

Wanted: Weak People
2 Corinthians 11:16-29

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August 23, 2020

A resume is a “brief account of a person’s education, qualifications, and previous experience, typically sent with a job application.” We prepare them when we seek employment. People seek counsel on how to write an effective resume. Some get professional resume writing companies to design a resume for them in an attempt to get a certain job. The internet has plenty of resume templates we can use.

When we put together our resumes, we normally put our best foot forward. We highlight our achievements, education, skills and strengths. So would you put any of the following on your resume if these were true of you: “Multiple times in prison; thrown out of establishments several times; just about died from an angry mob; 5 separate sentences of lashings; multiple near death travel experiences; sometimes sleepless at night; anxiety; escaped when wanted by the authorities.” If you looked at such a resume would you think about hiring an ex-con who had frequently been thrown out of places and constantly got in trouble?

Yet a person with such experience actually listed all these items on their resume or more accurately in a letter. That letter was read to

a lot of people. So they got to hear all about this person’s weaknesses. Surely they didn’t get the job.

Someone needed to tell that person the right way to put together a resume. You don’t list all your weaknesses. Or do you? What if listing those weaknesses accomplished exactly what this person hoped to do? What if they very intentionally listed their weaknesses for the sake of people dear to them? What if God could use them more because of their honesty about their weaknesses?

We naturally hide or try to cover up our weaknesses. Yet did you ever think it possible that God might use your weaknesses to accomplish His great purposes? I’m not talking about sins or giving into temptation. I’m talking about difficult experiences in our lives, or hard realities in our lives; Anxiety, Illness, Disability, Hard childhood, victim of injustice, unemployment. Now I don’t think anyone likes to be weak. I know I don’t. I love feeling strong. But we all have weaknesses and will experience weakness. So what if we changed our perspective on those weak times. What if we saw them as opportunities to depend on God and watch Him work?

That’s what we will consider today as we near the end of our study on 2 Corinthians. Paul aims to win back those swayed by his opponents in Corinth. They boasted about their strengths to influence

others. So Paul will take them on in his continued attempt to bring people back to God's best for them. So we will first look at Paul's weaknesses and what God does through them. Then we will think about our weaknesses and the possibility of seeing them used for God's glory. So let's find out about this in 2 Corinthians 11:16-29.

2 Corinthians 11:16-29 (ESV)

¹⁶I 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. ¹⁷What I am saying with this boastful confidence, I say not as the Lord would but as a fool. ¹⁸Since many boast according to the flesh, I too will boast. ¹⁹For you gladly bear with fools, being wise yourselves! ²⁰For 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. ²¹To 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. ²²Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they offspring of Abraham? So am I. ²³Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. ²⁴Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. ²⁵Three 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; ²⁶on 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; ²⁷in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. ²⁸And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. ²⁹Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?

³⁰If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. ³¹The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, he who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying. ³²At Damascus, the governor under King Aretas was guarding the city of Damascus in order to seize me, ³³but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall and escaped his hands.

Last week in the first few verses of chapter 10, we saw Paul begin to take on the opponents he's spoken against throughout this letter. He recited some accusations made against him. Then he disproved them. We focused on how Paul waged war by the Spirit using divine weapons to destroy strongholds.

After that, he spends a lot of time talking about boasting. It was apparently common practice, in that culture, for people to boast about their position, skill and training to gain influence. Paul's opponents have boasted in the church and succeeded in convincing some about their authority. So Paul spends the rest of chapter 10 talking about the foolishness of boasting in oneself.

Then he really goes after the opponents in the first half of chapter 11. In fact, he accuses them of being false teachers disguising themselves as apostles. So he perceives them to be a very serious threat in the church. He concludes that to reach those influenced by these opponents, he must play their "boasting" game. But he will turn

boasting on its head to accomplish his purpose. **What does Paul do? He “boasts” about his weaknesses.**

Verses 16-18 reveal this strategy. He considers boasting in oneself a foolish activity. Yet he will become such a fool if it will save some of them. Yet he is very uncomfortable with this. In fact, he qualifies this action by pointing out that the Lord would not do this. Verse 17 – What I am saying with this boastful confidence, I say not as the Lord would but as a fool.” He doesn’t want the appearance of this foolish boasting to be mistaken for his true character. Yet he will boast a little according to verse 16. He will play their game according to their rules.

Why does Paul do what he does? (20-23a) He wants to release people from the burden of the boasting opponents. He’s not doing this to put himself forward. He’s not on some ego trip trying to take down the opponents. He tries to wake up the people in the church who have been taken in by these opponents. So he first confronts the congregation about their willingness to listen to the opponents. Verse 19. “For you gladly bear with fools, being wise yourselves! Then he points out the foolishness of their putting up with the opponents.

Lest we think that Paul overstates the negative influence of the opponents, look closely at verse 20. There he lists 5 ways the opponents abuse the congregation. “For you bear it if someone, One, makes slaves of you; Two; devours you; Three; takes advantage of you; Four; puts on airs; Five; strikes you in the face.

The opponents made slaves of the people likely by being so dominating them with their presence and speech so no one dared oppose them. This was almost like a slavery where you were bound by whatever the opponents said. The opponents also devoured or preyed upon the people. They likely insisted on payment for their ministry even from people who could not afford it. They take advantage of the congregation. Maybe people showed good faith and trusted them to have their best interests in mind. Instead they took advantage of all that.

To “put on airs” means to lift up oneself in a prideful way. Some people can actually get their way by trying to dominate, bully, or pressure others. Or maybe they claimed to have great authority when they didn’t like a private claiming to be a general or an employee acting like he owned the whole corporation. Finally, they struck people in the face. Masters struck rebellious slaves in the face. Ministers should not have done that to their people. Yet somehow the people put up with all

this maybe out of fear, intimidation or just thinking that you had to respect the powerful leader. The opponents acted exactly like the leader or powerful in the society. So people understood how to act or survive under such leadership. They tolerated these opponents, allowing themselves to be ordered about, robbed of their money, deceived of the truth and slapped for disagreeing.

So Paul begins to “boast” or list his own qualifications. The first ones in verse 22 seem to respond to further accusations. He asks “if they (the opponents) are Hebrews, Israelites and Abraham’s offspring.” So it seems they used this background to assert their authority. Yet Paul has the same background. He was a Hebrew or from the Jewish race. He was an Israelite, one of God’s chosen people. He was from Abraham’s offspring, an inheritor of the promises made to Abraham’s descendants.

Then in verse 23 he starts separating himself from these opponents. “Are they servants of Christ. I am a better one.” Then he acknowledges again his discomfort with this. “I am talking like a madman.” Then he starts listing his weaknesses. They fall into 5 categories.

What are Paul’s weaknesses? #1 Imprisonments, beatings and near death. (23b-25). He received the Jewish punishment of 39

lashes 5 times! This was given by the synagogue for false teaching, blasphemy and serious law breaking. They likely accused Paul of blasphemy for proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah. He was also beaten with rods or long hard wooden sticks. This was a common punishment by the Romans in the empire. This happened to him 3 times despite his Roman citizenship. Apparently it was illegal to beat a Roman citizen with rods. But some officials ignored that and beat Paul anyway. He just about died when a mob stoned him. They left him for dead after he stopped moving but he got up and continued on.

The second set of weaknesses is found in verse 26 - **Frequent dangerous journeys.** Before COVID, many of us traveled to a lot of places in relative safety. In ancient times, travel was a risky undertaking during the best of times. Paul lists multiple dangers he encountered just because he traveled to spread the Gospel.

Third group of weaknesses. **Hardship and hard work** in verse 27. Paul experienced sleepless nights because of the work needing to be done. He endured thirst, hunger and risked exposure when trying to sleep outside.

Fourth, In verses 28 and 29, he confesses to **anxiety about all the churches.** He experienced the daily pressure of anxiety for the churches. This was the same guy who wrote “Do not be anxious about

anything” in his letter to the Philippians. Here we find out that he needed to preach this to himself.

The last weakness he lists is **Escaping a governor by being let down in a basket from the city wall**. This is found in 32-33. It refers back to the incident in Acts 9:23-25. It was just after Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus. Well he is in Damascus and he begins preaching Christ in the synagogues. This created quite a disturbance and some plotted to kill him. So the king of the city wants Paul arrested. In ancient cities, you could quickly limit a fugitive’s options by closing or guarding the city gates. So Paul escapes when some friends let him down in a basket out of a window in the wall.

Now we might think that’s actually a story of triumph. Yet think about how weak Paul looks in that situation. When you think of conquering heroes what direction do they normally go? Up. They go up to the mountain top to capture the enemy. They go up a city wall to capture a city. Here Paul gets lowered down in a basket to escape his enemy. Paul has just talked about tearing down strongholds by divine weapons in chapter 10. Now he reveals an apparently wimpy escape out of a window in a basket. I wouldn’t put that on my resume.

Are they really weaknesses? Yes – especially in a culture that valued strength and wisdom. Some might read this and conclude

this is more like humble bragging. You list all that you’ve suffered and you gain fame because no one can beat you in the most extreme suffering category or we may admire someone who endured all of this. Yet that culture valued strength and wisdom. So if you got multiple beatings, you must have lacked wisdom to get into such predicaments. If you were in danger while you traveled, you were too poor to afford safe travel. If you had to work hard and were without food, you weren’t strong or powerful enough to get others to work for you or prepare your food. If you experienced anxiety, you weren’t wise enough to manage everything. Many of the hardships would have been deemed deficiencies or social weaknesses in the broader Greco-Roman culture, including the elite in Corinth.

Yet Paul boasts in his weaknesses. **What does “boasting” in Paul’s weaknesses do? It displays God’s strength and help through them.** *God* saw Paul through all of these things. *God* enabled Paul to persevere through them and accomplish ministry. *God* had the power to use these weaknesses and sufferings for His greater purposes. Through Paul’s willingness to endure the shame of these weaknesses the Gospel spread and many came to Christ. So Paul declares his approach to his weaknesses in verse 30. “If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weaknesses.” He hopes that this

unusual approach will jolt the Corinthians from their tolerance of the opponents to see true Christian servanthood.

So we've looked at Paul's weaknesses and what God does through them. Let's look at our weaknesses and the possibility of seeing them used for God's glory? **Since God can do great works through our weaknesses, we must admit them and see God work through them.** I will boast of the things that show my weakness. How might this happen? Think about the doors that open when someone admits weakness or speaks from a position of obvious weakness.

Why do we pay way more attention to people like Joni Eareckson? She has had to live with the weakness of being a quadriplegic for 50 years. It's obvious for everyone to see. Yet look at what God accomplished through her faith. God has encouraged tens of thousands have through her weakness and faith.

In my own life, God has accomplished great purposes in times of weakness. When our family has experienced the weakness of illness, the body of Christ ministered to us. When I'm in trouble and search the Scriptures for encouragement, I share some of it with you. God uses it to encourage you. When my parents died – God again showed me His love through the care of others. Through that weakness, I have also gained an ability to sympathize with others who have lost their parents.

When a Christian experiences the ultimate weakness of their own death, God can use that to proclaim the Gospel at their funeral.

When we share or admit our weakness God's ministry can happen. God may minister to us Himself meeting us at our point of need. He may send someone to minister to us during times of weakness. Or he may use our admission of weakness and His provision through it to give hope to others experiencing weakness. In the upside down world of God's kingdom, He works through weak people to accomplish His great purposes. He can do that through you and in you.

After all, God provided for our greatest "weakness" - alienation from Him. We were born sinners. We naturally choose to follow ourselves and our sinful nature rather than God. Yet God provided for this great weakness when Jesus became weak for our sake. He submitted Himself to the weakness of human flesh. He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of a humiliating death on a cross. So instead of trying to justify ourselves by putting our best foot forward, we admit our need and turn to Christ and His work on the cross will be saved. If you have never received Christ as Savior and Lord, God calls you to do that today. Turn to Christ in faith and place the trust of your life on Him. God will give you His Gospel, Himself, Forgiveness

and new life in Him. Through your admitting your greatest weakness and God will do His greatest work in your life.

So as we close, I want to invite you to think about your weaknesses. Instead of looking at them with shame or embarrassment, admit them before God. Then ask God to do His great work through your weakness. Offer your weakness to God and be used by Him. He will minister to you in your weakness. Maybe He will give someone else the opportunity to minister to you. Or maybe He will bring to mind someone who can benefit from hearing your story of weakness and how God provided through it.