

Boasting in Weakness

2 Corinthians 11:16–33

July 26, 2025 — New Baptist Church
Pastor Trent Eastman

Archaeological Moment: *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*

Our faith is a historical faith. We are here today because God did something in history, and understanding that history helps us understand Scripture. That is why I open nearly every Wednesday evening Bible study with what I call an Archaeological Moment — a brief look at the historical or cultural background that illuminates the text before us. Tonight I want to share one with you here, and I think you will see immediately why it matters for our passage.

It is called the *Res Gestae Divi Augusti* — literally, “The Deeds of the Divine Augustus.”

Gaius Octavius Caesar Augustus was born in 63 BC, adopted by Julius Caesar, and following his decisive victory over Mark Antony at the Battle of Actium in 31 BC, he became the sole ruler of Rome, establishing the Roman Empire. He ruled as Emperor until August 19, 14 AD, when he died of natural causes at the age of seventy-five. A month before his death, he arranged for his own obituary — one that he had written himself — to be engraved on public buildings and bronze pillars throughout the Roman Empire. Because the *Res Gestae* was inscribed in multiple locations, we today possess a complete text.

As the title suggests, Caesar wanted the world to know his deeds. The document runs roughly the length of the book of Galatians, so I will not read it in full, but here are a few of the things Caesar chose to boast about.

| “I subjected the whole world to the empire of the Roman people.”

| “The Senate decreed that the gates of Janus Quirinus should be closed... and before my birth they are recorded to have been closed only twice.”

This is Caesar essentially saying: I brought peace on earth. The gates of Janus were closed only when Rome was at war with no one.

| “I found Rome a city of brick and left it a city of marble.”

This refers to his vast public works, including the restoration of eighty-two temples.

| “I gave money to hundreds of thousands.”

A large portion of the document is devoted to cataloging his generosity. And alongside all of this, he lists the offices and honors he held: consul thirteen times, emperor twenty-one times, three triumphs celebrated, three censuses conducted. The list is very long.

I share all of this because the *Res Gestae* is a perfect window into what the ancient world valued and what it meant to be great. People boasted in how good they were, how much they had given, the power they had wielded, the awards they had won, and how many people followed them. Gaius Octavius Caesar Augustus set the standard, and the whole Roman world understood it.

And this is the world into which the Lord sent the apostle Paul to proclaim the gospel.

A Different Gospel in Corinth

Paul entered a world saturated in self-promotion — a world of accomplishments, victories, and monuments, a world so infatuated with self that it was functionally blind to the work and presence of God. Tragically, that spiritual blindness had made its way into the church at Corinth, and it was causing that congregation to drift toward a different Jesus, a different Spirit, and a different gospel.

Paul had planted the church in Corinth during the years 50–52 AD. After he left, people he would later call “false apostles” arrived and began preaching a Jesus who did not suffer, a Spirit who did not sanctify, and a gospel that was not free. And these men built their entire argument on their boasts. They claimed authority based on how wonderful they were. They had their own *Res Gestae*: their Jewish heritage, their religious credentials, their speaking ability, their spiritual experiences, their influence, their success, their outward appearance. “Look at what we have accomplished. Look at our credentials. Look at our greatness.”

Just as Augustus had his achievements inscribed in bronze for all Rome to read, these men came into Corinth with carefully curated accounts of their own greatness, designed to establish their authority and undermine Paul’s. And sadly, the Corinthians were impressed. They listened — and drifted toward a different Jesus, a different Spirit, and a different gospel.

And so Paul, in our text today, says: if boasting is what you want, if that is what you need, then I will boast also.

The Fool's Speech: Paul Enters the Contest

¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ What I am saying with this boastful confidence, I say not as the Lord would but as a fool. ¹⁸ Since many boast according to the flesh, I too will boast. ¹⁹ For you gladly bear with fools, being wise yourselves! ²⁰ 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. ²¹ 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.

Paul is making a sharp rhetorical point: boasting is how fools talk. And since the Corinthians seem to enjoy listening to fools, he will speak their language for a moment.

²² Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they offspring of Abraham? So am I.

Whatever the false apostles are claiming on the basis of their Jewish heritage, Paul can match it — and exceed it. In Philippians 3:4–6 he makes this even more explicit:

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 Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

Everything the false apostles are boasting in — every credential they are presenting — Paul can say: I have that too. And more.

A Madman's Résumé: Suffering as Evidence

²³ Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one — I am talking like a madman —

Notice that parenthetical remark. Paul knows exactly what he is about to say will sound absurd. If he is going to prove that he is a better servant of Christ, the natural expectation would be for him to list the number of churches he planted, the miles he traveled, the people baptized, the size of the crowds he preached to, the miracles he performed. These are the things people would expect to find in Paul's *Res Gestae* of apostolic greatness.

But he lists none of them. Instead, he turns to the things the world would regard as weakness or failure. This is precisely why he prefaces it with “I am talking like a madman.”

| *with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. ²⁴ Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one.*

According to Jewish law, forty lashes less one was the most severe beating permitted — thirty-nine stripes with a leather strap, stopped just short of forty so the executioner would not accidentally transgress the law. It was agonizing and humiliating, administered in the synagogue. Paul received it five times, and none of these incidents are recorded anywhere in the book of Acts.

Think about what that means. Paul would enter a town, find the synagogue, and preach Jesus. Opposition would rise, and they would give him the thirty-nine lashes and drive him out. He would move on to the next town — and go straight to the synagogue. The same thing would happen. Five times. His love for his Jewish brothers was so great that he would walk back into the very place that had beaten him, knowing full well what awaited him.

And if there were no Jews to beat him, there were always Romans.

| *²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods.*

That is a Gentile, Roman punishment. Then he adds: *Once I was stoned.* This happened at Lystra, recorded in Acts 14:19, where his attackers left him for dead. It occurred during his first missionary journey, and Lystra was on the road toward Tarsus — his hometown. Paul must have felt the pull to simply go home. He didn’t. He got up and continued.

| *Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea.*

The one shipwreck recorded in Acts had not yet happened at the time Paul wrote this letter — he had more ahead of him still. It appears that travel by sea was not exactly safe.

The five synagogue floggings, the three Roman beatings, the stoning, and the three shipwrecks come to twelve near-death occasions. To those enchanted by the prosperity gospel of the super-apostles, these are not résumé builders — they are the things you hide. But to Paul, they are proof positive that he was a servant of Christ. They revealed that Christ was sustaining him, encouraging him, present with him, and that the joy of the Lord was his strength.

The Daily Weight

From dramatic near-death events, Paul now turns to what ordinary ministry had looked like for him day in and day out.

²⁶ 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; ²⁷ in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.

This is what everyday ministry looked like for Paul. He lived in constant danger — and notice that among those dangers he names false brothers. That breaks my heart. It is possible that Paul's deepest wounds came not from those outside the church, but from those who claimed to belong to Christ.

Caesar Augustus boasted of temples built and armies conquered and the vast numbers of people he ruled. Paul's boast reads more like a medical chart. But even now he is not finished, because he has saved his heaviest burden for last.

²⁸ And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.

Paul has just cataloged twelve near-death experiences. He has described the relentless daily dangers of his missionary life. And then he says — apart from all of that — there is *this*: the daily pressure, the daily pressing weight of the needs and concerns and worries of the churches. Every morning he woke up carrying Corinth, and the other churches, on his heart.

When you read Paul's letters with that verse in mind, you begin to feel it. To the Galatians: "*I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you!*" (Galatians 4:19). To the Ephesians, he bows his knees before the Father, praying that Christ would dwell in their hearts through faith, that they would be rooted and grounded in love, filled with all the fullness of God (Ephesians 3:14–21). To the Philippians, he prays that their love would abound more and more, that they would have knowledge and discernment, and be filled with the fruit of righteousness (Philippians 1:3–11). To the Thessalonians: "*When I could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your faith*" (1 Thessalonians 3:5).

Every day he carried the church. And it is this daily weight of loving people — this burden the world reads as weakness — that is actually the heart of Paul's boast. He makes it explicit in the next two verses:

*²⁹ Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?
³⁰ If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.*

A Basket in the Night

To illustrate what he means, Paul closes with one final image.

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

There is so much Paul could have chosen here. Miraculous healings. Prison doors flung open. Blinding Elymas the Magician. Casting out the spirit from the slave girl. He picks the moment he had to be lowered out of a window in a basket in the middle of the night to escape his enemies. This is Paul saying: look at what my ministry actually looks like. It is not a parade. It is me hiding in a basket.

“If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.”

Why Weakness? Four Answers

Why does Paul boast in his weakness? Let me offer four answers.

Paul’s weakness reveals the power of God. Boasting in weakness is how Paul gets himself out of God’s way. We tend to step in front of God when we feel we need to be at the center of what he is doing, when we act as though he cannot do it without us, or when we want to make sure we receive the credit. Boasting in weakness removes that obstacle. When I become less, he becomes more.

Paul’s weakness reveals that God’s grace is enough. This is something Paul will make explicit in the very next chapter: *“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me”* (2 Corinthians 12:9). People boast because they need something — recognition, honor, to be noticed, some benefit the boasting will bring them. But Paul, because of the grace of God poured out for him, says: I already have what I need. It is more than enough, overflowing in fact.

Paul’s weakness reveals his love for the church. This is a major argument running through our entire passage. He is telling the Corinthians: the false apostles do not love you, which is precisely why they consume you. I love you, which is why I am suffering. They tell you that my suffering and weakness are proof of failure. Actually, they are proof of my love.

Paul's weakness reveals the supreme worth of knowing Jesus. This is best seen by returning to the Philippians passage. After listing all his credentials — Hebrew of Hebrews, Pharisee, blameless under the law — Paul writes: “*But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ*” (Philippians 3:7). Compared to knowing Christ, all of those accomplishments are worthless. Knowing Jesus is so great, so life-changing, so beautiful and joyful and astonishing, that it makes everything else in this world taste like stale bread. My weakness reveals the worth of knowing Jesus.

What Does This Mean for Us?

What do you boast in? I want to make this personal before we close.

First, let me be clear about what boasting in weakness does not mean. It does not mean seeking out suffering, pursuing failure, refusing to grow, neglecting responsibility, excusing laziness, or living a passive faith. Paul is not romanticizing failure. He did not pursue beatings or shipwrecks. Paul pursued Christ faithfully, and weakness came with faithful obedience. When weakness came, he did not resent it or conceal it — he offered it to God as the very place where Christ's power would be displayed.

The false apostles wanted the Corinthians to look at them and say, “How great they are.” Paul wanted the Corinthians to look at him and say, “How great Christ must be.” That is the difference. Any boasting designed to get people to look at you is not boasting in weakness.

So what does it actually look like for us?

We boast in weakness when we stop building our identities on our accomplishments and instead build them on what Christ has accomplished for us. Our worth is not found in what we achieve, but in what Christ has already achieved through his life, death, and resurrection. Because of that, we no longer have to prove ourselves — we can simply rest in the grace of God.

We boast in weakness when we choose faithfulness over impressiveness. Faithfulness is hard precisely because it is often taken for granted, frequently unseen, and rarely celebrated. Chasing the spotlight may get a person noticed and applauded, but as I am sure you know, spotlights and applause are always momentary — and they carry little meaning. Faithfulness is the power of God at work through you. Be faithful with what God has given you.

We boast in weakness when we stop hiding our dependence on God. Paul was not embarrassed to say, “I am weak.” “I am struggling.” “I need help.” The Christian life is not about pretending we have it all together; it is about knowing the One who does. And so we are free to say, “I

don't know." "I need prayer." "I have sinned." "I cannot do this without Christ." Weakness is the place where grace is experienced.

We boast in weakness when we love well. Like Paul, when we love well, it is evidence of Christ at work in us. Love makes us weak because it creates vulnerability, opens the heart to disappointment and pain, and invites us to share the burdens of others. But that is exactly what Jesus did.

Two Résumés

When Caesar Augustus was composing his *Res Gestae* — cataloging the temples he had raised, the wars he had ended, the world he had subdued — Jesus of Nazareth was a young man in an obscure village that no one noticed, working a carpenter's bench, waiting for the hour his Father had appointed.

Augustus wrote: "*I subjected the whole world to the empire of the Roman people.*" Jesus said: "*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.*" (Matthew 28:18)

Caesar brought peace by closing the gates of war — through endless war. Jesus said: "*My peace I give to you — not as the world gives.*" (John 14:27)

Caesar boasted of the wealth he distributed. Jesus gave his life: "*The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.*" (Mark 10:45)

The world looked at Augustus and saw greatness. The world looked at Jesus and saw weakness. But the weakness of God is stronger than the strength of men. To the world, the cross looked like defeat — but it was victory. To the world, the grave looked like the end — but it was the defeat of death itself. And the Savior who appeared powerless became the King who reigns forever.

So Paul says: "*If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.*" Why?

Because when I am weak, I discover that Christ is enough. And the greatest evidence that God is working through me is not how impressive I appear. It is how clearly people can see that I need Jesus.

Amen.