Australians are a penal colony. Most Australians can trace their roots back to criminals.

[1 : 03] And so the criminals who were sent out from England, these people were complete failures in their own society. So hated successful people.

Anyway, that bled in through the generations. And so the tall poppy syndrome is huge in Australia, and they lent it to us. Now, it is, I mean, it's a ridiculous, completely unhelpful sort of attitude.

But it does exist. Now, into the culture that Paul was speaking to in 2 Corinthians here, into that culture, they had the opposite problem. In that culture, it was completely acceptable to talk yourself up.

Everyone in Corinth wanted to be the tall poppy. Life was all about gaining honor and glory and certainly avoiding shame.

So the goal was social progression. It was climbing the social ladder. And one of the ways you did that was through self-promotion, was through boasting about your achievements. So that's how things operated in Corinth, which explains why the false teachers did so well in this church, because their gospel was so in sync with the cultural narrative of success and winning.

[2 : 13] And Jesus was, you know, for them, this great resource to help them gain personal power to win at life. And it was certainly helpful that they appeared to be winners.

They were great speakers. They had lots of credentials. And they preached to Christianity that said, Do this and believe that, and you'll be delivered from all your pain and suffering, and life will go really well.

And the whole thing was kind of flavored by this steady stream of ecstatic spiritual experiences. Now, this is, of course, not the gospel of Jesus, is it?

This is a gospel that doesn't transform hearts. This is a gospel that just conformed people to the world that they lived in. The true call of the gospel is to lay down your life, is to live sacrificially. It's a call to faithful obedience. In the midst of pain, not necessarily escape from it. 2 Corinthians 4.12. This explains this really well. Death is at work in us, so that life is at work in you.

[3 : 21] Paul's saying, I'm dying. I'm laying down my life, so you'll know life. For these false teachers, church was a business. You know, the gospel was like a product they were hawking.

And in a business, a business is in the market of selling its products. It doesn't ask the consumers to lay down their life for the product. A business sells a product to make life easier, and the Bible points to a way of life that won't necessarily make life easier.

Right, all that, all that that I've just said, that's what this passage is about. So let's get into the details of it. So Paul starts off.

He reminds us that he's about to do some silly boasting that this church loves. He's going to talk their language. He says in verse 17, look, I know God doesn't talk like this, but I'm willing to do what

I need to do to get through to you guys, so I'm going to talk your language.

And then in verse 20, he gets very real with them. He says, by the way, you know these guys that you think are really great, these false teachers, that are helping you live your best life now?

[4 : 25] Well, let me tell you about something. Let me tell you something. Let me tell you what they're actually doing to you. He says five things. He says in verse 20, he says, you know, they're actually, they're not freeing you.

They're making slaves. They're making slaves of you. And you're a slave because it's not the true gospel. He says, they're devouring you. That verb is used in Greek.

It's to describe an animal of prey eating another animal. He says, this is what they're doing. They're devouring you. They're probably referring to these false teachers taking money from them, stealing their resources.

He says, they're taking advantage of you. And that word means getting something by trickery. He says, they're fooling you. They're putting on ears. It says, they want to be the tall poppy.

They think they're better than you. And they're basically just like striking you in the face. It's like they're slapping you every week. You don't even realize it, but they're just slapping you every week. In summary, Paul says, you're so impressed by these guys because they look like what you want to be.

[5 : 29] They look like what culture says is great, but they're hurting you. They're taking you away from Jesus. Now, after these strong words of introduction, Paul begins his boasting, his fool's speech, and it starts off like a typical boast would.

Verse 22, he talks up his heritage, probably because the false teachers have talked theirs up. And then he says, in fact, I'm a better servant of Christ than you guys are, than these super apostles are.

Now, you can imagine when the letters read out, right, for the first time in this church, there would have been a few guys going, finally, finally, finally, Paul, you're getting serious about the self-promotion stuff.

You'll show them. They'll rue the day they crossed you. Now, if the speech had followed the normal pattern of boasting, Paul could have gone on and said, oh man, I've, I've, I've established more churches than you.

I've spoken to bigger crowds. I've traveled to more countries. I've written more books than you. They'll be reading my books for centuries, probably. But no, he doesn't do that.

[6 : 33] He, he starts his speech, his boasting. It is the opposite of what people expected him to do. Verse 23. There's no, I've started more churches than you.

It's, I've been in prison so many more times than you. I can't remember how many times I was beaten. And mostly they, I almost died in those beatings. And he continues verse 24.

It says, five times I was whipped, 40 lashes minus one. That was a Jewish punishment. At a synagogue. Whipped 27 to the back, 13 to the chest.

This would have happened because he probably went into a synagogue when he would visit a city. And he loves his people. He wants to, he wants to preach to Jews as well as Gentiles. And the Jewish leaders would have thought of him a heretic.

And they would have organized it so that he got whipped publicly. But isn't it remarkable that, that he would have known this. He would have known this was a consequence of preaching in these synagogues.

[7 : 30] And yet he kept going back because he got whipped five times. And you know, there's no mention of this in Acts, right? It doesn't talk about this. It makes it even more remarkable, I think.

Verse 25, he was beaten by rods three times. Okay, so the whipping is, that's what the Jewish people did to him. The beat with rods, that was the Roman punishment. It was like with the billy club, get beaten. And then he says he was almost stoned to death by this mob.

And then it moves on to the travel related dramas. Shipwrecked three times. Paul did a lot of travel. And travel was a dodgy business back in the days.

I am, I did an overnight trip on a greyhound once. Mate, that was pretty bad. But this, it's great. I could tell you some great stories about that trip. But this is, the guy's comparing knives.

No joke. Seriously, it was, don't do it. Anyway, he's saying, he's constant, constant danger of robbers, and his own people. Constant dangers from, dangers from the Gentiles, from the false teachers, and the wilderness, and the sea.

[8 : 35] Everywhere is danger, he says. Verse 27, he talks about how hungry and cold and exposed he was. And I guess when you're supporting yourself, you come up short sometimes.

And coming up short back in the days, meant living quite hard. Very interesting though. When he comes to the end of this list of problems he has to deal with, he says this.

And apart from all the other things, there's the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. So there's this enormous emotional weight that he carries. But the passage, the climactic, awful thing, is who made, who was made to fall, and I'm not indignant.

That's the climax of verse 29. Who was made to fall? His biggest worry is not the beatings. His biggest worry is not the shipwrecks and the whippings. His biggest worry is that people are falling away from Jesus, because they're following these false teachers.

That's his big concern. So the list ends there, and Paul says, verse 30, So if I must boast, I'll boast of the things that show my weakness. Then he gives one more example, and this is a particularly humiliating example.

[9 : 49] He talks about being lowered down a wall, hiding in a basket, to get away from this murderous governor in Damascus. It's particularly humiliating, because it's the opposite of the coolest, bravest thing you can do in the Roman world, which is climbing over the top of a wall.

Let me explain that. Okay, so in Canada, the highest military order is, is medal as well. It's the Victoria Cross. It's the States. It's the Medal of Honor. Back in the days here, in ancient Rome, the highest award you could give, military award, was the Corona Morales.

When an army was sieging a city, the first guy over the wall, you know, they put ladders up and ropes up and hooks and stuff, they try and get over the wall to defeat the city.

The first guy over the wall was awarded this, and it was literally a crown. This was the biggest honor, the biggest boast. It's, you know, you get your Corona Morales there, although usually it was given posthumously.

But still, but still, it's pretty good. So Paul, do you see this, why he puts this one last, and describes what happened in detail.

[11 : 02] Paul being lowered down a wall in a basket, hiding from his enemy. It's the opposite of the coolest thing that you could do in ancient Rome if you're a soldier.

It's the upside down Corona Morales. So the big question is this, is why is he telling people this stuff? Why make this speech?

Why tell him things in that culture made him look weak? These false teachers, these super apostles, you know, they brought with them stacks of recommendations, and they had all this impressive speech, and they're talking themselves up all the time.

Paul's strategy for countering this false gospel was a list of things which they would have seen as weaknesses. A list would actually, they would have said, disqualifies him from ministry.

So why does Paul make this speech? Why? Folks, there's a number of reasons. This is just the first half of the speech. I'm just going to give you one of those reasons. You don't have to go back to it, but if you went back to 2 Corinthians 4, you've got Paul speaking about the glory of God.

[12 : 15] This is a bit of a thesis statement for him. He's speaking about the glorious God, the majesty of God, how amazing the gospel is. And then he says in verse 7, but we have this treasure, this amazing treasure, in jars of clay to show the surpassing, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not us.

You could paraphrase that. God's amazing power is often most experienced in human frailty and weakness. So we're jars of clay.

It's like ancient Tupperware, throw away, easily breakable kind of stuff. God works through weak people. God works through weak people. That's what Paul said in back chapter 4, and this list of mishaps is a great example of that.

But what he's also doing there, more importantly what he's doing, is it's Paul's list is he challenges the cultural markers of success, and he subverts them.

And he says, I do all this, all of this, all of the stuff I went through for the sake of the gospel. Paul uses weak people. Now folks, you might be sitting there thinking, yeah, but doesn't God use our strengths?

[13 : 32] Isn't that like, also like a thing that God does? Absolutely, of course he does. We have talents, and they should be used in the service of God.

For example, Christine Klukas is our church treasurer. She's our treasurer because she's a really good accountant. We didn't choose an accountant who was innumerate and illiterate simply to demonstrate our trust in God.

That would be ridiculous, right? Paul is not saying, he is not saying here, I'm not good at anything. God helps me be good at things. He's obviously good at stuff, and he's utilizing his gifts and talents, and we should utilize our abilities in the service of the gospel.

The weakness we're talking about here is not a lack of ability. The weakness is the weakness that comes, the pain that comes, the sacrifice that comes as a result of following Jesus.

Because when you choose to serve others over serving yourself, you're taking the humble position, and you can look weak. It's not just you look weak, it's not just the perceived thing where people think you're weak.

[14:45] You actually pay a cost to that, and it can be an emotional cost, a physical cost, it can be both. I'll give you a few examples. You know, it's a life that's incredibly inconvenienced, isn't it? A few examples.

A friend of mine is a missionary, has just come back from Burma. She is living a hard life in Burma because she's living with the poor, eats what the poor eats. She sleeps like the poor sleep, dirt ground, just a thin mattress.

And she's come back for some respite. And she looks hollow. Her life in our context looks silly, and it looks weak, given the markers that we have for success in our culture, doesn't it?

Another example is Dr. Will Johnson, who is a member of our congregation, maybe you know him. He's a GP. He's the chair of the Euthanasia Prevention Coalition of BC. And last week, the Canadian Parliamentary Committee on Euthanasia and Assisted Dying came out with their proposal on assisted suicide.

So Will has been all over the radio and TV talking about this. And he is following Jesus and defending this pro-life position at great cost to himself and his family, mental, emotional cost.

[15:56] A few more examples. I mean, these are kind of big examples, but things like serving, being on the coffee roster, that's a little death. And it serves others and it forwards the gospel because that time afterwards, breaking bread together, that's very important.

When you welcome your home to your neighbors, even though it's a great inconvenience and they don't know Jesus and you welcome them into your home and you spend two hours making sure your home looks really nice and cooking a big dinner, that's a little death.

It's an inconvenience. But it serves the gospel, doesn't it? In that kind of service. I mean, think about Paul. Goodness. After that, all that stuff he went through, the guy must have been a mess.

And it's not weakness, just as a side point here. This is not, he wasn't seeking out the weak life for the sake of weakness because that's the virtue. No. It's weakness for the sake of the gospel.

It's weakness for the sake of serving. Another great passage where Paul talks about this as we head towards the end of our sermon here, that's 2 Corinthians 6.

[17:10] Paul summarizes this really well. He says, Working together with him, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. So he's talking about sort of receiving the grace of God and just sort of holding on to it and not letting it flow out of your life to others, to impact others.

Folks, the grace of God, this treasure, is supposed to impact the lives of others and the way to pass it on is by dying to yourself. And dying is painful and dying can make you look weak and it can make you look stupid in the eyes of other people.

And it makes me ask the question as I say this, you know, where in my life am I willing to be inconvenienced? And where in my life am I willing to die and look weak for the sake of others?

I tithe money and I, you know, I can make myself feel pretty good about that. But am I tithing my time for the sake of the gospel as well? Now why is this so important to hear in our culture today?

It's important to hear because our great sin, the sin that lies underneath of all the others, is this. We want to run our own life. We just want to be in charge.

[18:27] From the parliamentary report on euthanasia this week, they said this, and this, this is shocking. They said that are quite competent and mature minors should not be excluded from seeking to euthanize themselves.

So doctors, they recommend, should be able to kill a child if the child wants it. How did this happen? How did it happen that in our culture, in this country, that that's a thing that elected government would suggest, that elected government officials would say, yeah, this is a good idea.

How did this happen? I can tell you how it happens. It's because one of the primary values in Canada is what? It's autonomy. It's autonomy.

It's radical individualism. So I have the right to do whatever I want. Folks, that is the opposite of the life God has called us to.

[19 : 41] But that just, that desire to be autonomous, goodness, that seeps into every aspect of our life. And the cure for it is to daily, repeatedly, urgently, with vigor, come to the cross.

Keep coming to the cross. Because living the risen life requires coming to the cross and dying. Let me finish up with just, just this short quote from Bert, Dietrich Bonhoeffer from his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*.

You know this, but it summarizes it so well. When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die. Folks, dying is always going to look weak, isn't it?

But it's a life we're called to live, a life in service to others. But it's, it's the upside down, it's the upside down thing, isn't it?

But it's in that dying, it's in that dying that we'll know the life of God. And it's the only way to experience it. That is why Paul boasts in his weakness.

[20 : 53] And that's why Paul boasts in his dying. Amen.