2 Corinthians 11:28-33

28 Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure on me of concern for all the churches. 29 Who is weak without my being weak? Who is led into sin without my intense concern? 30 If I have to boast, I will boast of what pertains to my weakness. 31 The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, He who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying. 32 In Damascus the ethnarch under Aretas the king was guarding the city of the Damascenes in order to seize me, 33 and I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and so escaped his hands.

After being a bit ‘insane’ from the earlier parts of this chapter Paul reiterates his concern for the church in Corinth – as well as other churches. His integrity is intact because of the foolishness being stipulated as an illustrative point, but Paul is not going to focus on his own strength or his own authority in these verses, he’s going to appeal to God, and then continue on the story (so far) of his own difficulties as a faithful servant of the only God.

# Paul’s Concern for the Churches [Verses 28-29]

## Apart from External Things

Verses 23-27 talk about Paul’s intense circumstances outside of ministry demands. Paul’s argument in verses 28 and 29 about the church are in addition to those tremendous threats and abuses he experienced and apparently doesn’t think will stop happening while he’s on his 3rd missionary journey (or future journeys).

## Daily Pressure on Me of Concern for All the Churches

*Why was it daily pressure?*

Paul’s care for the bodies he was staying with was a full time job, on top of which he was a tent maker. Once that work was done there was news that came from various messengers such as Titus [2 Corinthians 7:6], Timothy [1 Corinthians 4:17], or Onesimus [Colossians 4:9]. These messengers carried news about the wellbeing of various church bodies and individuals Paul had met. Given the large number of people who Paul shared the gospel with across large portions of the Mediterranean there was probably a pretty consistent stream of updates and news for various church needs. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “It is reported…” [c.f. 1 Corinthians 5:1] and we can imagine that reports like this were at least somewhat distracting.

*Why was Paul concerned for all of the churches?*

Paul took on a parent-like role with the churches he was an apostle to. He wrote this of himself in 1 Thessalonians 2:7,11. Having started churches during various journeys he had a deep care for their wellbeing. He wanted them not just to exist, but to flourish. Paul’s stewardship was unique across many bodies – imagine what elders deal with times dozens of churches!

### Who is Weak Without My Being Weak?

Weakness is reflected in several ways within Paul’s writing specifically and the New Testament generally:

* Weakness of faith (Romans 4:19, 14:1; 1 Thessalonians 5:14; 2 Timothy 3:6)
* Weakness of strength (1 Corinthians 1:27, 11:30; 2 Corinthians 13:4)
* Weakness of Conscience (1 Corinthians 8:7-12)
* Carnality (Galatians 4:9)
* Maturity/Discipline (Hebrews 12:9-13)
* Sick – a translated variance of meaning (Philippians 2:26-27)

Paul’s context here is less specific, but we see his empathy as the core point he’s trying to make with this statement. We can assume it isn’t weakness of faith. When we have an empathic reaction to others’ misfortune it can drain us and distract us. Living that at scale can be a serious level of concern. Imagine as an apostle that you’re not only taking on care for one body, but the concern for the body across an entire region. Then add to that active and life-threatening persecution. That’s a lot for Paul to take on.

*What do you do when others’ weaknesses make you weak?*

### Who is Made to Stumble or Sin Without My Intense Concern?

The Greek word here that is translated ‘led into sin’ is literally caused to stumble. It’s where our English word scandal comes from. Paul is very concerned about the growth and development of each body and so hearing that believers may have been suckered into sin or walked away through false teaching [Galatians 1:6], philosophies of the world [Colossian 2:8], or carnality [2 Timothy 4:10] was a heavy blow for Paul.

Again, as you take on how hard this is in our own lives bump that up to a larger scale and you find yourself coming up wondering how Paul would have managed to deal with things so intense. You discover that Paul needed to throw himself on the mercy of the Lord and be abiding to endure such intensity.

### Why Paul Wrote What He Wrote & Sent Who He Sent

It’s worth pausing to reflect on why Paul’s letters contained so much writing about correction, growth, and body life, and why he sent representatives. The need was greater than what Paul could address, but he had doctrines that were to maintain the health of the bodies, help shore up error, and to attempt to ensure unity through principles of God-empowered agape love. Ephesians 3:14-4:7, 1 Corinthians 12-14 and Romans 12 are great example sof places where Paul wrote at length to help clarify these doctrines of ecclesiology (the doctrines of the church body).

Paul also sent representatives to help not only reinforce these doctrines verbally and with presence, but they also could have answered more questions outside of the letters, and brought back more news for future letters or doctrinal clarification from Paul.

Paul’s Goal was clearly for edification and strengthening which would have allowed his work to stay more focused on establishing new churches given time and the Lord’s plan. But it also was for passing down truth. Paul knew that he only had so long on this earth, but his heart was that the church would be firmly founded until the return of Christ.

# Paul’s Weakness Continued [Verses 30-33]

## I Will Boast in What Pertains to My Weakness

Paul continues this idea of being made weak by saying he will boast in what pertains to his weakness. In the coming chapter he is going to speak to God’s use of Paul’s weakness to show His strength [2 Corinthians 12:9-10].

*Why do we need to understand our weakness?*

When we are boasting in our own strengths we fail to recognize exactly why we responded to the gospel: we did not come to God with anything He needed or wanted. Culturally in Corinth and today for us in the 1st world we find that ‘self-made’ people get a lot of attention. They have status. Paul, countered that by declaring his weakness as the only thing he will glory in.

### God Knows That I am Not Lying

Paul’s calling on God as a witness here is a bit out of place for us, but for the Jewish audience there was no higher authority and it carried with it a most severe disgrace if you were to swear by God, but then be found a liar [Numbers 30:2]. Matthew 23:16 tells us about how the Jews had made various compromises about how they were making oaths. They had gone to the point of avoiding swearing by God and instead move to various other ‘holy’ things to swear by. James 5:12 speaks of the need to have integrity and let your yes be yes and your no be no.

Paul’s use of ‘swearing to God’ is not something that we should read as counter culture, but instead Paul’s going to the Corinthians with utter humility, but confidence in His relationship with the Father so as to boldly use a phrase that would have caused the Jews among them to do a double take. Paul was not lying and he’s gone to the most extreme oath to prove it.

### He Who is Blessed Forever

Paul takes a moment to laud the Lord where he had just words earlier humiliated himself, is a reflection of the perspective he is about to share in chapter 12 about strength and weakness. In Paul’s weakness God be glorified.

## Fleeing for His Life

Paul’s mention of Aretas here is specified in the book of Acts right after his salvation in 9:24-25. Paul’s having fled the city in a basket was not a moment of pride for him. There is no boasting in fleeing, but it was a way that he could safely continue his calling as an apostle.

He mentions Aretas here, who was Herod Antipas’ father-in-law for a while. Herod divorced Aretas’ daughter, Phasaelis, and Aretas then threatened Herod Antipas through attacks. These attacks were successful and Herod Antipas went to Rome for help. The army of Vitellius was dispatched, but due to a break they took, and the death of Tiberius, the army returned and Aretas was never counter-attacked.

Aretas’ sub-leader is mentioned as the ‘ethnarch,’ which is a term for a person who is in charge of a sub-group or ethnic group within the realm. Since the Jews in Damascus were under this ethnarch’s care and they were mad at Paul, the ethnarch wanted to get rid of the anger and potential riots quickly.

Paul’s escape was so that he could go on in his journeys. We find throughout Acts that Paul had varying responses to different kinds of pressure and this led to him sometimes fleeing, sometimes standing, and sometimes calling on the government officials for a chance to try to share the gospel at the highest levels. In either case Paul’s being lowered down in a basket would have been a humiliating event to the Corinthians (and many other people), but it was part of Paul’s proving his position.

*When do we hear people sharing their own embarrassing stories at church?*

# Conclusion

Paul’s care for the body as a whole led him to be a loving parent. His care was deep. His concern for their establishment and continuity was complete. As believers we should consider our interactions as part of our outward testimony, our inward responsibility to the future of the church, and as part of Christ’s life in us. We should seek humility, like Paul, so that we can move in ways that reflect God’s life in us as we abide.