Until recently, it was pretty much socially unacceptable to boast. If a public figure were to boast about their achievements, or the money they make, or the crowds they draw, it was considered crass. And in large part that's because of the influence of Christianity on our culture, because things were very different before it. And in ancient Greece it was considered totally normal to boast. And as Paul's drawing this letter to a close, that's the situation he's confronted with in Corinth. New leaders have arrived there who have no hesitation telling everyone just how great they are.

But the way Paul tackles it doesn't just undermine their boasting, it answers why we feel the need to boast in the first place.

The What and Why of Boasting

Look at v18: 'Since many boast according to the flesh, I too will boast.' And Paul's talking about these new, *super* apostles, as he calls them, who were more than happy to tell anyone who would listen just how *super* they really were. But look how Paul describes their boasting - it's 'according to the flesh'. And that word *flesh* can mean your literal, physical body. Or it can mean life lived in independence of God - as if this life is all there is, and we're the captains of our own destinies.

And these leaders were boasting about themselves as if that was true. They're taking all the areas they were strong in, their oratorical skills, their spiritual experiences, their intellectual sophistication, and bragging about them - as if this was what life was *really* about. And the fact they're bragging tells you, they think *they* deserve the glory. That their strengths, their success, is down to them. They're boasting according to the flesh.

Now think how we can do that today. Firstly, of course, today people literally boast in the flesh, in the body. And whether by the pictures we post, or the clothes we wear, or don't wear, people can draw attention to their body. Hey, look at me.

But we can also boast the way these guys did. I mean, think of the things that get our attention, that we notice in others, or like other people to notice in us. Like our successes and that next step up the ladder. Or our skill in a certain area. Or the nice things others say about us and how highly we're thought of. And we may not verbalise it, like they did, but still we think it.

And we boast in the flesh when we think these are down to us. We congratulate ourselves, and invite others to do the same, as if we were their author.

And the question is: why do we do it? Commenting on this passage, George Guthrie, Professor of New Testament at Regent College says, 'because we want to be the best and do the best.' We want to get up that ladder of achievement or other people's opinion. Because we want to be told, hey, you're good. You pass. Which means, we're after a verdict. So we put stuff out there to get that verdict.

One of my daughters was recently talking to a new friend about running. And he said to her, 'You have to have a 'why?' to run. You have to have a 'why?' to get up early and get out there. And for me,' he said, 'why do I run? To stay fit. And why do I want to stay fit? So I can look good. And why do I want to look good? So I can *feel good* about myself.'

Do you see why he needs to run? And why someone like him might talk about how much he runs, or how fit he is? So he can feel good about himself. He's after a verdict. But he's also after an identity: a 'him' that he likes. So he can look in the mirror and feel ok about himself.

And when any of us draw attention to ourselves, or something good we've done, we're after the same. So we can say to ourselves, or hear someone else say, you're good.

But there's another reason people boast, and Paul highlights it here: v20, '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.' And these new leaders in Corinth were clearly using the church to advance themselves. But why might someone do that? When they're proud and think they *really* are better than others.

And whether it's the person in the pew, or a preacher, or a politician, people can boast, and tell others how good they are in a certain area, to gain the influence, or the position, they think they're entitled to.

Now, hopefully, you and I are not that crass. But think how we can do this subtly. We might drop something into a conversation that makes it clear, 'hey I'm pretty knowledgeable in this area'. And we might do it to get a stroke. But we can also do it do it to get a seat at the table. And we push ourselves up to get leverage over others.

And Paul sees that happening in Corinth and he's determined to wean the people off these leaders. But to do it, he's going to turn boasting on its head.

The Weakness of Boasting

Look at v16-17: 'Let no one think me foolish. But even if you do, accept me as a fool, so that I too may boast a little. What I am saying with this boastful confidence, I say *not as the Lord would* but as a fool.'

So Paul's going to fight fire with fire, but as he does, he's making it clear: this isn't the Lord's way, this is the sort of thing fools do.

In fact, he's going to show himself the direct opposite of everything your average Corinthian would have bragged about, if they could. The opposite of everything they would have considered sophisticated, or clever, or what a leader should be. He's going to boast in weakness.

Except, that's not how he starts. Verses 21-22: 'But whatever anyone else dares to boast of - I am speaking as a fool - I also dare to boast of that. Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they offspring of Abraham. So am I.' So in terms of Jewish heritage, in terms of salvation history, I am the equal to these guys.

But then he says, no! In fact, I'm more than their equal, I'm better than them. Verse 23, 'Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one'.

And this is where you'd expect him to really start setting out his stellar spiritual CV. The degrees he's been awarded, the churches he's planted, the books he's published. But he does the opposite - he says he's so much better than them *in all the areas they would have despised*. Verse 23 again, 'Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one - I am talking like a madman - with far greater labours, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death.'

And these are things that in their elitist, materialistic, image and prestige conscious culture they would have considered the opposite of power leadership or social success. He has to work hard, no networking at the thermal baths for him. He gets thrown in prison, no smart

dinner parties for Paul. He's repeatedly beaten, no designer clothes on his back - just scars. By the standards of Corinth this is a man who's failed.

And then he says, he's endured far more dangers in missionary service than anyone. Including, v24, 'Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one.' And those 39 lashes were the punishment given by synagogue officials to punish heretics. And yet, when ever Paul visited a town, where did he always go first to preach the gospel? To the synagogue. Despite carrying the scars of hard-learnt experience, Paul keeps going back to synagogues with the good news. And you can imagine the smart set in Corinth thinking, 'tut, tut, tut. You'd think he would've leant, that's not very wise.' And Paul is saying, precisely!

And he's faced risks from crossing mountains and rivers and seas. He's faced dangers from bandits and respectable citizens. And in v27 he gives a summary: 'In toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.' And he's not saying all this so they think, 'what a hero, what a man of action!' He's saying this because they would have considered this the opposite of having made it in life.

A couple of Sundays back Su and I went to a new church plant in the UK and it was great. Except, we walked in to the school hall where they were meeting and, because of COVID regulations, all their doors and windows were open and it was freezing. And we hadn't been there more than two minutes before I started complaining.

Why? Because I clearly think I deserve better than to be cold. Because like these Corinthians I think comfort is what I deserve. And Paul is saying, sure, and now take a look at my life - it's the opposite of what you think you deserve, it's the opposite of everything you consider a success. You want to talk about your strengths, well let me tell you all those things that expose my weakness.

You see, both in Corinth, and up until today, we tend to think of leadership in terms of charismatic personality and dynamism, don't we? Of impressive gifting and authority. Of success and results. And Paul is saying, no - true Christian leadership is demonstrated in the weakness of life-laying down service.

Now, if a leadership guru were writing his latest best seller on how to release your inner Steve Jobs, he'd almost certainly include some case studies, wouldn't he? Some auto-biographical or 'examples of successful others' stories to show you how to do it. And that's what Paul does next. He relates three events, the kind of events that would make it into the guru's book. Or not.

And the first is taken right from the beginning of his missionary career. Verse 32, 'At Damascus, the governor under King Aretas was guarding the city of Damascus in order to seize me, but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall and escaped his hands.'

Now, you know about Founder's Myths - about the stories that get told of how a company or organisation began. And how the person who started it all pulled it off, against all the odds. Like Jobs and Wozniak and Apple in the garage.

Well, this is Paul's Founder's Story. But if you look at it, it's the exact opposite of what those myths are trying to achieve. Because this is the opposite of glory. You see, when the Roman army was besieging a city and the time came to try and take it, and the siege ladders went up against the walls, and arrows and rocks and boiling oil were raining down, there was one

highly coveted award for the first solider who was brave enough, valiant enough to get up those ladders and be the first over the wall. It was the *corona muralis*. The Crown of the Wall.

And Paul is saying, I am the opposite of that glory and valour. I deserve no crowns. Instead of climbing the wall, and taking the city, I fled.

But then he moves on to the second example - it's a life-defining spiritual experience. Chapter 12v2, 'I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven - whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. And I know that this man was caught up into paradise… and he heard things that cannot be told.'

So, back in Corinth these other leaders were boasting about their spiritual experiences - so Paul does too. Except, he doesn't. He talks about it in the third person. Now, when I do that at home, and say stuff like 'well, dad thinks this, or dad did that, or if you asked Dad, he'd say…' it drives my girls mad. So I keep doing it. Paul does it for a different reason. These other guys are quite happy to talk about themselves, so Paul deliberately distances himself from it. They'll tell you all about their visions, so Paul chooses one he's not even allowed to talk about! Plus, it was 14 years ago, whereas they've probably had 17 in the last week alone!

So why talk about it at all? Because it sets up his third and final example - the peak of his boasting. And it's the thing that brought him the lowest. Verse 7, 'So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.'

And the question is, what was the thorn? And the answer is… we don't know. Was it something psychological, like depression? Was it something physical - like some illness or disability? Something with his eyes, because he talks about those elsewhere, or a stutter - because he talks about not being eloquent. Or was it one or more real, human opponent? Because in the Old Testament, God describes those who oppress the people of Israel as thorns in their sides.

Well, Paul doesn't tell us. What he does tell us is that it was *given to him*. That even though it was a messenger of Satan, probably because it kept on telling him how weak and rubbish he is, and 'you'll never amount to anything', it was a gift. Given to him for his good, to keep him, he says twice, 'from becoming conceited'. To stop him falling for the temptation of every leader - to think you're better than the rest and be consumed with self-importance.

And maybe that's why Paul doesn't tell us what it was. Because if it was his eyes, we might say, 'well mine are fine, 20/20 vision - self-importance not a problem.' And if it was depression we might say, 'emotionally rock solid'. And if it was persecutors we might say, 'not a problem, everyone likes me'. It's the fact that it could be any number of things that tells us, whatever reminds us of our frailty, whatever tells us, 'you can't do life on your own', is God's gift to you, because like Paul it brings us down to earth.

And Paul says, v8, 'Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this that it should leave me.'

And God's response was? No.

Now maybe you know what that feels like. Maybe you've prayed repeatedly for God to change your situation. Or for an answer. And there's no change and no answer.

But if you look, Paul didn't just receive a 'no'. Verse 9, 'But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."' In other words, you don't need the thorn

removed Paul, you just need my grace to deal with it. So look to me and I will give you all the perseverance, all the endurance, all the ability to cope you need. And your weakness will become the ground out of which my power in your life can grow.

You see, it's not by thinking 'I've got it all together' or 'I've got *to get it* all together' that God's power works in and through us. It's as we realise we need him. That we're weak without him. And boasting displays either our insecurity or our pride. Either that need to to be told we're attractive, or successful, or clever, because underneath we don't feel it. Or the pride that thinks we really are a cut above the rest. And boasting can never humble your pride, obviously, but neither can it - or the verdict of others' that it seeks - answer the insecurity that drives it. Only the power of Christ can.

The End of all Boasting

Look at v9, where Paul says, 'Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.'

And Paul discovered that it was in realising his emptiness that he could experience Christ's fullness. It was in acknowledging his weakness that he could experience Christ's power. But it's also why he says in Galatians, 'Far be if from me to boast *except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ*' (Gal 6:14).

You see, if Paul knew what it was to have *his* request about this thorn denied three times, so did Jesus. As he prayed three times in the Garden, 'Father, if it's your will, take this cup from me.' But he too was denied. And it's that seeming weakness of Jesus that can give you strength in your unanswered prayers. Because we can think 'Why doesn't he take this thorn, this cup, from me? Why isn't he here when I need him?' But when we needed him most, Jesus took the cup, and he was denied for us.

And here, Paul receives a thorn, but at the cross Christ was crowned with them. Not the crown of military glory, the *corona muralis*, but the crown of the king taking all our thorns, all our suffering and sin, and giving his life for us, as he was pierced for our transgressions.

And it's in that supreme weakness of the cross that he becomes the ultimate saviour and his power is displayed. Because it's there in the seeming abject failure of the cross, that he wins the greatest of all victories and sin is conquered and death is defeated and our forgiveness is won.

And that's why Paul will boast in the cross of Christ, because it shows us how needy and sinful we really are, which humbles the pride that thinks we have something to boast about.

But is also answers our deep insecurities and that need to be told we're ok. Because the cross tells you, this is how much you are loved. The Son of God died for you. And all your failures and all your not-being-good-enough, has been taken away. And now your Heavenly Father, the judge of all the earth, the only opinion that really counts, looks at you and says, I love you, I approve of you, you are ok. And when you have his verdict, it gives you a deep inner confidence.

And it'll answer your need for an identity, because now you can look in the mirror and see someone you feel good about: a child loved by God. Because in Christ's beatings, you're healed. In his brokenness you're made whole. In his dying you can find life.

But you'll never find any of those all the time you think you're the ultimate. But when you realise Jesus is, his grace comes flooding in to meet you in your weakness. It's why Paul says, v10: 'For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.'

Now, how can you be content when people insult you?? Or when life is seriously hard? Or everything is going wrong? How can you know that kind of emotional stability and poise? Only when your contentment, your sense that you're ok, is built on something more solid than your latest success or others' opinion of you, the kind of stuff we typically boast in.

But when it's built on Christ's death and resurrection you can be content, whatever others are saying or however life is going, because you know he has already won your verdict for you.

And knowing that will mean you won't need to use people like these other leaders were. Instead you'll serve them like Paul did. It's why he says, '*For the sake of Christ*, then, I am content…' He's not in this for himself, but for Christ. And to see his justice, and his mercy, and his kingdom expand. 'For when I am weak', Paul says, 'then I am strong.'