

“Boasting in our Suffering”

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¹Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ²through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. ³And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

⁶For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person — though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. ⁸But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. ⁹Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. ¹⁰For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. ¹¹But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

(Romans 5: 1-11)

"[One who] knows himself a braggart, let him fear this, for it will come to pass that every braggart shall be found an ass." Ironically, these words from Shakespeare’s *All’s Well That Ends Well* are uttered by Parolles, a soldier who is the biggest fake and braggart in the whole play. The play proves that a self-serving braggart may succeed for a season, but in the end their true colors always show.

I have to admit that bragging has always been a real pet peeve of mine. In my opinion, people who “toot their own horns” make very unpleasant music. I’ve always preferred the point of view held by Arnold Palmer, one of the greatest golfers of all time. “As my father taught me,” Palmer once said, “You don’t need to tell anybody how good you are. You show them how good you are... I learned early not to brag about how good I was or what I could do but [to] let my game... show them that I could play well enough.”

That’s why I find it so odd that Paul would spend so much time and energy not only talking about boasting but actually extolling it as a virtue. According to Merriam Webster, to “boast” is “to take excessive pride in oneself.” And, in the world of Christian ethics, pride is not a good thing. It is typically listed first on the list of the Seven Deadly Sins. The classical theologian Thomas Aquinas called pride “the root of all sin,” and C.S. Lewis referred to it as “the Great Sin,” “the utmost evil,” and the “complete anti-God state of mind.” “As long as you are proud,” Lewis wrote, “you cannot know God. A proud man is always looking down on things and people: and, of course, as long as you are looking down, you cannot see something that is above you.”¹ Why in the world would Paul want us “excessive pride” in anything? Why would Paul talk so much about boasting?

What I think is going on here is a rhetorical strategy that Paul uses very effectively. He drops a few bread crumbs to lead us in a certain direction... to draw us in... and then he pivots in a surprising direction. So, when Paul uses the word “boasting,” he knows that we

¹ “Reflections: The Greatest Sin,” <https://www.cslewisinstitute.org/resources/reflections-december>.



will hear “bragging.” Paul knows that when we think of boasting we will think of people who love to talk about themselves and how great they are, because we all know boasting when we hear it. We know bragging when we hear it. And we know that bragging can actually be an effective strategy. It’s hard to get ahead when you are humble. If you claim extraordinary competence, and you do it loud enough and often enough, some people will eventually conclude, “Well, I guess they must be competent.”

But Paul also knew that most people find boasting distasteful. Excessive pride in one’s own self is not generally appealing. On the contrary, it comes across as selfish, over-confident, and boorish. It can also come across as insecure or needy, as if the person is really just fishing for validation. In this way, Paul creates an uneasy feeling in his audience. It leaves us asking the very question we have asked: why is Paul wanting us to boast?

And that is exactly where Paul wants us to be as he reclaims the word as something completely new. Because that is what faith does. It takes something that we thought we understood and it turns it on its head. Jesus was the master at this. Just think about his teaching. Do you want to be great? Then you need to be a sermon? Do you want to grab hold of the real meaning of life? Then you need to lose it – you need to quit holding on so tight and let it go. Faith makes strength look like weakness and proves that weakness can be strength... that what the world calls “wise” is often foolish, and strategies that look like foolishness can be the wisest ways forward.

The first step in flipping this script comes easily when we realize that the Greek word translated here as “boasting” does not necessarily mean “bragging.” *Καυχάομαι* (*kau-cay-omai*) can also mean “to glory in,” to “rejoice in,” or to “exult in.” So yes, it can mean to take pride in something, but not an unhealthy, selfish pride. It is a celebration of something truly good and beneficial. And for Paul, the celebration of something good and beneficial was never a celebration of his own power or self-worth.

The best example of this is found in his letter to the Philippians. Paul knew that, when it came to a great spiritual resume, no one could beat him. “If anyone... has reason to be confident in the flesh,” he said, “if anyone has reason to boast, I have more.” He then listed all the markers of power and influence that would have been valued and honored in his world. Think of all the things we would list today – being from the right family... going to the best schools... being in all the right clubs and making the most money. Paul had plenty to boast about. But then he flipped it all on its head. “But whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him.” All those things that everyone wanted, that people envied... they were like trash to Paul. Mentally and emotionally, he dumped those things in the can and left them at the street. They no longer mattered to him. Once he met Christ, Paul quit boasting about himself. He quit celebrating himself and glorying in himself. From that time on, Paul boasted about very different things.

With the time we have left, I want to mention three of them. The first thing that Paul was willing to boast about was God. “*Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord,*” Paul wrote. “*For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends.*”²

² 2 Corinthians 10:17-18.

Someone who took this to heart was the 20th Century theologian Karl Barth. Above the desk in his study, where he did his reading and writing, Barth hung a photograph of Matthias Grünewald's Isenheim Altarpiece, a masterful artifact of Northern Renaissance art. The panel shown in that photograph shows John the Baptist standing beside the figure of the crucified Christ. In one hand, John holds a book. In other hand is uplifted, pointing a long finger up at Christ on the cross. Above John's head are his famous words from the third chapter of the gospel of John: "I must decrease; he must increase." Every day, Barth wanted to remind himself that his work as a theologian, and his calling as a person of faith, was never to call attention to himself or celebrate himself. It was always to celebrate Christ. "I must decrease; he must increase." My work, Barth said, should never elevate me. My work should be a boast in God.

Paul also loved to boast about other people. Take the Thessalonians for example. Paul wanted so badly to get back to those people he loved, but life and missionary work kept getting in the way. He compared himself to an orphan being separated from them, that they were his true family. In one powerful line from First Thessalonians he wrote this: "*For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? Yes, you are our glory and joy!*"³ Wouldn't you say the happiest people in the world are the people who take pleasure in the success and happiness of others? When someone you love is doing well, when they are thriving and succeeding, when we can take joy in that, is it not greater than the joy we find in our own success? This is what Paul did. He found joy in other people. He exulted in other people and rejoiced at the victories of other people.

And finally, Paul talks about a kind of boasting that is the hardest for us to understand: boasting in suffering. In Ephesians, another letter credited to Paul, the scripture tells us to "*Sing and make music in [our hearts] to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.*"⁴ This is a tough one for us. Not only are we told to give thanks for trials and tribulations, we are encouraged to glory in them, revel in them, somehow celebrate them.

I want to start by saying that I find it difficult to believe that God intends for us to suffer. It is hard for me to believe that God smites us with punishment or sends tragedies our way to teach us some kind of a lesson. I have no proof or special knowledge on this, but it just seems inconsistent with the love and compassion that we see in Christ. So I do not think that Paul is asking us to celebrate suffering as some kind of badge of honor.

But I do believe that Paul asks us to approach suffering in a certain way. Paul wants us to see suffering as an opportunity for hope. And that hope is what Paul wants us to boast in: the hope that there is no hole or pit in this life that is too deep or too dark for God... the assurance that there is no place in this world – no mistake too grave, no hurt too deep – where God is not with us in the midst of it. We may not be able to celebrate suffering, but we can celebrate that hope. Even in deep fear and pain, we can grab hold of it and not let go.

There are two ways we can boast in this hope. First, we can recognize that suffering brings us close to Christ. Christ was a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief. Times of pain are a part of our lives just like they were a part of Christ's life. I cannot tell you how many times people have told me that they have never felt closer to God than in times of great grief or loss. In those times, all the walls are down, which means that we can feel the

³ 1 Thessalonians 1:19-20.

⁴ Ephesians 5:19-20.

presence of God close at hand. Again, it is not the suffering that is celebrated. It is the awareness that God is with us, even in that place. Even in this pain, God is with me.” That is something to glory in.

The other way that suffering gives us hope is that it reminds us that God is never more like God than when God is taking defeat and turning it into victory. That’s what God does. God takes a situation that looks hopeless and brings hope back to life. Just like the cross, once a symbol of condemnation and death, was transformed into a symbol of grace and life. Just like the stone door of the tomb, a prison cold and dark and completely impregnable, was cracked open in the Easter dawn. This is not an occasion for bragging, but it is certainly something we give thanks and exult in.

In all of these ways, Paul reclaims and transforms the act of boasting. It will no longer be a self-centered, self-aggrandizing brag, Paul says. From now on, a Christian boast is a joyful proclamation of God’s power, grace, and love.

And we need this transformation now more than ever. Old-school, selfish boasting is enjoying an unfortunate ascendancy. Pompous celebrations of self are on the rise. But Paul reminds us that there is reason for hope. Braggarts may succeed for a season, but in the end their true colors always show.

As for me, I am sticking with the wisdom of Arnold Palmer’s father. Instead of boasting in ourselves, we will boast for God. Instead of puffing ourselves up, we will boast in other people who make the world a better place. We will even boast in our suffering, because that pain only reminds us that when we are weak we are strong, and God’s hope will never disappoint us. If that can be our boast, then we have done enough, because that kind of living speaks for itself.

Amen and Amen.