

INTRODUCTION

We all want our kids to grow up and be successful. I read a true story about a physician who was driving her four-year-old daughter to day care. The doctor’s stethoscope was on the seat and her daughter picked it up and began to play with it. The doctor thought, “How wonderful! My daughter wants to follow in my footsteps and become a doctor.” She said, “Honey, do you know what to do with that?” Her daughter said, “Sure!” Then her daughter spoke into the stethoscope and said, “Welcome to McDonald’s, may I take your order?”

Paul considered himself to be the proud papa of the Christians in Corinth and he wanted them to follow in his footsteps. He had given birth to the church and loved them, but he was upset because false prophets had infiltrated the church. So he had to write a very strong letter to get their attention. In these words we discover Paul was a true basket case.

Have you ever heard anyone called a “basket case?” It’s not a compliment. We usually think of a basket case as someone who is crazy enough to be committed to an insane asylum. I did a little research and discovered the phrase originated in WWI. Some soldiers were so gravely wounded in battle that military surgeons judged them to be beyond medical repair, so they were literally carried off the battlefield in baskets. They were called basket cases. Since that time, the term “basket case” has come to refer to anyone who is so emotionally or mentally incapacitated they seem to be beyond any hope of repair.

When I call Paul a basket case, I’m speaking both figuratively and literally. Figuratively speaking, Paul was carrying around a heavy load of emotional baggage. But he was a basket case literally, because there was a time when he was facing arrest and possible execution and he had to escape by being lowered in a basket over the wall of the city! That’s a REAL basket case!

We learn a great deal about Paul’s life in these verses, so let’s read the true confessions from a basket case in 2 Corinthians 11:23-33.

“Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn? If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, who is to be praised forever, knows that I am not lying. In Damascus the governor under King Aretas had the city of the Damascenes guarded in order to arrest me. But I was lowered in a basket from a window in the wall and slipped through his hands.”

Paul wasn't the first basket case in the Bible; Moses was a basket case, too. As a baby, Moses was placed into a basket and set adrift on the Nile River. The Bible is full of basket cases, so if you sometimes feel like a basket case, then welcome to the party! I hope to convince you in this message that sometimes life gets so tough, the only thing you can do is to climb into God's basket and let someone help you. Let's learn three important life lessons every basket case needs to know.

1. WHEN YOU SERVE GOD, DON'T BE SURPRISED WHEN YOU SUFFER

Let's rewind the tape to Paul's conversion. He had just watched with approval in Jerusalem while an angry mob had stoned Stephen to death. With a new infusion of zeal, Paul was on his way to Damascus to have other Christians arrested and executed. After all, this story about Jesus was heresy! But on the road to Damascus, Paul was blinded and has his eyes opened in the same moment. Jesus appeared to him and said, "Saul, Saul, why are you trying to hurt me?" Paul asked, "Who are you?" Jesus said, "I am Jesus, the One you've been fighting. Now get up and go into the city and I'll tell you what to do next."

Paul stumbled into the city, and God called a man named Ananias to go to him and restore his sight. From the beginning, Jesus made it clear Paul would suffer. Jesus said to Ananias regarding Paul, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument ... I will show him how much he must suffer for my name." (Acts 9:15-16)

Suffering was part of Paul's original marching orders. In spite of that, there are still some misguided Christians who think when you become a Christian; it's the end of all your troubles. It is the end—the FRONT end! The Christian life isn't a playground, it's a battleground. The health/wealth/and prosperity false prophets promise gullible people that the Christian life is a bed of roses. Paul didn't know much about the bed of roses, but he sure knew a lot about the thorns. Paul identified two different sources of suffering we endure.

(1) External pressure from attacks

Back in the early days of silent movies there was a popular serial called "The Perils of Pauline." It was the original cliffhanger featuring a damsel in distress, a despicable villain, and a handsome hero. This section describing his adventurous sufferings could be called "The Perils of Paul."

He mentioned he had been whipped by the Jews on five different occasions. The Talmud stipulated a guilty person could be publicly thrashed but the punishment was restricted to 40 lashes. If more than 40 lashes were inflicted, then the one doing the lashing would have to be beaten, so in order to keep from transgressing the law, they stopped counting at 39 just in case they made a mistake. This wasn't a mild punishment. The Talmud also stipulated if a person died from the beating, the one holding the whip wasn't guilty, so apparently this punishment could be severe enough to be fatal. And Paul endured it five times!

In addition to this punishment from the Jews, Paul had been beaten by the Romans on three

different occasions. A stiff rod was used for this punishment, and there was no limit to the amount of lashes. There are accounts of prisoners dying from a Roman scourging. Imagine how Paul’s back must have looked. Every time he took off his robe you could see the angry scars crisscrossing his flesh. In Galatians 6:17 Paul wrote, “I bear on my body the marks of [serving] Jesus.” The word is *stigmata*. Paul had become stigmatized for the sake of Jesus.

Paul also mentioned he had been stoned, and he wasn’t talking about smoking pot. Stoning was a form of Jewish capital punishment. It was always a death sentence. The Jewish Mishnah stipulated a person being stoned was to be thrown from a ledge at least twice the height of the person. Then a large stone was to be dropped on them. If they didn’t die from the fall or the large stone, then witnesses were to pick up rocks and finish the job. In Acts 14 we read there was an angry mob fueled by Jewish radicals who hated Paul. They stoned Paul and dragged his body outside the city and left him to die. Remember, they stoned a victim until he was obviously dead. But the disciples gathered around Paul and he got up and went back into the city. We won’t know until we get to ask him, but some scholars believe Paul was killed and God raised him to keep preaching. It wouldn’t have been the first or the last time God raised the dead!

In addition, Paul was shipwrecked on three different occasions. And this was written before the events recorded in Acts 27 happened, when Paul was on a little ship battered by a fierce hurricane for two solid weeks before the ship crashed on the rocks. He mentions he was in the lost at sea treading water for a night and day, which would be at least 36 hours. And, yes, there are 45 different species of sharks in the Mediterranean—even man-eating white sharks up to 15 feet in length have been sighted off the coast of Italy!

He goes on to mention he was constantly under attack from a variety of bad dudes. Paul was so hated by a group of zealous Jews that in Acts 23 we read forty men made a vow not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul! In addition to personal attacks, he mentioned he was often hungry, cold, and naked. But not only did Paul suffer from external pressure, there was also

(2) Internal pressure from anxiety

In verse 28 Paul wrote, “Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.” The word “pressure” is the word *merimnao*, which is same word translated “worry” in Matthew 6:25 when Jesus said “Do not worry about what you will eat or drink.” It literally means to “have a divided mind.” Worry is a sin, and Paul is confessing here that he worries about the churches’ health. I can relate to that. I have been pastor here at Green Acres for almost 18 years, and I have shared a lot of joys, sorrows, and tears with many of you. Because I care so much for this church, I eat, drink, and sleep Green Acres Baptist Church. I must confess that sometimes I vacillate between worry and faith. I must constantly keep reminding myself that this is God’s church, and He’s in charge. But this is only one church. Imagine, Paul was concerned with all the churches he had started on his missionary journeys. That’s pressure!

Are you suffering from some kind of internal anxiety or pressure? Do you feel like a coke bottle that’s been shaken up, and you’re afraid you’re going to blow your top sometime? You can handle it. Just remember, it is only during times of pressure that we discover what’s on the inside of us!

Based upon all this external and internal pressure, I don't think you'll ever Paul spouting off about how being a Christian is all about being happy, wealthy, and healthy all the time! Paul probably could have commented like my friend Ron Dunn who's in heaven now. Ron walked with the Lord long enough to be brutally honest with Him. He said, “Lord, I'm surprised that you have as many friends as You do, considering how you treat the ones you have!” So don't be surprised when (not IF) you suffer! The next lesson we can learn from this basket case is

2. WHEN YOU FAIL, USE IT AS A TURNING POINT IN YOUR LIFE

Of all the tough experiences Paul could have used to end this chapter, he looked back 20 years and mentioned the time when he was lowered in a basket to escape being arrested. His basket escape from Damascus took place a short time after he met the Lord, and it represented his first major crisis after that life-changing encounter.

Ray Stedman wrote about this event: “Paul was saying, ‘As I look back on my past life, one incident comes to mind more than anything else. It was a time when I was a complete failure at what I was trying to do. That is what I boast in, because that is when I began to learn the most important lesson of my life.’”

Piecing together the story from Acts 9, we learn after Paul was converted he stayed in Damascus and started preaching in the synagogues that Jesus was the Messiah. He was an overnight success—talk about a celebrity conversion! A few days earlier, he was the greatest enemy of Christians, and suddenly he became their most vocal supporter.

To compare, could you imagine how shocked we would be if Iran's President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, suddenly claimed he had encountered Jesus at the U.N. and he had become a follower of Jesus? And then he started preaching in churches throughout the U.S. That would make headlines. Although this was long before newspapers, Paul made headlines in Damascus. Of course, there would be plenty of skeptics over Ahmadinejad's conversion—and there were many skeptics about Paul's conversion as well.

There's a key verse in Acts 9 to set the stage for the midnight basket escape. The Bible says, “Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ.” (Acts 9:22) It's easy to read between the lines and see that Paul probably thought he was going to stay in Damascus and have a long, fruitful ministry there preaching about Jesus. He was on the road to ministerial success! Not. A group of Jews were so incensed by his preaching they hatched a plot to murder him. They enlisted the aid of the Roman governor under King Aretas, to place soldiers at all the exits of the city to arrest Paul the moment he tried to leave the city. Suddenly this celebrity preacher found himself as the #1 name on the FBI's most-wanted list. Like many ancient cities, Damascus was surrounded by a city wall protecting the residents from attack, but it also made the city like a prison for a wanted man like Paul.

So, instead of enjoying success as a celebrity preacher, Paul found himself crouching in a large basket. And under the cover of darkness, he was lowered from a window over the city wall. Then, like a failure, he had to slink away into the night.

This was Paul's first encounter with failure, but it wasn't his last. He learned failure wasn't final. He learned it's okay to fail, as long as you "fail forward." He got up and kept on following Jesus, and the Lord used Him in a mighty way.

Do you have an episode of failure in your past you can look back to and say, "I blew it there. I was a flop, a failure. But I got back up and God has blessed me since?" If you've had a midnight basket escape of your own, it equips you to deal with the next time you fail. That's a great promise of God from the Bible—we will fail, but failure doesn't have to define us. God can still use failures like Paul and like us. The Bible says, "If the Lord delights in a man's way, he makes his steps firm; though he stumble, he will not fall, for the Lord upholds him with his hand." (Psalm 37:23-24)

Too many people use failure as a stopping point, but God wants you to use failure as a turning point. The great inventor, Thomas Edison, searched to find a filament for an affordable incandescent light. He failed repeatedly, but after he failed he didn't stop and say, "It's impossible." He kept careful notes about each failure and kept on trying. He estimated it took him 10,000 failures before he got it right. But each failure simply became a turning point to turn him toward the ultimate solution. Edison later said, "The greatest failure of life is not realizing how close to success you were when you gave up." Are you trying to recover from some failure in your life? God doesn't want it to be a stopping point. Use it as a turning point and get up and keep following Jesus. The final lesson we can learn from a certified basket case is:

3. WHEN YOU'RE SURROUNDED BY ADVERSITY, LET GOD CARRY YOU

In Damascus, Paul suddenly discovered he was surrounded by Jewish enemies and Roman soldiers, and he was trapped. There was nothing he could do, so he had to surrender to a plan where he climbed into a basket and was lowered over a wall. His friends were holding the ropes, but Paul understood God was delivering him. Have you learned whenever you feel trapped and surrounded by adversity God has promised to rescue you? The Bible says, "The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms." (Deuteronomy 33:27) God says, "I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you." (Isaiah 46:4)

If you've ever taken the course "Experiencing God" by Henry Blackaby, you know that we all have experiences in our past that become spiritual markers for us. A spiritual marker is some event or experience in your past where God stepped in to rescue you. It's good to identify these markers, and remember them, because they serve as practical reminders to reassure you the next time you find yourself in need of a rescue. Paul looked back at his midnight basket escape and it gave him the strength to face the greater trials that were ahead.

Where are you right now? What kind of personal application do you need from this story? Ask yourself two questions.

(1) Do I need to humble myself and climb into God's basket?

We don't know what that basket looked like or where it came from, but we can say with

certainty that it was God's basket. God provided it as a way to rescue Paul. There's something about climbing into a basket that speaks of surrendering control. The only thing Paul could do was to climb into the basket and then hang on to keep from falling out. Other than that, he was totally helpless. When you're in a basket hanging by ropes you have surrendered control of your situation to someone else. Sometimes that's the hardest thing to do. We prefer to try to maintain control and insist we can handle the situation.

Are you at a place in your life right now where you are surrounded by adversity? Are you still insisting you can handle it yourself? Why don't you surrender right now and say, "God, I'm climbing into your basket right now. I can't save myself. I need you to help me out of this mess." If you'll climb in and hang on, God will rescue you! Will your problem go away? Not necessarily. God will either give you a way to escape, or He'll give you the strength to endure it. But here's another question for you:

(2) Do I need to step up and hold the ropes for a friend?

Look around. Do you see someone you know who can't escape their circumstances without you holding their rope? We are never given the names of the disciples who held those ropes as Paul was lowered over the wall. They are unknown to us, but they are known to God. And I'm sure Paul never forgot them. If he ever saw one of them again, he said, "Hey, you're the guy who held the rope for me that night I escaped from Damascus. Man, I want to thank you because if it hadn't been for you, I would have been a goner!"

There is a great need in the church today to be a rope holder. You may not be able to travel to China with the gospel, but you can hold a rope by giving your money, or by praying. You may not be able to stand up in front of a large group and teach the Bible, but you can hold the rope for your teacher by greeting people, or by making the coffee for the group. There are plenty of people who need you to hold their rope. Look around start grabbing some ropes!

CONCLUSION

Another member of the "unknown heroes of God" was a man named Allen Gardiner. Gardiner was a captain in the English Royal Navy. After an encounter with the Lord, Gardiner developed a missionary zeal that rivaled that of the Apostle Paul. In 1826 he left the Royal Navy and sailed to South America as the first modern missionary. For the next twenty years, he and other English missionaries sailed around the continent in small boats taking the gospel to the Indians. They were under constant attack from the tribes and in 1850 they sailed to Pincot Island, off the coast of the Patagonia, the southern tip of South America. While there, Gardiner and six other missionaries spent a brutally cold summer waiting for a promised supply ship to arrive. The temperatures plummeted to -20 degrees and they ran out of food and water.

When the supply ship finally arrived, they found all the missionaries had died of starvation and disease. Gardiner's emaciated body was found near his boat. He was wearing several layers of clothes and had wrapped clothes around his feet and hands to keep out the chill. Beside his body lay his personal journal. Reading the words he wrote in those days before he died, we find a level of devotion in the midst of suffering that compares to our text in 2 Corinthians. His last entry

before he died is amazing. He wrote,

“Our dear brother Maidment left the boat on Tuesday at noon to search for food and has not since returned, doubtless he is in the Presence of his Redeemer, whom he served so faithfully. Yet a little while, and through grace I may join that throng to sing the praises of Christ through eternity. I neither hunger, nor thirst, though five days without food. Marvelous loving kindness to me, a sinner. I am overwhelmed with a sense of the goodness of God.”

You may say, “Well, God didn’t rescue Allen Gardiner.” There are different ways the hand of God rescues us from trouble. He passed from starvation to a place where the Lord “prepares a table before me.” Allen Gardiner didn’t quit until God took him home. His journal became a source of inspiration for thousands of Christians. A generation after his death, a ship set sail from England for South America. It was full of young missionaries passionate to share Christ with the people of South America. The ship’s name? The HMS Allen Gardiner.

We’re all cracked pots—and basket cases. So will you follow the Lord, even if you’ve failed? He will carry you through. Will you climb into His basket today? Or will you pick up the ropes for someone else?

OUTLINE

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Jesus said to Ananias regarding Paul, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument ... I will show him how much he must suffer for my name." *Acts 9:15-16*

- (1) External pressure from attacks
- (2) Internal pressure from anxiety

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3. WHEN YOU'RE SURROUNDED BY ADVERSITY, LET GOD CARRY YOU

"The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms." *Deuteronomy 33:27*
"I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you." *Isaiah 46:4*

PERSONAL APPLICATION

Do I need to:

- (1) Humble myself and climb into God's basket?
- (2) Step up and hold the ropes for a friend?



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To put it in Texas terms, “You’re mighty welcome to use any and all of my ingredients; just make your own chili!”

For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes