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II Corinthians 11:16-33 "My Life, Their Life, Your Call"
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All right. Let's open our Bibles this morning to II Corinthians Chapter 11 verse 16.

Paul had spent a year and a half in this church, seeing it planted and grown, and only five years later did he hear about the Judaizers moving in to take command of the church from a leadership standpoint. The Judaizers were men who brought Judaism, but really had twisted it to complete legalism and mysticism. They followed Paul around for years. They were a challenge to really the work of God everywhere. And Paul was so frustrated, because he loved the people and they were being led astray.

By the time that you get to this book, II Corinthians, over a year has passed. Three letters have been sent. Paul has made a visit there, sent a couple of his disciples there as well, and only recently did he and Titus meet up in northern Greece to find out that all of that outreach was working. The church was extricating itself from these false prophets and false apostles, false teachers. But yet there was some that were just hanging on. And so Paul finishes this book, the last four chapters, speaking authoritatively to these men. And one of the ploys that he used was he wanted to compare himself with them. He wanted the church to look carefully at what he had done and said and how he had lived amongst them, and what these false teachers were doing. Because ultimately the proof of who you are is seen by what you do, what you say over a longer period of time.

We come to these verses this morning, from verse 16 to the end of the chapter, where Paul reluctantly finds himself boasting of his accomplishments, or of his suffering, or of the life that he's led, not to bring him any glory himself. In fact, he goes out of his way to say, this is dumb. But if this will help them to see the difference, then that's all that matters. He wants to

rescue these saints from these horrible men who had led them astray for so long.

We read in verse 16, this is what he said: "I say again, let no man think of me as a fool. But if otherwise, at least receive me as a fool, that I might boast a little. What I speak, I speak not according to the Lord, but as it were, foolishly, in this confidence of boasting. Seeing that many boast according to the flesh, so I will also boast. For you put up with fools gladly, since you're so wise yourself! For you would put up with it if one would bring you into bondage, if one would devour you, or take from you, exalts himself; even if one strikes you in the face. To our shame I say we're too weak for that. But in whatever anyone is bold -- I speak foolishly -- I want to be bold as well." Paul is not a guy that wants to boast. It isn't in his nature. It horrifies him. It is a tactic, though, that is used when you want to say to people completely deceived, look who you're following, and look at the example that we've set.

Humility is a glorious Christian virtue. I think you can only become humble -- it's a hard thing to say of yourself, yes, I'm very humble. But you only become humble when you see the grace of God and you understand the glory of God and His majesty. I once read somewhere, and I've remembered it for years, that humility can only survive in the presence of God; that humility is the shadow that follows the Lord. If you stand in His shadow, it can't help but humble you and bring you to your knees. And certainly, Paul understood that very well. You can expect to find humility applauded about as often as you find the Lord applauded.

Look, here's the picture on humility and pride: Every sin in the Bible is an affront to the Lord, because every sin represents a going away from Him. For example, covetousness is when someone turns away from God's provision and seeks to find satisfaction in other things that He has not provided, or wants to have when He hasn't provided them. Lust is turning away from God's design to seek pleasure in some kind of illicit relationship. Anger is turning from God's justice, God's retribution to take matters into your own hands. Vengeance is not to be yourself. Impatience is just turning from God's sovereign oversight to try to hurry things along because you just aren't going to wait anymore. You want control of it yourself. Fear is turning from God's power and His

oversight to the dread of others.

But then there's pride, and it's the ultimate sin, because pride takes God off the throne and puts you there. You now become God. That makes it ultimate idolatry, which is why wherever you turn in the Bible you read about humility. We read, "He has shown you, O man, what is good; what the Lord requires of you. Do justly, love mercy, walk humbly before the Lord." Everywhere you turn, don't do things by selfish ambitions, put on tender mercies, esteem other better than yourself, put on humility and meekness and longsuffering. It's constant, because when you stand in God's shadow, you're brought to your knees. You're humbled.

No one in the scriptures understood that any more than Paul. Pride is the first sin mentioned in the Bible. It took Satan down. He had a glorious place, but pride was his destruction. Isaiah Chapter 14, "I'll rise to the heights of the clouds. I will be like the Most High." And that was it. Pride had risen in his heart.

So when you get to reading about Paul boasting, understand that he was compelled to do it because he believed that the folks that were still following these false teachers needed to have a wake-up call, like look at what's going on here, check this out, make the comparison. They had been spreading lots of disinformation about Paul: His appearance was bad, his lack of qualifications, his questionable motives, his status was challenged. They undermined his message, and Paul was attached to the message that he was preaching.

Before he lays out his boasts beginning in verse 23 down through the end of the chapter, Paul wants to make it extremely clear that he thinks this is foolish and fleshly, but these phonies needed to be exposed. He says in verse 16, "I say again." When did he say it the last time? Verse 1, "Bear with my foolishness for a minute, and my folly." And he says it again here. This is foolish boasting, and it's not something I habitually want to do, but that's what the false teachers habitually did. Paul starts by saying, if you agree this is foolish, at least give me the same privilege that you give them and hear me out.

Paul had no problem boasting about Jesus. Back in Chapter 10 verse 17, he says if you're going to boast,

boast in the Lord. At the end of this chapter, in Chapter 11 verse 30, he'll say, If I'm going to boast, I'd like to boast in my infirmities, because if I can tell you how weak I am, that tells you how strong God is. But he saw this as foolish, to boast about his suffering and his sacrifices and his concern. But here's the deal: There's Proverbs 26 verse 5, and it says that you should "answer a fool according to his own folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes." In other words, sometimes the only thing fools understand is foolishness, and that's kind of where Paul's at. If they don't get anything else, maybe this'll wake them up.

He says in verse 17, he says in verse 18, look, this is ridiculous, you know. And I'll meet you on your own turf because I want to bring the people that are following out from following you, but he even says speaking not according to the Lord. I think he just doesn't see this as the way that the Lord might very well go about doing this. But he feels led to, in other words, set before them that comparison.

Now, Paul kind of drips with sarcasm when he, in verse 19 and 20, in verse 21, says to them, I know that you put up with fools because you're so smart. Even if they take advantage of you, they put you in bondage, they devour you, they exalt themselves, they'll even strike you in the face, and then Paul says with great sarcasm, I'm sorry we were too weak to treat you that way. Make the comparison. Paul gives them a list of the abuses he had heard through Titus and others, that the children of God in Corinth were suffering, and I think it brought his blood to a boil. He said of them, they bring you into bondage. They take away from you the freedom that you had in Jesus. They do this, they don't do that, the legalist that demand obedience, that the minions. They make a slave out of you. This religious way.

He said that they devour you. It's the word for, to consume. It is the word that Jesus used in Matthew Chapter 23 to warn us about the scribes and the Pharisees who came to devour widow's houses. It literally means to take what they have until they had no more. They want to take from you.

The word "take" there is the word for demand or dominated. It's the word for bullying, if you will, in the Bible. They pushed you around, they insulted you,

they belittled you. They forced themselves upon you while exalting themselves. And even physically assailing you, slapping you in the face. It's kind of the ultimate action of disgust. You remember Paul was slapped in the face by Ananias, the high priest, for questioning the high priests' words. This is the way that their false religion was pushing them around. And Paul said, look, I'm sorry we can't treat you like that. Makes such perfect sense. And I like that sarcasm's in the Bible. I always thought it should be. But he then goes on to begin to express the sacrifice that he was willing to make to be sure that they were right with God, that they knew the things of God. And how much he was willing to lay out in his life for the sake of the gospel.

This list that Paul gives us -- and we'll just kind of go over it together in a few minutes -- if you were making an argument for yourself, I'm not sure this is the kind of list you'd make up. You were beaten and imprisoned, and yeah, I was quite a guy in my days. And then you give all of these kind of suffering and difficulties. This was a list that you probably wouldn't have laid out.

But interestingly enough to me, this list tells you how incomplete the account of the books of Acts is, because this letter was written about the time of Acts Chapter 20-Acts Chapter 21. It's very early on in that situation. The last seven chapters of Paul's life, this has yet to happen when he's writing this letter. There is very little of what we read here recorded in the annals of the book of Acts. It's almost unbelievable to think about what Paul went through to share the Lord with people. How little -- and for our generation, how little we do. We live in Western culture. Unfortunately, the church in the west thinks that church is all about what am I getting out of it? What time does it start? What time can I get out of here? What's the least I can do? We're so weak in that regard. Paul's such a stark reminder of what -- if we really wanted to give our lives to the Lord, what we might have to go through, and yet what it might cost to get the word out to others. Though we have a list of things here, we won't find that list in the book of Acts as much.

His boasts here are in categories. They are the sufferings that he suffered physically for Christ. They are the sympathies that he showed for this church that he greatly loved, and there's his submissive heart towards

the situations that God put him in that he couldn't adjust or change. Sufferings and sympathy, and his submission to the things of God. Paul wanting to lay out the difference between him and these false teachers that were there to take advantage of them, putting them in bondage, devour them, exalt themselves over them, and even mistreat them, and he wanted them to see the difference.

I want to remind you before we look at this list that everything on this list happened to Paul because he was doing the right thing. He was right where God wanted him. He was obedient to the Lord. This is not a punishment. This wasn't you got off track, you get what you deserve, you shouldn't have been in that place, you shouldn't have said those things. This was all right where the Lord wanted him to be, and this is the -- I won't say the reward that he got, but this is the consequences that followed him as a result of doing the things that God would want him to do. It is an amazing list of things.

If you read this list on your own, and you're prone to read the Bible and seeking to apply it to yourself, as certainly you should do, you might say to yourself, I can't relate to any of this, and you'd probably be right. The things that Paul went through I suspect you'd go, nope, didn't happen to me, nope, nope, nope, nope, nope, nope, nope, nope. But the lesson is still the same. There are still consequences for standing up for Christ in this world. There's still a devil that likes to punish you for seeking to do just that, and come after you, and his purposes and tactics haven't changed very much, and neither has the call of the Lord upon our life.

Paul begins by saying, "Are they Hebrews? So am I. And are they Israelites? Well, so am I. And are they of the seed of Abraham? Then so am I. And are they ministers of Christ? -- I speak as a fool -- I am more: Labors more abundantly, in stripes," and then he begins with the list. But he starts by saying, they're Jews? And they're claiming to be God's servants.

The word "Hebrews," by the way, in the New Testament distinguishes Jews living in Israel speaking Hebrew from the Hellenist Jews that lived outside of Israel and spoke Greek. So those that are the diaspora; those that have been pushed out of Israel, if you will, that lived in

different parts of the world. They usually were not referred to as Hebrews. It was just a distinction. Not that they weren't Jews, but where they came from, the severity of their training usually, and the language that they spoke.

Paul said, "Are they Hebrews? Well, so am I." Now, Paul was born in Tarsus, Asia Minor. He grew up speaking Hebrew. He was Hellenist Jew, if you will. He came from the diaspora. However, when he was young his parents sent him to Jerusalem. He was raised as a Hebrew. In fact, he will say of himself that he is a Hebrew of the Hebrews, so to speak, I think in Philippians Chapter 3.

The word Israelite just refers to everyone who's a Jew, a descendant of Jacob. It was the theocratic kind of identity of the people. Paul said of the false teachers, are they Hebrews? Some of them were. Are they Jews? They all were. They were the Judaizers, if you will, that had brought the law and perverted it and made it a works righteousness, and added lots of mysticism and hierarchy to their beliefs. And finally, Paul said, "Are they ministers of Christ?" Well, they weren't saved. None of these guys knew the Lord. It was horrible, and what they taught was despicable, and Paul thought, I'm speaking like a fool. But I'll tell you what a servant of Christ would do, and then he gives us this list.

Now, it's not a list of miracles or power or conversion or church plants or changed lives or bodies healed. He gives a list of credentials that literally have everything to do with suffering, at least first. Here's the sufferings that he experienced serving the Lord. Maybe you can put yourself in his shoes. Have you experienced suffering serving Christ in this world? Suffering is exactly what Jesus predicted would follow you and I. He said He was sending us forth as sheep among wolves. That's usually not a good experience. A sheep in the midst of wolves is usually not a good place to be, but that's the what the Lord said. He would send us forth like sheep amongst the wolves.

Paul's sufferings consisted of being arrested, being beaten, being hated, being persecuted, being slandered. Wherever you go to shine God's light in the kingdom of darkness, you're invariably -- and you're going to generate hostile response. You shouldn't ever hope that it'll just be easy. It won't be. It's light and

darkness; it's life and death; it's Christ against the God of this world. It's not going to be an easy sell, or an easy ministry, ever. Ever. But Paul's life was certainly an indication of how hard it could be.

The Lord, when he had saved Paul, said to him in Chapter 9 that He was going to show him the things that he would suffer for His name's sake. These false teachers in Corinth had letters of commendation from their peers. Paul had a body filled with scars. In fact, he will say to the Galatians, "From now on, don't trouble me anymore. In my body I bear the marks of the Lord Jesus Christ." Imagine having to say to somebody, you want to see what I get for serving the Lord? Check this out. You know, body from head to toe scarred. The false teachers had none of those things. And Paul wants them to make the comparison. He's not boasting because he wants to brag. It's not his heart. But he wants them to see the difference between him and those that are in the church that are still trying to take advantage.

And he begins here in verse 3 by saying, "I am in labors more abundantly." The word "kopos" in Greek means to toil until you tip over. It's a word that means to the point of exhaustion. You can't go another step. You can't climb another hill. You can't cross another river. You've just had it. And Paul said, that's the way I feel every day, out in his ministry. I've received stripes above measure, or literally, I've been cut and bled so often in beatings, I can't -- and I've lost count of them. I don't know how often that's happened to me. For preaching, for sharing. I've been in prison more frequently. Not in the county jail where you get three meals and a shower. Usually in a hole in the ground, with chains on and in filth, blood if you've been beaten. Nobody cleans you up. And according to at least historical standards, if somebody that you know didn't bring you food, you died. They didn't feed you. Your families needed to feed you. It was a horrible place to be. Paul was imprisoned in Philippi, in Jerusalem, in Caesarea, twice in Rome. But by the time he is writing this, he has only been in jail in Philippi, where he was at shortly before he ended up in Corinth.

He writes, "I've been in death often." How many of you have been close to death for being a Christian? Any of you? In death often, narrow escapes, accidents, weather, mobs, disease. Paul lived with his own mortality every

day. He faced it every day. It wasn't an easy life. In fact, he said in the I Corinthian letter, Chapter 15, I want to tell you that we are dying daily. Dying daily for the sake of the gospel. Seems far different than God just wants you healthy and well.

In verse 24, Paul said, "From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods." The Jewish practice of correcting, especially in punishment, they used the Deuteronomy 25 verse 3 verse which says you can give somebody 40 stripes, but no more than that, so he wouldn't be humiliated. The practice had easily become, let's just give him 39. For the most egregious crime you get 39 stripes: 29 of them to your back, 10 of them to your chest. But they would never go by 40, because we want to be merciful. Five times. Five times. Nearly 200 stripes. You put yourself in that spot. At what point do you go, I'm done sharing. I'm just going to write letters from now on, from far away. He was always accused of the worst and given the most.

The beating with rods, which happened three times, was not a Jewish practice, but a Roman one. It was so brutal that you might remember in Philippi that the first thing that the saved Philippian jailer did when he came to the Lord was to take Paul and Silas home to clean up their wounds. Beaten by the Romans. Paul was a Roman citizen. It was totally illegal. But when Paul arrived in Corinth after that experience, he might very well still have physically exhibited the pains of that whole ordeal, having been beaten with rods. Welcome to the ministry.

"Once," he says, "I was stoned." We have the record of that in Acts 14. Paul's first missionary journey, he had come to Lystra. There was a local lame man who'd been lame in the town from his birth. Paul in preaching was led of the Lord to call on this man, and the Lord raised him up on his legs, and he walked, and the whole town wanted to worship him as a god, and Barnabas. And they argued and stopped them just short of bringing out and slaughtering animals in their name. But when they barely had stopped the crowd just from down the street -- well, not just down the street. From miles away -- the others came, the places where he had been, in Antioch and in Iconium, and they stirred up the crowd so much that the crowd in Lystra decided they would just drag this guy outside of town and then try to kill him. And they left

him there dead. Timothy would have watched this. This was his area. "Once I was stoned." I don't know. Just to get the gospel out.

"Three times," he said, "I was shipwrecked." I don't know if you've ever got stuck in the water, but I don't think you've been stuck in the water 24 hours in an ocean, hoping someone finds you. And not once, not twice; three times. I wonder if Paul had nightmares. And this happened well before all of those trips to Rome and the hazard. The three times could easily have become six. What a life this man led.

He writes in verse 26, "I've been in journeys often. From the book of Acts, the account we can figure out, that Paul traveled about 8,600 miles over 15 years; before being taken to Rome, forever packing and unpacking. The road, life is hard on a body. It's even harder on those who are being hunted and rejected everywhere they go. If I was Paul, I'd have stayed home at some point. But he couldn't stay home. Even after the second missionary journey, he wasn't home for three, four months before he had to go out again. He couldn't rest. That was what -- there was a world to reach. How convicting is this for us?

He writes in verse 26, "I was in peril of the water and in peril of the robbers and in peril of my own countrymen, and in peril from the Gentiles, and in peril of the city, and in the wilderness, and in the sea, and even amongst the false brethren." The keyword, I was in peril. Wherever I went, danger waited for me. Whether they were floods and rivers, or bandits and robbers, in the wild west that we called Asia Minor, whether it was from my own countrymen or from the Gentile world, whether I was in Jerusalem where I was attacked, or in Ephesus where I was attacked. Sometimes bands of people gathered together against Paul. In the city or in the wilderness, doesn't matter. No safe haven, no law and order, no protection under the law. Peril on the high seas, peril from people that he thought he could trust, folks that had turned against him, folks that he liked and thought liked him, friends that turned out to be no friends at all. Welcome to the ministry. What a way of life. And yet who said this life for us as Christians in this world is supposed to be easy? Not if we're doing it right apparently.

He says in verse 27, "In weariness and in toil." To the point of exhaustion, muscles ached, tendons pulled, feet are blistered, hands are tired. I can just imagine what this guy's body must have looked like that he called home. He might have been 60-plus when he died. I bet he looked 120. I don't know. It's "Rocky 11," I'm pretty sure. "In sleeplessness often," but not because he wasn't tired. Worry and illness and concern, preaching all day, working all night. Quite a convicting picture, I think, for our generation.

We read that he was in hunger, and in thirst, and even in fastings often, and in cold and in nakedness. Imagine. To make it work he'd go without eating. This is a man right where God wants him, carrying the treasure in this earthen vessel. Cold, insufficient clothing, freezing temperatures, just to get the word out. What possesses someone like that? Would that be possible for you? Does this describe your character as far as your willing sacrifice to get Jesus' name out at any cost? Does it typify the television evangelist? That was Paul's argument.

Paul, the greatest of the apostles. Prison sentences, beatings, death, stonings, shipwrecks, drowning, raging rivers, bandits, plots of men in the wild, in the city, amongst these so-called friends. And then if that isn't enough, he writes in II Corinthians Chapter 4 verse 17 these words: "This is my light affliction." Excuse me? "This is my light affliction which is just for a moment. It's working in me a far exceedingly and eternal weight of glory." Look, what I'm going through is nothing, Paul says, compared to what's waiting for me when I'm done. There's a Heavenly-minded guy who had God's heart for the lost, and it wasn't going to be easy to get the word out. And if you walk out today and go tell somebody about Christ, it's not going to be easy for you. It's not going to be easy. It may not rise to this level, and praise the Lord it doesn't, but trouble will come as a result.

So those were his sufferings. He then turns to his sympathies in verse 28, and he said, "Besides the other things, which come upon me daily: My deep concern for all of the church." Paul loved the people. He wanted them to do well. It kept him up. It kept him in prayer. He agonized over their care. He exhorted them. He traveled back to see them time and again. Imagine

getting stoned at Lystra, and then on your second trip going, "We should go to Lystra." Why? "Well, there's a church there." Great. God bless them. Tell them to watch out for the people with the stones. No, he went back, and he went back again. And for the last year and a half, he'd been dying inside for these folks. He would say to the Galatians, "My little children, I will labor until Christ is formed in you." He will write to the Thessalonians, "I wanted to be gentle among you as a nursing mother would cherish her own children." He would write in I Corinthians, "You have lots of teachers, but you don't have many fathers in the faith." He loved the people. That wasn't the key for these false teachers. They would leave when the income source dried up, when there was not enough benefit.

No, he loved the people. He says in verse 29, "Who's weak, I'm not? And who's made to stumble, I don't burn with indignation?" When they hurt, he hurt. He wasn't aloof. He wasn't distant. When they were stumbled, he turned with anger. Whatever happened to the church left a mark on Paul.

And he says in verse 30, "If I've got to boast, I'm going to boast on the things which concern my infirmity. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who's blessed forevermore, He knows that I'm not lying." God knows the truth. In all my weaknesses, He's been glorified. I'm boasting to you, but I want to boast about what I wasn't able to do and what He was."

Well, he ends in verse 32 and verse 33 by making a mention to the submission to the Lord that he had learned early in life, that this was going to be a humility-driven existence for him. And he reaches way back years earlier, and he says this: "In Damascus the governor under Aretas the king was guarding the city of the Damascenes with a garrison, desiring to arrest me, but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall. I escaped from their hands." Both the Romans and the Greeks, they admired overpowering presence of leaders; those who could dominate situations through sheer force. Paul gives an embarrassing situation of his own life. A fleeing at night, and hiding in a basket, let down the walls, escaping for his life. You can read about it in Acts Chapter 9 verse 25. He would boast of his weakness. Well, here's a place I learned early on.

If you read the book of Acts, you know that Paul, when he came to the Lord there outside the city of Damascus, when the Lord healed him of his sight, he disappeared for three years. He went into the Arabian desert. He says that he was taught by the Lord firsthand. We don't know anything about it. But when he came back, his first coming back into public eye was in Damascus, and he went to preach. And this guy that had been the terror of the church now became hated by the Jews, and they immediately went after him. He went to them to preach Christ, and they went, yeah, you're going to die. He had been a turncoat now. He had switched sides, if you will. And so this man who was the toast of the rabbinical circles, the educated sincere Pharisee, the one who had traveled with the high officials in Jerusalem, that everybody knew and wanted to know, that had come to Damascus to kill Christians and to arrest them, three years later finds himself in a basket maybe where there were dead fish an hour before. Now he's kind of the dead fish. And they're lowering him down a window on the wall, and he sneaks off under cover of darkness. And Paul says, that's my life. I have to keep on the run, but God has taken care of me all of these years. I'll boast of my weaknesses, they'll boast of their strength. I'm going to tell you of my weakness. The Lord had told him it would be a rough road, but here's what He said: This is worth it.

We should never discount what sacrifices others have made to be sure that we've gotten the gospel delivered to us. But now here's your job: Now what kind of sacrifices are we going to make to make sure this generation hears about Jesus? Unfortunately, the church just stands around and wrings its hands a lot of times, like "Oh, the world's so terrible," and, "Oh, it's getting worse." There's people that will die on their political stance. I'll tell you what hill you can die on: Calvary. If you are going to die for something, die for that. And if the church will do that, if we'll take this to heart and just say, "Lord, use us, no matter what it costs." It'll probably cost you plenty, but in the end, it's like Paul: You'll glory in your weakness, because the Lord can do great things to those who are available.