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Paul's Apostolic Credentials

11:21b to 12:4

Paul's apostolic credentials DIG: What was Paul actually "boasting" about in this passage? In what ways did his boasting represent an instruction to his readers on how to guard their minds? What are some of the trials that Paul mentions? How did he suffer? How do you think he was able to preserve in sharing the Gospel in the midst of these crises?

REFLECT: What kind of life situations are the most difficult for you to endure? If critics attacked your character and faith, what "credentials" would you be able to offer to show the genuineness of your faith? Who in your life has made sacrifices so that you might be blessed spiritually? How can you thank that person? Who can you help this week?

Having established that in every way he was not at all inferior to the false apostles, Paul presented his apostolic credentials that actually proved that he was superior to them.

By imploring **the Corinthians** to **bear with him in a little foolishness (11:1)** and, if they must, to receive **him as a fool** so that **he** could **boast as a fool (to see link click Ca - Foolish Boasting)**, **Paul** had established the framework necessary for understanding what **he** was about to do. **He** would **boast as a fool**, but what **he** said would not be **according to the Lord; rather this considered boasting is spoken as a fool would speak (11:17a)**. Therefore, in **11:21b**, no longer able to delay the inevitable, **he** begins **boasting**.²⁶¹

Apart from the biographical insights it provides into the life of **Paul**, this section might seem to have little practical relevance for today. However, such is not the case. The tactics of the Adversary for assaulting the leaders of **God's** people have not changed. And the issue of **Paul's** apostolic authenticity is still fundamental today. **He** is an authoritative source of divine truth through all **his** writings, whatever may be the theme. **And all Scripture is profitable (Second Timothy 3:16)**. This section also gives us insight into how **Paul**, the noblest of believers, handled the extreme adversity **he** faced.



Beginning in **11:23**, **Paul** presented **four apostolic credentials** that set **him** apart from **the false apostles** (see **Af - The Problem of the False Apostles**): **his experience of suffering, his experiences of empathy, his experience in submission, and his experience of the supernatural**. They demonstrate powerfully that **Paul** was a genuine **apostle of Messiah**, and that **his opponents** were not.²⁶² We may infer from **Paul's** defense that **his rivals** took great pride in **their Jewish** heritage, flaunted **their** various accomplishments that emboldened **their** tyranny, and touted **their** supposedly amazing visions and revelations.

Paul began **his** defense with a straightforward statement about **his** pedigree. **Are they Hebrew-speakers? So am I. Are they of the people of Isra'el? So am I. Are they descendants of Avraham? So am I (11:22)**. **Paul** identified **himself** as a **Jew**, as do Messianic **Jews** today. Notice, **he** did not call **himself** "a Christian" (**Acts 11:26**). But **he** did proclaim **himself** as a **servant of Messiah**. Today, Messianic **Jews** do not, in **their** zeal to identify with **their Jewishness**, mute the fact that **they** serve **Yeshua**.²⁶³ Having established that in every way - socially, religiously, culturally, linguistically and covenantally - **he** was not at all inferior to **the false apostles**, **Paul** presented **his apostolic credentials** that actually proved that **he** was superior to **them**.

His experience of suffering (11:23-27): Paul might have defended **himself** by appealing to **his** impressive accomplishments and privileges. **He** could have pointed to **his** training under the famous rabbi Gamaliel, **his** association with the Jerusalem elite (**Acts 22:5**), or **his** obvious zeal for Judaism that resulted in the persecution of the Church (**Acts 8:1-3; First Corinthians 15:9; Galatians 1:13; Philippians 3:6**). Also, **Paul** could have pointed to all **God** had done through **him** after **his** conversion, to the cities **he** had preached in, the converts **he** had made, and the churches **he** had planted. Instead, **he** gave very different credentials that, though unimpressive by the world's standards, marked **him** as a true **apostle**.

His first credential, **his suffering**, seems a little unusual. But **suffering** was exactly what **Yeshua** predicted that **His apostles** would experience (**Matthew 10:16-25, 21:33-39, 22:2-6**). Therefore, **they** could expect **arrests, beatings, betrayals, hatred, persecution, and slander**. The shining light of the Gospel into the kingdom of darkness inevitably generates a hostile reaction. **The false apostles had their letters of recommendation (3:1)**, but **Paul had the scars on his body to prove that he belonged to Yeshua (Galatians 6:17)**. On the other hand, **the false apostles** had a life of ease and comfort. Since **they** were a part of the world, or the kingdom of darkness, Satan did not attack them.

Speaking of **his opponents**, **he** asked: **Are they servants of the Messiah?** But it seems like the more **Paul** thought about it, even to call **them servants of Messiah** was so repulsive to **him** that **he** quickly added the disclaimer: **I feel like I'm talking like a madman when I say that! Servants of Messiah? I'm a better one! I've worked much harder (1 Cor 15:58), been imprisoned in Philippi (Acts 16:23-24), in Jerusalem (Acts 22:24-29, 23:10, 18), in Caesarea (Acts 23:35, 24:27), and Rome (Acts 28:16-31); suffered more beatings, been near death over and over (11:23)**. Knowing that **every day** could be **his** last, **he** wrote: **Brothers, by the right to be proud which the Messiah Yeshua our Lord gives me, I solemnly tell you that I die every day (1 Cor 15:31)**. Almost from the moment of **his** conversion, **Paul's enemies** plotted to **kill him (Acts 9:23 and 29, 14:3-5, 17:4-5, 21:30-32, 23:12-21)**; **mobs** formed to hunt **him** down (**Acts 17:5-9**) and **rulers** sought **his life (11:32-33)**. Yet, **he** never wavered in this commitment or compromised the message that **he** preached.²⁶⁴

Five times I received "forty lashes less one" from the Jews (11:24a). This was a set phrase in Jewish law. For certain offenses, **the Oral Law** (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Ei - The Oral Law**) demands **forty lashes**. The practice was to give thirty-nine, allowing a margin of one error in counting, lest the imposed punishment be unjustly exceeded, which would be far worse than meting out slightly less. Why would **the Jews**, that is, a non-Messianic Jewish court, have ordered him to be **lashed**? Because of the reactions **he** stirred up as **he** proclaimed **the Good News** - that is, on trumped-up charges or for no good reason.²⁶⁵

Three times I was beaten with rods. This was specifically a Roman punishment with which **the Corinthians** were familiar, so that **he** did not need to add, "by the Romans." **Once I was stoned** by a mob of **Jews** and Gentiles (see the commentary on **Acts Bq - Paul's Message in Lystra**). **Three times I was shipwrecked**. We know from **Acts** that **Paul** traveled extensively, and yet the one account of **him** being **shipwrecked (Acts 27)** would have happened after **he** wrote **Second Corinthians**. This is just another reminder of

how little **Acts** tells us of **Paul's** experiences on his journeys! **The apostle** tells us that **he spent a night and day in the open sea (11:25)**, probably clinging to floating debris from one of **the three shipwrecks** mentioned.²⁶⁶

Paul's movements across the Roman Empire exposed **him** to endless dangers and hardships. **He** next lists **dangers** from having to ford **rivers**, presumably swollen by floods, to danger from **bandits**. **In my many travels I have been exposed to danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles**, most notably at **Philippi** (see the commentary on **Acts Bz - Paul and Silas in Prison**) and **Ephesus** (see **Acts Ch - Idol-Makers Start a Riot in Ephesus**); **danger in the city, danger in the desert, danger at sea, danger from false brothers**. Then **Paul** referred to the physical deprivation **he suffered** from **his** devotion to **his** calling. **I have toiled and endured hardship, often not had enough sleep, been hungry and thirsty, frequently gone without food, been cold and naked (11:26-27)**.²⁶⁷ **Paul's suffering** set **him** apart from **the** money-hungry, comfort-seeking **false apostles**, and marked **him** as a true **apostle of Yeshua Messiah**.

*Dear Heavenly **Father**, Praise **You** that **You** are very wise and totally loving. **You** will turn things right-side-up in heaven when **You** give out rewards. Those who boast about their "great" achievements that they did with no love for **You**, will receive nothing from **You**. Not only will they miss out on getting a reward, they will not even be able to live with you in your holy heaven if they did not love you. **Not everyone who says to Me, "Lord, Lord!" will enter the kingdom of Heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me on that day, "Lord, Lord, didn't we prophesy in Your name, and drive out demons in Your name, and perform many miracles in Your name?" Then I will declare to them, "I never knew you. Get away from Me, you workers of lawlessness" (Matthew 7:21-23)!** Loving you and living for **You** is the most important thing we do! Those who are persecuted because of **Your** name will receive a great eternal reward. **For I consider the sufferings of this present time not worthy to be compared with the coming glory to be revealed to us (Romans 8:18)**. How much better is an eternal reward from **You** than any fleeting earthly success. Our momentary problems and trials will soon be over. Then will come the eternal joy of life in heaven with **You!** **For our trouble, light and momentary, is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison (Second Corinthians 4:17)**. Our trials are much easier to bear when we fix our gaze on the peace and joy we will have for all eternity with **You** in heaven. Thank **You** for the huge price **You** paid for my ransom (**Mark 19:45, Revelation 5:9**) and for giving me the costly gift of **Your** righteousness (**Second Corinthians 5:21**). In holy **Yeshua's** name and power of **His** resurrection. Amen*

His experience of empathy (11:28-29): Like all **false apostles**, the one's **Paul** was dealing with manipulated and abused **the Corinthians** for **their** own selfish ends. **Paul**, on the other hand, was deeply concerned for **their** well-being. **And besides these external matters of suffering** mentioned above, **there was the daily pressure of my anxious concern for all the congregations of God (11:28)**. Yet **Paul** didn't violate the teaching of **Yeshua** about **anxiety** (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Dt - Do Not Worry About Your Life, What You Will Eat or Drink, or What You Will Wear**). **His** concern arose from **seeking first the Kingdom of God**. **He** was grappling realistically with the present, not the future, problems; and **he** had no **anxiety** about the relatively trivial matters of food or clothing. But as a faithful undershepherd **he** shared the constant burden of **the Chief Shepherd** with regard to the welfare of all the sheep.²⁶⁸ **Paul** further expressed **his** passionate concern for **the congregations of God** by asking two rhetorical questions. First, **Who is weak without me sharing his weakness?** expressed **his** empathy (**First Corinthians 12:26**) with the pain and **suffering** of the **weak**, immature believers (**First Thessalonians 5:14; Romans 14:1 and 15:1; First Corinthians 9:22**). Selfish, prideful **false teachers** do not care about people's struggles. Far from helping **the weak**, **they** were oppressive and ruthlessly took advantage of **them** (**Jeremiah 23:2; Ezekiel 34:2-6; Zechariah 11:16; Matthew 23:2-4; Luke 20:47**).

The apostle was also concerned about **the unruly** unbelievers (Greek: *ataktos*, meaning *out of order or out of place*), as **his** second rhetorical question: **Who falls into sin without my burning inside (11:29)?** reveals. **Paul** burned with righteous indignation when **God's people** were led **into sin**, as did **Yeshua**, who solemnly warned: **And whoever ensnares one of these little ones who trust Me, it would be better for him to have a millstone hung around his neck and be drowned in the open sea (Matthew 18:6)!** Love is not the enemy of moral indignation but its partner. Holy indignation toward **those** who lead believers **into sin** is an expression of the purest kind of love.²⁶⁹

His experience of humiliation (11:30-33): To the Greeks and Romans, a leader was someone with an attractive, overpowering presence, one who could dominate a situation through sheer force of his personality. Thus, **the Corinthians** probably would have expected **Paul** to defend **his apostleship** by showing off **his** ability to take charge of any situation. Surprisingly, **Paul** gave a humiliating illustration instead. **He** related how **he** fled from **Damascus** in the dead of night to avoid those who sought to kill **him** (**Acts 9:25**). As always, **if he** had to **boast**, **Paul** would **boast** only **about things that show how weak he** was (**11:30**).

Paul would introduce the seemingly mundane account of **his** escape with the forceful

declaration: **God the Father of the Lord Yeshua - blessed be He forever - knows that I am not lying (11:31)!** One would have expected such a vehement declaration of **Paul's** truth to lead directly into the dramatic account of **his** trip to **the third heaven**. That **he** used the declaration here, emphasizes the significance of this event to **him**.²⁷⁰

Immediately after **Paul's** experience on the **Damascus** road (see the commentary on [Galatians Am - Damascus during the Time of Paul](#)), **he** went away to **Arabia** where for **three years** he was taught the **gospel** of **grace** by **Messiah** (see [Galatians An - Arabia during the Time of Paul](#)). Only after **his** apprenticeship under **the Master** did **he** return again to **Damascus** ([Galatians 1:16b-17](#)). Enraged by **his** bold and fearless preaching of **Yeshua** as **the Messiah**, the unbelieving **Jews** in **Damascus** plotted to take **his life** ([Acts 9:23-24](#)). It was extremely ironic that **the city** to which **Paul** had made **his** way to **arrest believers** before **his** conversion ([Acts 8:3](#)) was the scene of this memorable attempt to cut short **his** witness for **Messiah**. Yet the attempt to silence **him** was as fruitless as **his** attempt to **destroy the Church** ([Galatians 1:13](#)).²⁷¹

When Paul was in Damascus, the governor under King Aretas, ruler of the Nabatean kingdom southwest of the Dead Sea, had the city guarded in order to arrest and kill him (11:32). But with the aid of fellow believers ([Acts 9:25](#)), **he** was lowered in a basket through an opening in the wall, escaping the clutches of his enemies (11:33) and then fled to **Jerusalem** ([Acts 9:26](#)). Now, many years later, **he** used the event to illustrate how humiliating that undignified experience was for **him**, lowered like a dead fish in a smelly basket. Unlike **the false apostles**, who would never allow **themselves** to be humiliated, **Paul** mirrored the humiliation of **his Master**. **Yeshua** was born in a manger (see the commentary on [The Life of Christ Aq - The Birth of Jesus](#)), rejected by **His** own hometown of **Nazareth** (see the commentary on [The Life of Christ Fj - Isn't This The Carpenter's Son? Aren't His Brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Jude?](#)) and **His** own people ([Matthew 27:30](#)). But **Messiah's** ultimate humiliation was being crucified while being naked and mocked (see [The Life of Christ Lu - Jesus' First Three Hours on the Cross: The Wrath of Man](#)).

His experience of the supernatural (12:1-4): At first glance, the account of **Paul's** **vision** seems to be out of place in a section dealing with **his** suffering and weakness. But the Greeks believed that those who truly represented the gods would experience mystical visions, which some tried to induce through drunken orgies (see the commentary on [First Corinthians Ce - The Pagan Background of Counterfeit Spiritual Gifts](#)). Undoubtedly, then, **the false apostles** claimed **visions and revelations** of **their** own. Many of **the Corinthians**, swept away by **their** phony claims, groveled before **them**. Thus, even though

he did so reluctantly, **Paul** felt it was necessary to relate **his** own **vision**.

Paul's "I have to boast" serves as a reminder of the rhetorical exercise in which **he** had engaged from the beginning of **his fool's** discourse (see [By - Being Deceived](#)). **He** realized that **his boasting** was necessary because much could be lost if **he** did not somehow cancel the seductive tyranny of **his rivals**, but stressed that **there** was **nothing to be gained by it, but that he would** reluctantly **go on to** explain **his visions and revelations of the Lord** as best **he** could (12:1). **His boasting** did not benefit the church because **it** was not verifiable nor could **it** be repeated, and could lead to **pride** (12:7). What *is* profitable is **Scripture, which is God-breathed and is profitable for teaching the truth, convicting of sin, correcting faults and training in right living (Second Timothy 3:16)**. Therefore, in the past **Paul** urged **the Ephesian elders** not to trust in **visions and** extra biblical **revelations**, but to **the Word of His grace, which was able to build them up and to give them the inheritance among all those who are sanctified (Acts 20:32)**. **The Bible** is complete and does not need to be supplemented by any further **revelation**, except **the Lord Yeshua Messiah at His Second Coming** (see the commentary on [Isaiah Kg - The Second Coming of Jesus Christ to Bozrah](#)).²⁷²

Paul's vagueness about the incident and **his** use of the third person seems to reflect **his** genuine **humility** and uncertainty about the details of the experience. **I know a man, in union with the Messiah, who fourteen years ago was snatched up to the third heaven. He** was taken up to **the third heaven**, which is beyond the earth's atmosphere (the first heaven) and the stars (the second heaven). If **Paul** was quite certain of the location of **the vision, he** was equally uncertain about whether the experience happened to **him** in **his body** or apart from it.²⁷³ **Whether he was in the body or outside the body I don't know, God knows. Paul** was not sure whether **he** was physically present in heaven or whether **his** spirit experienced it. **And I know that such a man - whether in the body or apart from the body I don't know, God knows (12:2-3)**. **He** talked about it as though it had happened to another **man** and not **himself**. Thus, the idea of **Paul's boasting** about **himself** is completely removed.²⁷⁴

. . . **was snatched up** (Greek: *harpazo*, meaning *to carry off by force*), is the same word used by **John** to describe **the Rapture** in **First Thessalonians 4:17** (see the commentary on [Revelation By - The Rapture of the Church](#)). However, what is seen in being **snatched up** here is more like either **the snatching up** of **Philip** (see the commentary on [Acts Bb - An Ethiopian Asks about Isaiah](#)), or perhaps **Ezeki'el** being transported to **Jerusalem (Ezeki'el 8:3)** to see the abominations that were happening within the holy **Temple** itself (**Ezeki'el Chapters 8-10**).

. . . **into the third heaven, or Paradise.** You and I are not going to **Paradise** until we die or until **the Lord** returns. But we have a marvelous encouragement in the fact that we are **seated with Him in heaven (Ephesians 2:6b)**. We have a position of authority and victory **far above every ruler, authority, power, dominion or any other name that can be named either in this world or the world to come (Ephesians 1:21)**. While we have not seen **God's glory** as **Paul** did, we do share in **God's glory** now (**John 17:22**), and one day we shall enter into **heaven** and see **the glory of Messiah (John 17:24)**. Such an honor as this would have made most people very proud. Instead of keeping quiet for **fourteen years**, they would have hired a publicist and wrote a best-selling book about it. But **Paul** didn't become proud. **He** simply told the truth - it was not empty **boasting** - and let what **he** could recall speak for itself. **His** great concern was that nobody rob **God** of **the glory** and give it to **Paul**.

. . . **and heard things that cannot be put into words.** **He** says so much, yet says so little. **The words he** heard were in a language unlike anything on earth. Although **the apostle** understood what was said, there were no **words** in human language to convey what **he** had heard, nor would **he** have been **permitted to speak** about what he had heard even if that were possible. (**12:4**). **They** were intended only for **his** ears and not as a revelation to be communicated to others. For this reason, **Paul** had never spoken about it. The veil between **heaven** and earth remains in place. What **the LORD** wants us to know about **heaven** is in **the Bible**, as for the rest: **The things which are hidden belong to ADONAI our God. (Deuteronomy 29:29)**.

True believers do not measure their walk with **God** on claims of visions or ecstatic experiences, the force of their personalities, the size of their ministry, educational degrees, or any other human criteria. Their walk is marked by how much they have **suffered** in the war against the kingdom of darkness, how concerned they are for **God's** children, how humble they are, and how accurately they handle the supernatural revelation found in **God's Word**. **Do all you can to present yourself to God as someone worthy of His approval, as a worker with no need to be ashamed, because they accurately handle the Word of Truth (Second Timothy 2:15)**. Like **Paul**, those who patiently endure the **suffering** and humiliation of this life, know that such **light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory whose weight is beyond description (4:17)**.