

Paul's Foolish Boasting
2 Corinthians 11:23-29
Part Two

So where are we in respect to our study of this great epistle? Paul in **2 Corinthians 10:12-18** had contrasted the improper boasting of his opponents with his own proper boasting. So, what made the boasting of his opponents improper and his boasting proper? The boasting of Paul's opponents was improper because their boasting focused on their credentials, accomplishments and experiences for the purpose of exalting themselves, whereas Paul's boasting focused on the gifts and the ministries that God had given him as an expression of God's grace toward him.

So after Paul had contrasted the improper boasting of his opponents with his own proper boasting, what did he do next?

Paul, surprisingly, in **2 Corinthians 11:1** announced his intention to engage in the same kind of foolish boasting as his opponents.

So why would Paul do such a thing? It was because he believed that this expression of foolish boasting that he intended to engage in, even though very painful for him, was what God wanted him to do in order to protect the Corinthians from the threat of his opponents whom he believed were false apostles and deceitful workers.

But even though Paul had a clear conscience in this matter, he did not want to proceed without, first of all, defending his intention or willingness to engage in such boasting to the Corinthians lest they would somehow misunderstand what he was about to do. And we saw this in **2 Corinthians 11:12-15**.

So after Paul's defense of his intention, or in other words his willingness to engage in foolish boasting, we might have assumed that he would have launched into it. But he didn't, rather he once again hesitated and chose rather to expand on what he had just said in terms of his defense in **2 Corinthians 11:16-21a**.

And it was only after this that he finally followed through on his stated intention and began to boast in the same kind of foolish way as his

opponents. And where did Paul in our text begin to do this? He began to do this in the latter half of **verse 21** and continued to engage in this kind of foolish boasting all the way through **2 Corinthians 12:13**.

So, what is the question that we are presently seeking to answer as we examine this text? What did Paul's foolish boasting focus on in 2 Corinthians 11:21-12:13? And what was the first thing that we noted last week that Paul's foolish boasting initially focused on?

Paul's foolish boasting focused on his heritage (2 Corinthians 11:21-22). So where did we in last week's message find Paul doing this? We found Paul doing this in the latter half of **verse 21 & verse 22**.

So now let me read those verses for you. And see if this is not so. **“But in whatever respect anyone else is bold—I speak in foolishness—I am just as bold myself. (22) Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they descendants of Abraham? So am I.”** So in these verses do we find Paul foolishly boasting of his heritage? And I believe that the answer would have to be yes!

His opponents had boasted to the Corinthian that ethnically they were Hebrews and Paul countered their boast with his own boast, **“So am I!”**

His opponents had also boasted to the Corinthians, that they were religiously Israelites and Paul countered their boast with his own boast, **“So am I!”**

And then finally his opponents boasted that they were the descendants of Abraham thus tying themselves to the covenantal blessings of the Abrahamic covenant and Paul countered their boast with his own boast, **“So am I!”**

So did Paul counter the foolish boasts of his opponents concerning their heritage with his own foolish boasts concerning his heritage? And what is the answer? Absolutely! Even though it was extremely difficult for him to do so, he, believing that this is what God would have him to do under the circumstances, did it.

So, what else did Paul's foolish boasting focus on? Paul's foolish boasting focused on his sufferings as a servant of Christ (2 Corinthians 11:23-29).

Let me now read for you **2 Corinthians 11:23-29** and see if this is not so. **“Are they servants of Christ?—I speak as if insane—I more so; in far more labors, in far more imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death. (24) Fives times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes. (25) Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. (26) I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren; (27) I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. (28) Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure on me of concern for all the churches. (29) Who is weak without my being weak? Who is led into sin without my intense concern?** So in these verses that we have just read, do we find Paul focusing on his sufferings as a servant of Christ? And what is the answer? The answer would have to be absolutely!

So now let me ask you this question: Would this particular focus of Paul on his sufferings have made any sense to his opponents at all when it came to supporting Paul’s apostolic claim? And what would the answer be? The answer would have to be absolutely not! It would have made no sense to them; for they would have viewed his sufferings as undermining his apostolic claim rather than as supporting his apostolic claim, for they would have believed that any true servant of Christ would not be marked by their suffering but rather by their credentials, great oratorical skills, persuasive powers, extraordinary personal experiences and success in their various endeavors as measured by the world.

But this was not what Paul believed, was it? He believed in something totally different! Paul believed that the mark of a true servant of Christ was the willingness to suffer for those he was sent to reach as a representative of the crucified Christ. This is what Paul believed and this why Paul responded as he did in **2 Corinthians 11:23-29**.

So how did he introduce this passage? He introduced this passage in **verse 23**, and how did he begin that verse? **“Are they servants of Christ?—I speak as if insane—I more so.”**

Paul at the very beginning of **verse 23**, for the sake of argument, appears to have acknowledged that his opponents, based on their own warped thinking, were boasting that they were **“servants of Christ.”** But Paul didn’t simply acknowledge their claim. He went on to comment on this acknowledgement in **verse 23**. And what did he say? He said, **“I speak as if insane.”** So, what did Paul mean by this?

For Paul to put his opponents’ claim before the Corinthians in this way, even though he believed their claim to be false, was so painful for him he said, **“I speak as if insane,”** which also to some degree reflected what he felt about this whole boasting thing. But even though he considered this “boasting thing” and everything associated with this “boasting thing” to be “insanity,” he was still prepared to go forward that is why he went on to say, **“I more so.”**

So, what was Paul going to do in order to drive this point home that he **“more so”** than his opponents was a **“servant of Christ?”**

He is going to focus on his sufferings in great detail. But before he goes in the details of his sufferings he gives a generic summation of the kind of things that he will be talking about at the end of **verse 23**.

And what did he say? **“Are they servants of Christ?—I speak as if insane—I more so; in far more labors, in far more imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death.”** So now having given this generic summation of his sufferings he is now ready to spell out for the Corinthians all that he has suffered on their behalf and on the behalf of others like them in far greater detail. So, what were the various things that Paul would go on to detail in the text that we are presently studying?

Paul detailed for the Corinthians specific sufferings he had experienced in 2 Corinthians 11:24-25.

Let me now read these verses for you and see if this is not so. **“Fives times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes. (25) Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep.”**

“Thirty nine lashes” was a unique Jewish punishment administered in the synagogue. It was extremely painful and humiliating and based on **Deuteronomy 25:1-3** could have been extended to forty lashes but because the executioner of the sentence could be punished if he exceeded the number of lashes that were allowable the law of Moses, the executioners of the sentence typically stopped at thirty-nine. Remarkably not one of these floggings has been recorded for us in the Scriptures. It is only here that we learn of them, and even after this there may have been more of them.

The **“rod”** was the instrument of Roman or Gentile punishment. Paul’s only recorded beating with the rod took place in Philippi and recounted for us in **Acts 16:22-23**. When an individual was beaten with rods they were stripped naked and beaten until the magistrates were satisfied. Paul here in **2 Corinthians 11:23** acknowledged that up to this time of his writing that he had been beaten with rod three times.

In light of these beatings it should not be surprising to us at all that Paul would be able to say what he said in **Galatians 6:17** when he told the Galatians, **“From now on let no one cause trouble for me, for I bear on my body the brand-marks of Jesus.”** So let me ask you a question. Was Paul embarrassed by these scars? No! If anything he was proud of them for they testified to himself and others that he in truth had taken up Christ’s cross and was willing to suffer on behalf of those to whom God had sent him.

Then what did Paul mention? He mentioned his “stoning.” We have a full account of Paul’s stoning at Lystra where his attackers left him, supposing that he was dead, according to **Acts 14:19**. It was only by the grace of God that he survived that stoning. Then what was the next specific suffering that Paul mentioned in **verse 25**?

The next specific suffering he mentioned was **“shipwrecked.”** Maritime disasters were not unusual in the ancient world due to fragile vessels, poor navigation, misleading maps, and the unpredictability of weather. And how many shipwrecks did Paul have? He tells us in this verse that he had three and these three shipwrecks here all occurred before the famous shipwreck on the Island of Malta, which is described in **Acts 27**. So we know based on **2 Corinthians 11:25** and **Acts 27** that Paul was involved in at least four shipwrecks. And one of them was particularly miserable for it resulted in

Paul floating around in the ocean on some kind of debris for a day and night, also according to **2 Corinthians 11:25**.

So, what do we have so far in **2 Corinthians 11:24-25** in terms of specific sufferings? We have five synagogue floggings, three Roman beatings, a stoning and three shipwrecks. This resume of sufferings that Paul endured as a servant of Christ would have served to undermine his apostolic claim in the minds of his opponents, but this was not the case with Paul for he believed that his willingness to suffer in this way only strengthened his apostolic claim since he believed that his willingness to suffer for those to whom he had been sent as a representative of Christ was a mark of a true “servant of Christ.”

So, what else did Paul detail? Paul detailed for the Corinthians specific dangers he had experienced in 2 Corinthians 11:26. Let me now read for you **2 Corinthians 11:26** and see if this is not so. **“I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren.** Clearly he faced a lot of dangers.

Paul was not a tourist! The dangers are all frequent-traveler perils and fall into two categories: places and people. In terms of places: Paul experienced danger wherever he went whether that involved rivers, cities, the wilderness, or the sea. But it was the people rather than places that presented him with the greatest dangers whether that involved robbers, his own countrymen, Gentiles, or **“dangers among false teachers.”**

Now notice how false teachers are positioned at the end of this list and are unpaired with any parallel danger, which gives the impression that Paul was seeking to highlight the danger associated with these particular men both in terms of the pain that they have inflicted him and the threat they are to the Corinthian church. So, what is the next suffering that Paul details as he continues to focus on his sufferings?

Paul detailed for the Corinthians specific volitional sufferings he had experienced in 2 Corinthians 11:27. Let me now read for you **2 Corinthians 11:27** and see if this is not so. **“I have been in labor and hardship,**

through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.”

Obviously Paul had freely chosen to live out a counter-prosperity lifestyle. Paul labored night and day with his own hands to preach the gospel (cf. 1 Thessalonians 2:9). His sleepless nights were a voluntary insomnia because his manual labor and his prayers and his preaching often curtailed his sleep. He suffered hunger and thirst and cold and exposure because of his extreme travels for the sake of the gospel. Paul volitionally chose all of this. So we see that while the false apostles taught a prosperity-drenched gospel replete with large honorariums and the good life, Paul volitionally had chosen to live hand-to-mouth. But there is still more suffering that Paul detailed for the Corinthians.

Paul detailed for the Corinthians his ongoing pastoral heartaches that he was continuing to experience in 2 Corinthians 11:28-29. Let me now read these verses for you and see if this is not so. **“Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure on me of concern for all the churches. (29) Who is weak without my being weak? Who is lead into sin without my intense concern?”**

Of all the suffering that Paul had to endure, the hardest I believe without doubt were his pastoral heartaches. Certainly we saw it being expressed in **2 Corinthians 7** when Paul was so anxious to discover how the Corinthians had responded to the so-called “severe letter,” that he sent Titus on ahead to find out. And then when Titus didn’t rendezvous with him in Troas, Paul went on to Macedonia where he said in **2 Corinthians 7:5** that he, after not finding Titus, said, **“But we were afflicted on every side: conflicts without, fears within.”** We again see this pastoral heartache in **1 Thessalonians 3:5** when he, speaking to the Thessalonians, said to them, **“For this reason, when I could endure it no longer, I also sent to find out about your faith, for fear that the temper might have tempted you, and our labor would be in vain.”**

Paul’s heart rose and fell not so much with his various sufferings that that he endured or the dangers that he faced, but rather it would appear that Paul’s heart rose and fell with his Christian brethren.

This is driven home by his rhetorical questions in **verse 29**, “**Who is weak without me being weak? Who is led into sin without my intent concern?**”

Paul’s becoming weak when his people were weak testifies to his empathy—he felt with his people. There was not an ounce of indifference in Paul’s heart.

The first counterpart to Paul’s empathy was his indignation over the thought of someone falling away from Christ. His people’s failings set Paul’s heart ablaze with pain. This is why Paul got so inflamed about Satan’s servants disguising themselves as servants of righteousness, declaring in **2 Corinthians 11:15** that their end would be according to their deeds.

So did Paul have pastoral heartaches! Absolutely! And in terms of everything that he suffered I believe there is good evidence he believed that his pastoral heartaches exceeded them all.

So did Paul in response to his opponents boast that they were the “servants of God” boast that he was even more so? Absolutely! And how did he support that claim?

He pointed to his sufferings that he suffered on behalf of the Corinthians and others to whom he had been sent as a representative of the crucified Christ.

So, what is the point that we can take from this message? We, like Paul, have also been sent as His representative into this world to make disciples and to baptize and to teach them, and I would hope that we would not shrink back from this task because of some discomfort, pain, loss, or adversity that we might have to suffer. Rather, if that occasion were to arise, we, like Paul, would suffer thus testifying to ourselves, and others, but most importantly the Lord that we are in fact a true servant of Christ.

If we profess to be servants of Christ, may we by the grace of God be willing to suffer in order to serve those to whom we have been sent so that we might through our willingness to suffer prove that we are in fact servants of Christ.