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2 Corinthians

Are they Hebrews? So *am* I. Are they Israelites? So *am* I. Are they the seed of Abraham? So *am* I. 2 Corinthians 11:22

In Paul's "boasting" out his defense against his accusers, he now contrasts himself with them. What is evident is that they matched each of these things that he will now describe and they boasted of their status because of it to the Corinthians. They claimed a special right and status because of this heritage and therefore they were more worthy to be listened to and followed. Be advised that nothing has changed today. As you read these words, know that the exact same arguments are used by the exact same category of people to sway others to their own misguided use of Scripture.

He begins with, "Are they Hebrews?" This points to the special status of those who have "crossed over," which is what the term Hebrew implies. They thus claimed the cultural privilege of being of this pure stock. They were probably born and raised in the land of Israel, spoke the Hebrew language, and read the Scriptures in that language. In contrast, they would claim that Paul was merely a knock-off of this pure line who mostly used the Greek translation of the Scriptures and who was born outside of the land of Israel.

However, Paul defended his status as a Hebrew. He was "a Hebrew of the Hebrews" (Philippians 3:5). He was born to Hebrews who were born in the land. He could rightfully claim that he descended from the same pure line. He also was trained under Gamliel and knew the Hebrew Scriptures in the original language. Just because he was born in Tarsus in no way affected his pure genealogy. Rather,

it gave him something more than they possessed because he could unite the pure doctrine of the Hebrews with the languages and experiences of the world beyond Israel. Thus, he was more qualified than they were to bring the message to the Gentiles. In essence, Jesus made no mistake in His selection. He was no knock-off, but was rather eminently qualified to be called a "Hebrew." Thus his words, "So *am* I."

He next asks, "Are they Israelites?" They came to the church at Corinth boasting in this national status. Israel is comprised of the 12 tribes of people who descended from Jacob. They had gone down to Egypt and lived in bondage; they were delivered out of there by God's hand; they were taken to Sinai where they received the law; and God spoke through His prophets of Israel to the people of Israel. They claimed this special status as a point of boasting to those at Corinth. "We descend from this great tradition of people who are the recipients, stewards, and interpreters of God's law." Paul notes in his defense, "So *am* I." In Philippians 3, he gives even greater detail when he says that he was "circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin" (verse 5).

Thirdly, he questions, "Are they the seed of Abraham?" The false apostles noted that they could trace their lineage back to Abraham, just as the genealogy found in Matthew does for Christ Jesus. They could then say to those at Corinth, "See, we have the same credentials as the Messiah as far as our birthright and heritage. We are His same stock and are His brothers because Abraham is our father. Surely we have the right stuff to properly train you and guide you into all perfect knowledge." In response, Paul says, "So *am* I."

In his "boasting" to those at Corinth, Paul has thus far successfully defended that he is in no way "at all inferior to the most eminent apostles." Rather, he meets and exceeds them in these external boastings of the flesh. He has incrementally arranged these points to show that he is a Hebrew, thus meeting the nationality they claimed to possess. He was an Israelite, thus being an honored and special relative to God's chosen people who received the law and the covenants. And he was of the seed of Abraham, thus entitled to all of the messianic privileges associated with that great father of the faith.

But Paul's message, the gospel message, is not one based on these things. It is one based on faith in the finished work of Christ. The Corinthians held onto the false apostles because of the externals, but it is the internal which makes one right with God. Paul needed them to first get beyond the externals by showing that he was as qualified as them. After this, he will have proven that they had no advantage over him in their boasts.

Life application: When you evaluate someone who is a teacher, the last thing you should be looking for is their worldly status. Who cares if someone is a Jew? Who cares if they read Hebrew or Greek? Who cares if they have a doctorate degree in theology? None of these things mean a thing if their message isn't in line with truths found in the Bible. Don't follow pope, preacher, priest, or pastor because of their externals. Instead, follow God's word and listen to the one who is willing to place that above all else.

Are they ministers of Christ?—I speak as a fool—I *am* more: in labors more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequently, in deaths often.
2 Corinthians 11:23

Continuing in his comparison of himself to the false apostles, Paul asks, "Are they ministers of Christ?" This is obviously what they had claimed to be. In verse 10:7, a close comparison was made -

"Do you look at things according to the outward appearance? If anyone is convinced in himself that he *is* Christ's, let him again consider this in himself, that just as he is Christ's, even so we *are* Christ's."

If they were claiming that they were ministers of Christ, then Paul would reduce himself to their level and boast of his own ministry. In doing so, he says, "I speak as a fool." The word here for "fool" is not the same as the one he has been using. Instead he uses the word *paraphroneó*. This is its only use in the New Testament and it comes from two separate words, *para* - beside and *phroneo* - mind.

Translators vary on how they present the word, but "fool" should be excluded because of its use in previous verses. Instead, words like insane, out of my mind, a madman, deranged, beside myself, in stupidity, and so on are used to convey a strong, but different intent than "fool." His use of the words, "I *am* more" is being used sarcastically to show that the false apostles were, in fact, really deranged.

For Paul, it is in this sarcastically "deranged" state that he will boast about his ministry. Whatever type of ministers of Christ they are, Paul has exceeded them "in labors more often." For the next five verses, he will list his labors in his ministry. And yet, in comparing them to the book of Acts, he only relays a small portion of what he endured for Christ. Were he to tell all, the book would be a large one.

Continuing on, he says, "...in stripes above measure." He will explain this in verses 24 and 25. The words "above measure" mean that he, above all the others, had received such punishment. What is implied is that more punishments meant that more evangelism had been accomplished. Most would be reticent to speak after a session with rods or scourges, but Paul became more vocal, not less.

He also mentions that he was subject to "prisons more frequently." At this point in the book of Acts, only one period of imprisonment was mentioned for Paul, but this doesn't mean there weren't others. His words here testify that, in fact, he had already had multiple incarcerations.

To finish out the verse, he says that he was "in deaths often." This means that the work he did brought him close to death, or into a position where death could rightfully be expected. In 2 Corinthians 1:9, he said -

"Yes, we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves but in God who raises the dead."

If the false apostles had faced any trials at all, none of them compared to Paul's in either type or in severity. He has begun to lay out the trials and pains he was willing to go through as a minister of Christ. Either he was truly insane, or he was willing to endure these trials because of his wholehearted devotion to Christ.

Life application: How strong is your faith in Christ? Would you be willing to endure the type of trials that Paul was in order to share the truth of God's word? If not, it is time for a faith tune-up. Who knows when such proofs of allegiance to Christ will be necessary for you!

From the Jews five times I received forty *stripes* minus one. 2 Corinthians 11:24

There is quite a bit to consider in these few words. First, the word "stripes" is not in the original, but it is given for clarity and its inclusion is correct. The law of punishing a Jew by the Jewish authorities comes from the Law of Moses. In Deuteronomy, this is recorded -

"If there is a dispute between men, and they come to court, that *the judges* may judge them, and they justify the righteous and condemn the wicked, ² then it shall be, if the wicked man deserves to be beaten, that the judge will cause him to lie down and be beaten in his presence, according to his guilt, with a certain number of blows. ³ Forty blows he may give him *and* no more, lest he should exceed this and beat him with many blows above these, and your brother be humiliated in your sight." Deuteronomy 25:1-3

Forty lashes were the maximum allowed by the law. In order to ensure that this was not violated, thus breaking the command which was given for punishment of another command, one lash was held back. The 40 lashes, minus one, are mentioned in the writings of Flavius Josephus. It is also believed that a scourge of 13 knotted thongs was used and the person was beaten only 3 times, thus equaling 39 lashes.

It should be noted here though that this punishment of 39 lashes cannot be equated to the 39 books of the Old Testament and thus a picture of Jesus' fulfillment of the law which included his stripes recorded in Isaiah 53:5. This is a commonly taught thing which neither matches the Law of Moses (40 stripes, not 39), nor was this the punishment which Jesus endured during His passion under Pontius Pilate. That was a Roman, not a Jewish, punishment and there were no such limits set by Rome. That is a fanciful, but misplaced, use of this punishment.

Concerning Paul's receiving this Jewish punishment "five times," there is no record in the book of Acts that he ever received it. When he was beaten (Acts 16), it was a Roman punishment. It could be that he received these Jewish punishments at the various synagogues that he visited, but there is no record of it. This shows that Paul's epistles, which very well support the narrative in the book of Acts, were not written based on Acts as some people claim. Rather, they are independent writings which unite at times to confirm the truth of the two accounts. At other times, they independently highlight other things not written in the other account.

Life application: Paul was willing to go to great lengths in order to preach the gospel of Christ to his own Jewish brothers, so much so that he confirms that he was beaten by them on five separate occasions. Are we willing to endure a little bit of pain and rejection by our own people in order to share this same message? Our willingness to suffer for Christ is a sign of our devotion and dedication to Him.

Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; 2 Corinthians 11:25

Paul continues with his list of the sufferings he faced for the sake of the gospel. He begins with, "Three times I was beaten with rods." Only one such beating is noted in Acts which is when he was in Philippi in Acts 16. The other two beatings are not recorded. They may have occurred at any time after his conversion. This type of beating was especially painful and the account in Acts 16 shows that he needed to have his wounds tended to because of the damage that was inflicted on him.

He next notes that he was stoned once. This is recorded as occurring in Lystra in Acts 14. It was the common form of execution among the Jews for blasphemy. In Paul's case, they left him for dead, but he was hardier than they realized. It says that, "...he rose up and went into the city." The fact that this claim matches that of the account in Acts in turn lends credibility to all of his claims, whether they are recorded or not.

Following this, he lists the suffering of having been shipwrecked three times. Acts only records one shipwreck that he was in, and it comes after the writing of this letter. The three he is referring to here are otherwise unknown, but it does show how dangerous it was to travel by ship during this period of history.

Finally in this verse, he says that "a night and a day I have been in the deep." This is generally considered as the result of one of his shipwrecks. The ship was far enough from land that he spent this time either swimming or holding onto a part of the ship until he was either rescued, or until he reached land. The waters around him would then be considered "the deep." However, there is another interesting possibility to what he is referring to.

One Greek writer notes that the words *en Butho* or "in Bythos," was a place near Lystra where criminals were thrown. The word *Bythos* means "the bottom" or "the deep." If this is so, then it could be a term used for a pit, like the dungeon that Jeremiah was thrown into (see Jeremiah 38:6). The word itself isn't used anywhere else in the New Testament, and Acts doesn't refer to this account, so either way it is only speculation as to what "the deep" really means.

Life application: Paul continues to show the lengths he was willing to go through for the sake of the gospel. How many of us are too tired to get up for church on Sunday or too busy to attend a Bible study or two during the week? How much time do we spend reading the Bible each day? This book came to us through much suffering and at great risk to those who penned it under the inspiration of the Spirit. Are we so overwhelmed with minutiae that we can't devote a portion of our time to studying it?

...in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren;

2 Corinthians 11:26

Paul's list of his many trials for the sake of the gospel continues to grow in this verse. He says, "...in journeys often." This would be the trials of his many journeys, particularly the chance of getting waylaid on the trip, such as happened to the man in the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37. It would also have included the other many hardships associated with traveling by foot or on an animal.

Continuing on, he says, "...in perils of waters." The word for "waters" is *potamos*. It means specifically "rivers." Thus, it carries the idea of a current, brook, or stream (as drinkable). You can get a hint of our modern word "potable" from this then. These inland rivers and streams needed to be forded in one way or another if no bridge was available. It was at times hazardous, but Paul continued on, passing over them for the sake of Christ.

His next words, "...in perils of my own countrymen," literally permeate the book of Acts. Everywhere Paul went, he faced threats of death from them, he faced their anger, and he faced their accusations. They had a deep-seated enmity towards him because of his teachings on Christ and because of his doing so to the Gentiles, both of which they rejected as ungodly. But this hatred wasn't just confined to his Jewish brothers. Instead, he was also "in perils of the Gentiles."

As it has been throughout Christian history, many Gentiles have rejected the message of Christ and thus they reject the messengers of Christ. The book of Acts, again, is replete with the perils that Paul faced among the Gentiles. And these many perils were not just isolated to one particular place. He next notes that he faced "perils in the city."

The residents of cities had animosities towards Paul and his message, just as they do today. City folk lack the intimacy with nature that those outside the city feel. Thus they cut themselves off, in part, from God's general revelation of Himself through the beauty which surrounds us in nature. They often become apathetic to the things of God and even hostile to them. This has remained true throughout the ages. Paul faced such apathy and was in peril because of it.

But he also faced "perils in the wilderness." In the wilderness were more than just wild animals and harsh living. In the wilderness is often lawlessness, like the Old West in the US where people lived by their own code of morality and judgment. For Paul to present the gospel there would mean many perils, from man and from beast. And yet he was willing to go even into the remote places to share this wonderful message.

But there was more. He also states that he faced "perils in the sea." Some of these have already been noted by him in the preceding verse. But he may be referring to other perils of the sea. Simply witnessing to sailors might bring him into trouble. Sailors often follow their own gods which they believe will protect them from other gods who intend to do them harm. To tell sailors that what they have always believed is false would be a good way of getting tossed into the deep or being used as fish bait. Whatever Paul is referring to, he was willing to face it for the exalted name of Jesus.

He finishes up this verse with, "in perils among false brethren." The word here is *pseudadelphos*. It means a false brother or a "pretend Christian." It is only used here and in Galatians 2:4. This is certainly a jab at the false apostles that he has been speaking about, but it is also inclusive of anyone who would claim to be a Christian in order to benefit from it, even though they had no true love of Christ. The Judaizers of Galatians wanted to rob people away from the faith. Others could profit monetarily off of Christ. The list could go on and on as to the reason why someone would claim to be a Christian, but who was really a deceiver. Paul faced up to such people and was in peril because of them.

Life application: It should be true that every step we take is one devoted to the message of Christ. If that message is one which upsets the world around us, then we may face perils because of it. Let us search our hearts and determine if we truly are willing to face difficulties for standing on the faith which we have professed.