

Paul's Own Story of His Life 2 Corinthians

11:22-12:10

by J.R. Miller

Paul defends himself against criticisms, sharing his life story of suffering and weakness, and reveals the triumph of Christ's strength in his own weakness.

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 11:22

Topics: "Strength in Weakness", "Suffering For Christ"

Description

J.R. Miller explores Paul's defense of his ministry in 2 Corinthians, emphasizing that despite accusations of weakness, Paul recounts his sufferings not to boast, but to highlight his devotion to Christ. He shares his trials, including beatings and shipwrecks, as marks of honor for his service, demonstrating that true strength is found in weakness and reliance on God's grace. Paul's experiences serve as a testament to the cost of discipleship and the glory of suffering for Christ's sake, ultimately revealing that his weaknesses allowed Christ's strength to shine through.

Transcript

More than twenty years after the conversion of Saul the Persecutor, further facts were added to the biography when Paul (as he was known during the years of his ministry) wrote his second letter to the church at Corinth. Charges of weakness and cowardice had been made against him, and he defended himself, not for his own sake--but for the sake of his preaching. He spoke of his trials and sufferings--but he refused to boast of his own achievements, as he knew that he owed everything to God.

In making his defense he said, "Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham's descendants? So am I." The Hebrews were proud of their name, and well they might be. They were God's chosen people. They had been honored above all other nations--in being the custodians of divine revelation. To them God had made himself known in holy ordinances. They had the tabernacle, the temple, the law, and the prophets. It was a great thing to be a Hebrew. The people boasted of their honor. But Paul was not behind them in this honor, for he was a Hebrew too. They boasted of their descent from Abraham--he was descended from Abraham too. He wanted the Jewish people who were now his enemies--to know that whatever of the glory of birth and ancestry they had, that he had the same. They gloried "after flesh"; he had the same glory.

Again, Paul asked, "Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more." What does he mean? Was he more than a minister of Christ? He seems to feel the unfitness of boasting in the matter. No true man ever likes to boast--or to have to uphold himself. As a patriot he could boast--but a Christian should always be lowly like his Master. What he meant was to tell of his devotion to Christ. A minister is a servant--Paul was Christ's servant in a most earnest way. He loved to call himself Christ's slave. This he explains and illustrates further in what he says of his services and sacrifices for the sake of Christ. It was in this way, that he was more a minister of Christ than they were. We show the quality of our devotion, in what we will do or suffer or give.

Then Paul breaks into the story of his life, what it had cost him to be a Christian--a minister of Christ. "I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again." That is, more abundantly than those he was addressing. He is not boasting of the superiority of his ministry--but is defending himself against their criticisms of him and his work, and speaks out of his heart as he remembers the sufferings he had endured in serving Christ. He is not complaining, either, in what he says about what he has suffered--indeed, he is glorying in it. It was the highest honor to be permitted to suffer for Christ. His wounds and scars--were marks of Jesus, decoration. The patriot soldier is not ashamed of his wounds received in his country's wars; he does not hide them, for they tell of his devotion to his land. The missionary is not ashamed of the marks he bears of the injuries he received in doing his duty.

The story of his sufferings as Paul tells it here, shows us something of the meaning of his life as a missionary. The life of the Christian minister in Christian lands, is one of honor and comfort. However self-denying he may be--he is loved and respected. He is not beaten, stoned, cast into prison, and loaded with chains. The minister's life is as a rule--one of delight. The life of the modern missionary is likewise as a rule, measurably happy and comfortable. Now and then, as in the Boxer outbreak in China, missionaries are called to endure great sufferings. But such experiences are exceptional, even in the newest missionary countries. The story of what Paul had suffered in his missionary work, shows how much it cost him.

"Five different times the Jews gave me thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked. Once I spent a whole night and a day adrift at sea. I have lived with weariness and pain and sleepless nights. Often I have been hungry and thirsty and have gone without food. Often I have shivered with cold, without enough clothing to keep me warm!" He did not go about telling of his persecutions--this is almost the only mention he made of them. He is not complaining now--but glorying. He is not showing how hard it was to be a missionary, advising young men not to study for the ministry. He is rejoicing that he was counted worthy. These records are lines of victory.

Paul refers in passing to other matters which had made his ministry one of pain and suffering. "In perils among false brethren" suggests disloyalties, charges, accusations, enmities. "It is not things that trouble us," said an experienced missionary to a traveler, "our difficulties are folks." Paul found much of his trouble in folks. The "care of all the churches" he mentions, too. He loved his churches and it grieved him to know of their strifes. His was a marvelous ministry. The world never saw anything like it before, and it has never seen anything like it since.

In the twelfth chapter Paul passes to visions. "I will come to visions and revelations." In these also, he had surpassed his enemies. He tells of experiences of remarkable character. He had been caught up even to the third heaven, into Paradise, and had heard unspeakable words. Then it was that there was given to

Paul the "thorn in the flesh." What this "thorn" was we need not try to find out, for nobody really knows. All we need to know is told us--that it was the messenger of Satan to buffet him, lest he should be exalted over much by reason of the exceeding greatness of the revelations. It was a humbling experience of some kind. Then he tells us what he sought to do. He went to God in prayer with this torturing thorn. "For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me." But his prayer was not answered in the way he hoped it would be. Yet it was answered in another way. He must keep his thorn--but he received the promise of grace to enable him to endure the pain, the humiliation, and yet go on with his work.

"My grace is sufficient for you: for my strength is made perfect in weakness." That is, he would get more of Christ's strength just in proportion to his own weakness. Then we have Paul's triumphant word. "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."

Thus we have the marks of Paul's superiority as a minister of Christ. There is no unfit boasting in this story of what he had suffered and what he had experienced. It was in his weakness that he gloried--that he was nothing--and that Christ was all in all.

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