

2 Corinthians 11: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] 2 Corinthians chapter 11 I wish you would bear with me in a little foolishness. Do bear with me, for I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ.

But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or if you accept a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it readily enough. Indeed, I consider that I am not in the least inferior to these super-apostles. Even if I am unskilled in speaking, I am not so in knowledge. Indeed, in every way we have made this plain to you in all things.

Or did I commit a sin in humbling myself so that you might be exalted, because I preached God's gospel to you free of charge? I robbed other churches by accepting support from them in order to serve you.

And when I was with you and was in need, I did not burden anyone, for the brothers who came from Macedonia supplied my need. So I refrained and will refrain from burdening you in any way.

[1 : 12] As the truth of Christ is in me, this boasting of mine will not be silenced in the regions of Achaia. And why? Because I do not love you? God knows I do. And what I am doing I will continue to do, in order to undermine the claims of those who would like to claim that in their boasted mission they work on the same terms as we do.

For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light.

So it is no surprise if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds. I repeat, Let no one think me foolish.

But even if you do, accept me as a fool, so that I too may boast a little. What I am saying with this boastful confidence, I say not as the Lord would, but as a fool. Since many boast according to the flesh, I too will boast.

For you gladly bear with fools, being wise yourselves. For you bear it if someone makes slaves of you, or devours you, or takes advantage of you, or puts on airs, or strikes you in the face.

[2 : 19] To my shame, I must say, we were too weak for that. But whatever anyone else dares to boast of, I am speaking as a fool, I also dare to boast of that. Are they Hebrews?

So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they offspring of Abraham? So am I. Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one. I am talking like a madman.

With far greater labours. Far more imprisonments. With countless beatings. And often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one.

Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked. A night and a day I was adrift at sea. On frequent journeys. In danger from rivers.

Danger from robbers. Danger from my own people. Danger from Gentiles. Danger in the city.

Danger in the wilderness. Danger at sea. Danger from false brothers. In toil and hardship.

[3 : 13] Through many a sleepless night. In hunger and thirst. Often without food. In cold and exposure. And apart from other things. There is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.

Who is weak? And I am not weak. Who is made to fall? And I am not indignant. If I must boast. I will boast of the things that show my weakness. The God and Father of the Lord Jesus.

He who is blessed forever. Knows that I am not lying. At Damascus. The governor under King Aratus. Was guarding the city of Damascus. In order to seize me. But I was let down in a basket.

Through a window in the wall. And escaped his hands. In 2nd Corinthians chapter 11. Paul presents himself as if the jealous father. Of a young betrothed woman. Concerned that she not be seduced away from her espoused partner.

The Corinthian church is betrothed to Christ. The bridegroom. The theme of Christ as the bridegroom of the church. Is one found at many points in the New Testament. It is something we see especially in Ephesians chapter 5 verses 22 to 32.

[4 : 15] Wives submit to your own husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife. Even as Christ is the head of the church. His body. And is himself its saviour. Now as the church submits to Christ.

So also wives should submit in everything to their husbands. Husbands. Love your wives. As Christ loved the church. And gave himself up for her. That he might sanctify her. Having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word.

So that he might present the church to himself in splendour. Without spot or wrinkle or any such thing. That she might be holy and without blemish. In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies.

He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh. But nourishes and cherishes it. Just as Christ does the church. Because we are members of his body. Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother.

And hold fast to his wife. And the two shall become one flesh. This mystery is profound. And I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. We also see Christ as the bridegroom in the book of John.

[5 : 17] And the book of Revelation. The image of the wedding feast found in the gospels is also important here too. Paul begins with an allusion to the story of Adam and Eve. And the temptation of Eve by the serpent.

There Adam was charged with guarding the garden. And he should have protected his wife. But he failed to do so. And the guile of the serpent is particularly focused upon here. The serpent deceived Eve with his cunning.

Their thoughts ought to be devoted to Christ. But they might easily be misled by Satan's schemes. The task of Paul as an apostle is to act as a guardian for the bride. There is a vision of Christian ministry here as well.

The Christian minister is a servant of the bridegroom to the bride. He represents the bridegroom to her. Protecting her from assault. Or any satanic wiles that might estrange her affections from the one to whom she is betrothed.

Unfortunately the Corinthians seem far too ready to turn from their bridegroom to another. You can imagine Paul's distress at this. He is the one who is their father in the faith. And he has directed their love to Christ.

[6 : 18] And bound them to him in the covenant bonds of betrothal. They have been washed as a bride in the waters of baptism. And he has declared the wonders of their bridegroom to them. But now it seems as if they can be led astray from Christ with great ease and little protest on their part.

Presented with a counterfeit form of Jesus. A counterfeit form of the spirit. And a counterfeit form of the gospel. They seem to be unable to discern the difference. He started off by telling them to bear with him in a little foolishness.

They bear with a counterfeit Jesus. Spirit and gospel readily enough. So he is hardly making any great demand of them. Paul characterizes his opponents as super apostles. They believe that they are superior to him.

These super apostles were almost certainly not members of the twelve. Sometimes the term apostle is used for the wider company of those who saw the risen Christ. Paul also sometimes uses it for persons sent on a mission.

Paul grants that he may not be the most skilled orator. Paul has already spoken of the plainness of his speech with which he proclaimed the gospel to the Corinthians back in 1 Corinthians chapter 2 verses 1 to 5.

[7 : 25] While Paul was not the most compelling speaker.

Acts 20 tells the story of a young man named Eutychus who sank into a deep sleep when Paul spoke at considerable length, fell out of a window and died. Paul was nonetheless not without wisdom in the truth of Christ.

That much should have been made very apparent to the Corinthians by this point. And even more so as the wisdom shone ever more brightly in contrast to the roughness of the speech in which it was couched.

The question of the source of Paul's support while he taught the Corinthians is raised here again, as it was back in 1 Corinthians chapter 9. Why had Paul acted seemingly inequitably in this manner? Why had he accepted money from the Macedonians but not from the Corinthians? Was it because he didn't love the Corinthians and didn't want to accept their support? Was their money not good enough for him?

[8 : 42] Quite the opposite. If anything, Paul robbed the Macedonians so that he could give a special treatment to the Corinthians. The other churches in the region would be able to back him up in this matter too, as would God himself.

Paul is going to continue to act in the same way. His consistency undermines the accusations of his opponents and their exalted claims that their own work operates in the same way as Paul's does. Paul previously mockingly called them super-apostles. And then he spoke about the way that they present a counterfeit Jesus, a counterfeit gospel and a counterfeit spirit. Now he declares that they are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ.

Indeed, beneath the mask, they are actually servants of Satan, who, like their true master, are able to disguise themselves as their opposites. They preach a counterfeit gospel, spirit, and counterfeit Jesus as those who are skilled in the deceptions of their father, who first deceived Eve in the garden.

However, as is the case with such persons, they will ultimately be revealed by their fruits, as their works yield a bitter harvest. Paul adopts a fool's persona for the sake of argument.

[9 : 54] He is speaking not in the proper way that he should as a Christian and an apostle of Christ, but with a persona for rhetorical purposes. He is playing the game of the super-apostles for the sake of argument for a period of time, while steadily subverting it as he proceeds.

His mode of speech is ironic, and at the outset he wants them to be very clear of that fact. Once again, he plays on the fact that, since they gladly bear with fools in their counterfeit gospels, they should bear with him, while he devotes a few sentences to playing the part of the fool.

He develops the theme of the Corinthians bearing with the spiritual mistreatment that they have received. In bearing with a counterfeit Jesus, spirit, and gospel, they have borne the worst sort of mistreatment.

Paul uses hyperbole to drive the point home. They will bear with being made slaves, being devoured, taken advantage of, with people taking heirs with them, or being struck in the face. If Paul is being accused of weakness, in his foolish boasting he declares his shame, that he and his apostles simply weren't strong enough to abuse the Corinthians in the way that the super-apostles had.

The super-apostles' strength really showed up Paul's weakness on that point. Paul has condemned the way of those who constantly compare themselves with each other earlier in the letter, but now he does so himself, yet in a way designed to nullify such competitive comparisons, not to play the same game.

[11 : 15] His ironic detachment in his foolish speech is really important here. The super-apostles may be capitalising upon their Jewish identity. Paul could readily do that too, should he want to.

Elsewhere in Philippians chapter 3 verses 3 to 11, he contrasts putting confidence in the flesh, and the way that, although he has grounds for confidence in the flesh, he has jettisoned such confidence for knowing Christ.

For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus, and put no confidence in the flesh. Though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also, if anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more.

Circumcised on the eighth day of the people of Israel of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews, as to the law, a Pharisee, as to zeal, a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith, that I may know him and the power of his

resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

[12 : 47] If the super-apostles want to play that Jewish status game, Paul can easily beat them at it, but he has abandoned that in order to gain Christ. Yet nullifying the super-apostles requires temporarily adopting an in-the-flesh persona to close them down.

If they claim to be servants of Christ, Paul is that much better. At this juncture he has to make especially clear that he is speaking in the persona of a fool, as a self-exalting boast in his apostolic service is precisely the sort of thing that the gospel rules out.

He boasts of his far greater toil or labours for Christ. His list of hardships, one of a number in this letter, is a list of ways in which Paul has accounted his life and comfort of little value relative to the message that he bears and the master that he serves.

Of course, part of what he has accounted to be of little value is his status, which means that this list has an increasingly paradoxical character. His endurance through so many trials is proof of his faithfulness to his commission.

It's a list of hardships, not of great demonstrations of power or prominence, but of dogged demonstration of faithfulness. The irony of the list will become clearer as we read through it.

[14 : 01] The sort of things Paul included would be considered shameful by many. Who boasts of being imprisoned often, of being stoned, or of being beaten at the hands of the Jews? They might boast of being Jews.

Being beaten at the hands of the Jews? Not so much. This is definitely not the list of someone who wants to make a good showing in the flesh. However, someone who wishes to be found in Christ, to know the fellowship of his sufferings, might well see that fellowship most in the hardships he endured for Christ, and perhaps especially in those hardships that reveal the world's rejection of him, as it rejected his master before him.

The point of all this is to foreground Paul's weakness. Who is weak? And I am not weak. This is where Paul chiefly finds his boast, in his weakness. This focus of Paul's identity also leads to his especial concern for the weak, who are caused to fall, a point that Jesus emphasised in his own teaching on a few occasions.

The strong wish to set themselves apart from the weak, as much as possible. However, Paul, in foregrounding his weakness, can take a special concern for the weakest and most vulnerable of Christ's sheep.

Paul concludes the chapter with one final boast, of being let down through a window in the wall of Damascus, to deliver him from the king who sought to capture him. That story is not even a story of some great endurance on Paul's part, but of his rejection by the world, and the Lord's gracious deliverance of him.

[15 : 27] Paul's powerlessness in that situation was the occasion for the Lord's salvation. The subversion of the status-seeking games of the super-apostles then is well underway, but Paul will deliver the finishing blows to it in the next chapter.

A question to consider. How might Paul's teaching, through his ironic boasting in this chapter, challenge the way that we regard ourselves and our status?