

Born to Win

Christian Origins #40

by: Ronald L. Dart

The Apostle Paul was *steamed*. Yes, I know he was an Apostle. I know he was a minister, all meek and mild and gentle and kind and all those things—and ministers are supposed to be that way. But don't kid yourself, the Apostle Paul got *steamed*. You can only take so much nitpicking, so much scratching around in your background, so much of people trying to find fault with everything that you do, that after a while it begins to wear a little thin. And it finally wore thin on Paul.

We like to think that Christian churches are full of gentle, perfect people that do everything right all the time, and are always very kind, and always think the best stuff, and never speak evil of one another. All I can say it, “Dream on.” Wherever there are people, there are politics. And the more people you've got, the more politics you've got. And it is going to be that way from the time you start to the time you are dead, put in your casket, and put in the ground. It is going to be a struggle.

The Apostle Paul knew that, and he was prepared to face it. That doesn't mean that, once in a while, you don't go ahead and say what's on your mind. And toward the end of the second letter to the Corinthian church, it finally got to the place where Paul felt he had to say something. He'd been through two long letters and exchanges back and forth with these people. And he had people picking at him from several different directions. He had some legalist Jews who had come into Corinth who were teaching their ideas. And other people were saying, “Well, who does Paul think he is?” and “He claims to be an Apostle, but he wasn't one of the original guys.” And it goes on and on and on.

2 Corinthians 11

KJ2000

¹⁸ Seeing that many boast after the flesh, I will boast also.

In other words, “Everyone's bragging about who they are, where they came from; physically, you know, what their credentials are. So I guess I might as well talk about it, too.”

2 Corinthians 11

KJ2000

¹⁹ For you put up with fools gladly, seeing you yourselves are wise.

Oh boy, this just *drips* with sarcasm. You suffer fools gladly. You're willing to put up with these people. You're happy to see the fools come in because, after all, you're *so wise*; you know *everything*.

2 Corinthians 11

KJ2000

²⁰ For you permit it, if a man brings you into bondage, if a man devours you, if a man takes of you, if a man exalts himself, if a man smites you on the face.

These people can walk up and slap you in the face—and you take it.

2 Corinthians 11

KJ2000

²¹ I speak as concerning reproach, as though we had been weak. But in whatsoever way any is bold, (I speak foolishly,) I am bold also.

²² Are they Hebrews? so am I. Are they Israelites? so am I. Are they the descendants of Abraham? so am I.

So what are we talking about here? These people have come in and are claiming some sort of superiority because they are Hebrews, Israelites, and the seed of Abraham. Paul says, “Big deal. So am I.” He also repeatedly uses variations of “speak foolishly”, “speak as a fool”. He’s saying, “Look. I do not honestly want to, nor feel it is wise for me to, compare myself to these people. And I don’t like the idea of having to present credentials. I don’t like the idea of having to tell people what I have done. I don’t like any of this stuff; but I’ve got to do it, I guess. I just want you to know that I understand it is a bunch of foolishness.

2 Corinthians 11

KJ2000

²³ Are they ministers of Christ? (I speak as a fool) I am more; in labors more abundant [...]

And I think that the Corinthians, listening to this letter being read, were probably cringing at this point because they *knew* that Paul had worked harder than any of them.

2 Corinthians 11

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²³ [...] in stripes beyond measure, in prisons more frequent, in deaths often.

You know what he means by that? He means being taken over to a post, strapped up by his wrists, and then having someone stand back with a cat o’ nine tails and lay stripes across his back. What do you mean “above measure”? Well, the “measure” in Jewish law was 40 stripes. In the written law of the Old Testament you can whip a man. You can administer corporal punishment but you can’t hit him more than 40 times. (That seems like a lot to me, but that’s what the Bible said you could do.) He says “stripes *above* measure”. He’d been whipped beyond that. Who did that? Gentiles, of course.

He’d been in prison more than any of them. He’d faced death more often than any of them. Oh, and by the way, he says:

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²⁴ Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes less one.

The Jews, it seems, were very careful about this. Since the law said you couldn't give a man more than 40, they subtracted one just in case they miscounted somewhere along the line; that they didn't go over and give a man 41 stripes. Poor Paul had been through that several times. Could you imagine what his body must have looked like? His back, his buttocks, his legs; where he had been whipped and beaten. The scars must have been awesome to behold.

2 Corinthians 11

KJ2000

²⁵ Three times was I beaten with rods[.]

He was caned, in other words. Somebody took a long cane and beat him with it. Now, I don't know exactly how that worked back then. But I remember when a boy was punished with caning in Singapore not long ago, he had to be hospitalized after about five strikes with the rod.

2 Corinthians 11

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²⁵ [O]nce was I stoned[.]

Yeah, that was up in Asia Minor when they dragged him out of the city and stoned him. They thought they had killed him and went off and left him for dead. He dragged himself out from under the rocks and staggered off to the next town and preached the same Gospel that nearly got him killed before.

2 Corinthians 11

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²⁵ [T]hree times I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep[.]

He was a night and a day holding on to a piece of wreckage, bobbing around in the Mediterranean. It's kind of tough, if you think about it; being a minister in those days with the responsibilities of travel that he suffered through. I tell you, I'm so ashamed of myself because it was not long ago, when I was talking to some people who asked, "So how did your trip go?" after I had flown out to Phoenix or Los Angeles or someplace meeting with some friends. And I responded, "Oh, I get so tired of these airplanes. They don't serve you food anymore; they give you sack lunches when you walk on the plane. We didn't have time to run by and pick up something so all we had was their miserable sack lunch with some potato chips and a stale cookie and a cold sandwich."

I was complaining a lot about it. I was complaining about the seats. I'm 6 foot 3—a big guy, and I get comfortable on an airplane. The travel was really eating me up, folks—and then I read this from the man who suffered shipwreck three times. And I want to tell you something—traveling by sea in those days, in those ships, was shipwreck enough for me, much less having the boat founder on a reef, being in the water, and being a night and a day out there in the sea.

Now, my trip was just fine, thank you. And it's okay if they don't serve me any food at all. I'll make out somehow. We'll get by. I just really blush, I really do, to think of how I have complained in my lifetime of the hardships of serving Jesus Christ when, as far as comparison to Paul is concerned, I've done the whole thing in the lap of luxury. And so, I guess, all of us who

serve Christ in the modern world ought to just shut up.

Now, that's not true of people who serve Christ in the Sudan, or in China, or in some other places like that because these people do so in peril of their lives. Christians have been sold on the auction block in places around the world *this year*. Christians are being imprisoned *because they are Christians* someplace around the world *this year*. People are *losing their lives* someplace around the world, because they are Christians, *this year*. So let us fall on our knees and be thankful. And let us be grateful that God has allowed us to serve Him in some degree of comfort and warmth, well-fed, and all the things that go with it. I think we ought to be ashamed of ourselves any time we, in this country, in the western world (frankly, probably anyone who's hearing my voice on this program). We ought to be ashamed of our complaints, and our little things that didn't go the way we wanted them to.

2 Corinthians 11

KJ2000

²⁶ In journeys often [...]

He spent half his life on the road in one way or another. It's really unusual for Paul to spend as much as 18 months in one location. Usually it was just a matter of weeks and he was on the road again. And being on the road, in his case, meant walking or maybe by sea, endangering his life every day.

2 Corinthians 11

KJ2000

²⁶ [I]n perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by my own countrymen, in perils by the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren;

²⁷ In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness.

Well, I think that Paul pretty well proved, in his life and with his work, where his heart was. Don't you? And maybe, if you don't want to take his word for it, that's okay. He wouldn't care much about that, I don't think. What Paul is saying here is, "Whatever you may think about me, I know where I've gone. I know what I've done. And I know that I have proved myself."

2 Corinthians 11

KJ2000

²⁸ Besides those things that are outside, that which comes upon me daily, the care of all the churches.

"I have to worry about you."

2 Corinthians 11

KJ2000

²⁹ Who is weak, and I am not weak? who is offended, and I burn not?

³⁰ If I must boast, I will boast of the things which concern my weaknesses.

³¹ The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is blessed forevermore, knows that I lie not.

³² In Damascus the governor under Aretas the king guarded the city of Damascus with a garrison, desirous to apprehend me:

³³ And through a window in a basket was I let down by the wall, and escaped his hands.

“That’s the kind of *dignified* exit I had from Damascus.”

Now it is only fair to ask what drove this man and kept him at it in the face of all of this.

Now, I can understand how a man who had been through one little bit of hell might come back and try again. But when it comes to Paul, and you read the litany of the things he went through—it’s the only place in all of his writings where he really goes through the trouble to tell you and give you the whole picture of the things that he suffered for the sake of being able to continue preaching the Gospel. You really have to wonder, you know, how could a man continue on in the face of all that. What drove him? Why didn’t he just get a job somewhere and settle down with a wife and kids and make tents? He could earn a living. Why did he carry on in the face of all this opposition?

Well, there are oftentimes two reasons why men give themselves so completely to a task like this. One is that they have no hope in this world. Whatever the reason—perhaps a terminal illness or something else—causes them to devote themselves in the time they have left to doing something worthwhile. There’s no point in pursuing the vanity that most of us spend our lives doing; which we do in the hope that somewhere out there we’ll succeed, somewhere out there we’ll get our break, somewhere out there things will work our way for a change. But when you come down to the end of your rope and you know that it doesn’t matter whatever else happens—my life is headed towards an end—that people start thinking there must be something I can do that’s worthwhile in the time I’ve got left. And the other why people will carry on in the face of such adversity is that they have hope *somewhere else*.

When Paul was on the road to Damascus (he told this story later in a speech to King Agrippa) on his way to Damascus to persecute the church:

Acts 26

KJ2000

¹² Thus as I went to Damascus with authority and commission from the chief priests,

¹³ At midday, O king, I saw in the way a light from heaven, above the brightness of the sun, shining round about me and them who journeyed with me.

¹⁴ And when we were all fallen to the earth, I heard a voice speaking unto me, and saying in the Hebrew tongue, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? it is hard for you to kick against the goads.

¹⁵ And I said, Who are you, Lord? And he said, I am Jesus whom you persecute.

¹⁶ But rise, and stand upon your feet: for I have appeared unto you for this purpose, to make you a minister and a witness both of these things which you have seen [...]

In other words, he actually had a vision of Jesus Christ. He was knocked down, Christ spoke to him and Christ said, “I’m going to make you a servant and a witness.” In the vision, Jesus also told Paul He would yet to appear to him, and that Paul had to learn some things.

Acts 26

KJ2000

¹⁶ [...] and of those things in which I will appear unto you;

¹⁷ Delivering you from the people, and from the Gentiles, unto whom now I send you,

¹⁸ To open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them who are sanctified by faith that is in me.

¹⁹ Therefore, O king Agrippa, I was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision:

Paul said, “I had a vision and it gave me instructions and I had no choice. I *have* to, I *had* to carry on. And notice that it is not only in the things Paul *had* seen, but that Jesus said He would appear to Paul again. That brings us to chapter 12 of 2 Corinthians and one of Paul’s most enigmatic statements.

2 Corinthians 12

KJ2000

¹ It is not expedient for me doubtless to boast. I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord.

² I knew a man in Christ fourteen years ago, (whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knows;) such a one caught up to the third heaven.

³ And I knew such a man, (whether in the body, or out of the body, I cannot tell: God knows;)

Strange, isn’t it? There’s something suspicious here as he says he knew the man 14 years ago. That is during the time when Paul would have been being taught by Jesus personally. The part about whether this man was in or out of the body is also may be that he is talking about himself and just doesn’t want to use the first-person.

2 Corinthians 12

KJ2000

⁴ How that he was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.

⁵ Of such a one will I boast: yet of myself I will not boast, but in my weaknesses.

⁶ For though I would desire to boast, I shall not be a fool; for I will say the truth: but now I forbear, lest any man should think of me above that which he sees me to be, or that he hears of me.

Now, I think this is a fascinating little statement here. In first place, he says that he is going to stop talking about this subject because he doesn’t want anyone to think too highly of Paul himself. This suggests again that this one who was caught up to the third heaven, who heard these unspeakable things was Paul and that he didn’t want people thinking more highly of him than what they saw him to be. “I don’t expect you (or want you) to take my word for things like this. They’re not important. I only want you to know what you *see* me to be and what you *hear* me to say. Beyond that you have no business attempting to think of me more highly than this.”

2 Corinthians 12*KJ2000*

⁷ And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure.

Commentaries have gone on and on about what they think this "messenger of Satan", this "thorn in the flesh" was. But I don't think this is quite as important as what he said in the beginning.

2 Corinthians 12*KJ2000*

⁷ And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations [...]

I can identify with that. I understand what he is saying here. If I had been caught up to the third heaven and heard things that man could not utter; if I had actually seen Christ in vision I would be very, very tempted to be exalted above measure. I would be thinking, "Well, I saw Christ. *You* didn't see Christ. Who are you to question me? Who do you think you are?" And I think that is a fairly normal human response. But Paul says that right alongside of this comes a thorn in the flesh (it was in his body, his mind was not affected in any way), a messenger of Satan to buffet him. I don't know what he means by that, but the result I can understand. It was something that humbled Paul and kept him in his place.

2 Corinthians 12*KJ2000*

⁸ For this thing I besought the Lord three times, that it might depart from me.

And I don't think he means by this that he asked in prayer; morning, noon, and evening on one day. I have an idea that he fasted, prayed, and made a special issue out of beseeching God for this thing on three separate occasions.

2 Corinthians 12*KJ2000*

⁹ And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for you: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. [...]

God chooses to do his work weak, fallible, mistake-ridden, sin-laden human beings. He cleans them up. He straightens them out. He puts their feet in the right way. He does the things He has to do with them. But He doesn't come down here and choose people who are visible to everyone as a great paragon of virtue and responsibility: the tall, strong, physically-straight people. He doesn't look for that. Oftentimes, God chooses the weak to confound to strong. He chooses the base to confound the honorable. He chooses all these things in order that man will never for a moment imagine, in their wildest imaginations, that Paul was smart enough to bring this all off by himself.

2 Corinthians 12*KJ2000*

⁹ [...] Most gladly therefore will I rather boast in my weaknesses, that the power of

Christ may rest upon me.

¹⁰ Therefore I take pleasure in weaknesses, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong.

“When, physically, in my own strength and what I can do, I am weak. That's when I can really get some work done.”

2 Corinthians 12

KJ2000

¹¹ I have become a fool in boasting; you have compelled me: for I ought to have been commended by you: for in nothing am I behind the very chief apostles, though I be nothing.

Because the truth is that none of us is worth a hang without Christ.

2 Corinthians 12

KJ2000

¹² Truly the signs of an apostle were done among you in all patience, in signs, and wonders, and mighty deeds.

¹³ For what is it in which you were inferior to other churches, except it be that I myself was not burdensome to you? forgive me this wrong.

One again, his pen drips with sarcasm. He doesn't believe that it is wrong. He is just putting it back in their face.

2 Corinthians 12

KJ2000

¹⁴ Behold, the third time I am ready to come to you; and I will not be burdensome to you: for I seek not yours, but you: for the children ought not to lay up for the parents, but the parents for the children.

¹⁵ And I will very gladly spend and be spent for you, though the more abundantly I love you, the less I am loved.

¹⁶ But be it so, I did not burden you: nevertheless, being crafty, I took you with guile.

Paul says, “Oh, give me a break. Really.” I remember once being part of a ministry where the policy was that you couldn't pay for anything that they had. In fact, if you sent in money to buy a booklet that they offered free-of-charge on the radio or television, they would send your money back with a letter saying, “We're sorry. We don't accept money in payment for literature.” And some people said, “Boy, that's crafty. That's really slick. In the process of *refusing* to take money for the booklet they are setting you up so, later on, they can get more money out of you.” What can I tell you? You can't win with some people. That's what Paul was up against.

2 Corinthians 12

KJ2000

¹⁷ Did I make a gain of you by any of them whom I sent unto you?

¹⁸ I urged Titus, and with him I sent a brother. Did Titus make a gain of you? walked we

not in the same spirit? walked we not in the same steps?

They knew that. But sometimes there is a gap between what we *know* and what we *feel* and it was feelings that had more to do with anything in Corinth,

2 Corinthians 12

KJ2000

¹⁹ Again, do you think that we excuse ourselves unto you? we speak before God in Christ: but we do all things, dearly beloved, for your edifying.

²⁰ For I fear, lest, when I come, I shall not find you such as I wish, and that I shall be found unto you such as you desire not: lest there be debates, envyings, wraths, strifes, backbitings, whisperings, conceit, tumults:

What, all these things in a Christian church? Yeah. As long as human beings are in Christian churches, trying to learn about God and trying to go the right way, stuff like this will happen.

2 Corinthians 12

KJ2000

²¹ And lest, when I come again, my God will humble me among you, and that I shall mourn over many who have sinned already, and have not repented of the uncleanness and fornication and licentiousness which they have committed.

2 Corinthians 13

KJ2000

¹ This is the third time I am coming to you. In the mouth of two or three witnesses shall every word be established.

² I told you before, and tell you again, as if I were present, the second time; and being absent now I write to them who earlier have sinned, and to all others, that, if I come again, I will not spare:

“I’m not going to stand up there before you and be mealy-mouthed about this. We’re going to deal with it.”

2 Corinthians 13

KJ2000

³ Since you seek a proof of Christ speaking in me, who toward you is not weak, but is mighty in you.

⁴ For though he was crucified through weakness, yet he lives by the power of God. For we also are weak in him, but we shall live with him by the power of God toward you.

⁵ Examine yourselves, whether you are in the faith; prove your own selves. Know you not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, unless you are counterfeits?

⁶ But I trust that you shall know that we are not counterfeits.

⁷ Now I pray to God that you do no evil; not that we should appear approved, but that you should do that which is honest, though we be as failures.

⁸ For we can do nothing against the truth, but for the truth.

⁹ For we are glad, when we are weak, and you are strong: and this also we wish, even

your perfection.

2 Corinthians 13

KJ2000

¹¹ Finally, brethren, farewell. Be restored, be of good comfort, be of one mind, live in peace; and the God of love and peace shall be with you.

¹² Greet one another with a holy kiss.

¹³ All the saints greet you.

¹⁴ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

And thus ends one of the most emotional of all of Paul's epistles. Until next time, this is Ronald Dart; and you were *born to win*.

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