

## Introduction

I have never boasted about my basketball skills. I may have boasted about my golf, tennis, ping pong or other skills, but I have never boasted about my basketball skills. I grew up in Iran and my father put up a basketball goal at our house. Occasionally, we would play HORSE, but other than that the basketball goal was not used. In Horse somebody shoots from anywhere and if he makes the basket, the person following him must make from that spot, or get a letter. If he misses, the next person is free to pick a spot to shoot from. When someone gets all five letters in HORSE, he is out. The last person remaining in the game is the winner. There is no dribbling, passing, blocking, defending; it is all shooting. When I came to the United States for high school, I had never seen a basketball game played, and did not know anything about how to play basketball. I did not know the rules, and I did not know how to dribble or pass. My mother and father had both played basketball in their schools, and I believe that my father made the winning goal in one of their big games. Since I was a good athlete, I thought that I would pick it up fairly quickly, so I tried out for the freshmen basketball team. It was a winter sport and I could not play golf in New Jersey in the winter. Our school had a three-day tryout, and afterwards, when they posted who had made the freshman team, I was not on the list. I was quite surprised, and a little disappointed. My potential skills had not impressed Coach Waters, and I was not one of the ones that made the team. I was a little bit in shock, as I never considered that I would not make the team.

Paul ends the section on boasting with what pertains to his weakness. Paul began this section his warning and defense with a different tone. He gave a warning to them that he was coming, and he did not want to have to use his boldness. He warned that he was coming as a soldier, and the weapons of his warfare were not fleshly, but were divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses. In part two, Paul spoke about his authority, and how it was not to be used to tear down, but to build up. He also spoke about his commendation, that it was the Lord's commendation that really mattered. In part three, Paul spoke about his goal, which was to present them as a pure virgin to the Lord. He also shared his concern for them, that he was afraid that they had been deceived and led astray. In part four, he compared himself to the most imminent apostles, or super apostles, and he was not the least inferior to them, especially in knowledge. He also compared himself to the false apostles, the deceitful workers who disguised themselves as servants of righteousness. These false apostles had deceived them, and were trying to take advantage of them. Paul compared his credentials with them, and nobody had gone through the trials and suffering that Paul had endured. Paul's ancestral credentials, and his sufferings as a servant of Christ were second to none. Paul ends this section on boasting about his weaknesses.

Part 1	1. Paul's Boldness
	2. Paul's Weapons of Warfare
Part 2	3. Paul's Authority
	4. Paul's Commendation
Part 3	5. Paul's Goal
	6. Paul's Concern
Part 4	7. Paul's Comparison to Super Apostles
	8. Paul's Comparison to False Apostles
	9. Paul's Credentials
Part 5	10. Paul's Weakness at Damascus
	11. Paul's Weakness in Revelations
	12. Paul's Weakness of the Thorn

Boast is used six times and weakness is used six times. The passage is about Paul's boast in his weaknesses. Most of us boast about our strengths, not our basketball skills. But Paul said that if he had to boast, he would boast of what pertains to his weakness. Paul's boasting today is similar to my boasting about basketball skills; he boasted in his weaknesses. The reason for boasting in our weakness is when we are weak, God makes us strong. Paul boasts of three weaknesses. He first boasts about being lowered down the wall in Damascus in a basket. Second, he boasts about receiving visions and revelations. Third, Paul boasts about a thorn in his flesh.

### Paul's Boasting in Weakness

1. Damascus Wall Escape (2 Cor 11:30-33)
2. Third Heaven Revelation (2 Cor 12:1-6)
3. Thorn in the Flesh (2 Cor 12:7-10)

(2 Cor 11:30-33) "If I have to boast, I will **boast** of what pertains to my **weakness**. {31} The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, He who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying. {32} In Damascus the ethnarch under Aretas the king was guarding the city of the Damascenes in order to seize me, {33} and I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and so escaped his hands."

(2 Co 12:1–10) "**Boasting** is necessary, though it is not profitable; but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. {2} I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago—whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I do not know, God knows—such a man was caught up to the third heaven. {3} And I know how such a man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, God knows— {4} was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak. {5} On behalf of such a man I will **boast**; but on my own behalf I will not **boast**, except in regard to *my* **weaknesses**. {6} For if I do wish to **boast** I will not be foolish, for I will be speaking the truth; but I refrain *from this*, so that no one will credit me with more than he sees *in* me or hears from me. {7} Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me—to keep me from exalting myself! {8} Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me. {9} And He has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in **weakness**." Most gladly, therefore, I will rather **boast** about my **weaknesses**, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. {10} Therefore I am well content with **weaknesses**, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am **weak**, then I am strong."

#### 1. Damascus Wall Escape (2 Cor 11:30-33)

The passage begins with Paul saying that if he has to boast, he will boast of what pertains to his weaknesses. Then, he gives the account of being let down in a basket in Damascus. Some scholars believe that his incident in Damascus is an afterthought to the afflictions and trials that he had been sharing. They separate verse thirty from verses thirty-one through thirty-three. The word for weakness is *asthenia*, Strong's G769, which means infirmity (17x), weakness (5x), disease (1x), or sickness (1x). They use the verse as a spring board to discuss Paul's eyesight or other weaknesses that he mentioned in his writings. For example, he wrote to the Galatians that it was because of a bodily illness that he preached the gospel to them the first time, and that they had not despised or loathed him in his bodily condition. We do not know what condition he had, but apparently, he had some sort of physical sickness while he was with them. Paul ended his

letter to the Galatians pointing out that he was writing the benediction in large letters with his own hand. Some think that his weakness or infirmity was poor eyesight.

(2 Cor 11:30) “If I have to boast, I will boast of what pertains to my weakness.”

(Ga 4:13–14) “but you know that it was because of a bodily illness that I preached the gospel to you the first time; {14} and that which was a trial to you in my bodily condition you did not despise or loathe, but you received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus *Himself*.”

(Ga 6:11) “See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand.”

When Paul planted the church in Corinth, he also went in weakness. In 1 Corinthians 2, he said that he had not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, but was with them in weakness and in fear and much trembling. Even though he came in weakness, his message and preaching were a demonstration of the Spirit and power of God, so that their faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God. God worked through Paul and demonstrated His power through Paul's weaknesses.

(1 Co 2:1–5) “And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. {2} For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. {3} I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling, {4} and my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, {5} so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God.”

I believe that Paul has not had an afterthought and thrown this example in as an addendum, but that it is the first example of weakness in this passage about boasting in weaknesses. Paul calls God as his witness about this account of being let down in a basket through a window in the wall. Luke's account of this incident was most likely written in the early 60's, and this letter to the Corinthians was written around 57-58 AD. The Corinthians did not have any written reference to this incident, and Paul is bringing God in as the witness of this event.

(2 Cor 11:31-33) “The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, He who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying. {32} In Damascus the ethnarch under Aretas the king was guarding the city of the Damascenes in order to seize me, {33} and I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and so escaped his hands.”

We have the benefit of having the account in Acts, which gives us some further details and context of the event. Paul had been on the way to Damascus to find, arrest, and bring back any Christians that he found there. On his way, the Lord appeared to him and Paul was blinded by the light that he saw. He had to be led to Damascus by those who were with him. Paul also heard the voice of the Lord and God gave him specific instructions about what he was to do. The Lord told a man by the name of Ananias to go lay hands on Paul, and he did as he was directed. Paul got saved and baptized, and then began to boldly proclaim Jesus as the Son of God. He confounded the Jews who lived at Damascus, proving that Jesus is the Christ, and so the Jews plotted together to do away with him. Their plot became known to Paul, and the disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a large basket.

(Ac 9:19–25) “and he took food and was strengthened. Now for several days he was with the disciples who were at Damascus, {20} and immediately he *began* to proclaim Jesus in the

synagogues, saying, “He is the Son of God.” {21} All those hearing him continued to be amazed, and were saying, “Is this not he who in Jerusalem destroyed those who called on this name, and *who* had come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?” {22} But Saul kept increasing in strength and confounding the Jews who lived at Damascus by proving that this *Jesus* is the Christ. {23} When many days had elapsed, the Jews plotted together to do away with him, {24} but their plot became known to Saul. They were also watching the gates day and night so that they might put him to death; {25} but his disciples took him by night and let him down through *an opening in the wall*, lowering him in a large basket.”

In this account, Paul gives some additional details. He mentions the ethnarch under Aretas the king. Aretas was the father-in-law of Herod Antipas, the person that had put John the Baptist to death. Herod had divorced Aretas' daughter so that he could marry his brother, Philip's wife. Aretas had conquered Damascus, and set up an ethnarch or governor to govern the city. Paul does not mention Damascus by name, but refers to it as the city of the Damascenes. The Jews convinced the governor that Paul was a trouble-maker and should be put to death, so he placed guards at the city gates to arrest Paul if he tried to leave. The believers in Damascus brought Paul to a certain house built against the wall that surrounded the city, and in this house, there was a window or small door. The protective walls around cities were about forty feet in height, and up to eight feet in diameter. There were seven gates around Damascus, and early Christian tradition identified the window that he escaped from as being near the gate called Bab Kisan, which was on the southeastern side of the city. That was where many of the Christians lived at that time. A chapel was built over that section of the wall and was inaugurated in 1939.<sup>1</sup>

(2 Cor 11:32-33) “In Damascus the ethnarch under Aretas the king was guarding the city of the Damascenes in order to seize me, {33} and I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and *so* escaped his hands.”

Why would Paul boast about his escape from Damascus? Paul did not leave Damascus as a triumphant hero of any sorts; he fled as a fugitive. He was let down in the night in a basket by others who helped him to flee. Paul began his ministry in weakness. Paul would be arrested, imprisoned, stoned, whipped, and beaten in the future, but he began by fleeing persecution.

## 2. **Third Heaven Revelation** (2 Cor 12:1-6)

The second boast in weakness is about the visions and revelations that Paul received. He begins by reiterating the fact that boasting is not profitable, but in this case it was necessary. It is easy to see that Paul would have preferred not to be having this discussion, but he deemed it necessary.

(2 Co 12:1) “Boasting is necessary, though it is not profitable; but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord.”

Paul uses the third person approach in this section. He said, “I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago...” Paul was that man that he was referring to. This letter was written in the early 60's, so fourteen years earlier puts the date in the late forties, and Paul would have been in Antioch. Barnabas and Paul went on their first apostolic journey around 44-46 AD, and they returned to Antioch, where they stayed through 49AD. They went to Jerusalem to meet with the apostles and elders to discuss circumcision and salvation by faith. When they returned, Paul took

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<sup>1</sup> <https://curate.nd.edu/show/mc87pn92c5d>

Silas with him and began his second apostolic journey. Paul did not know if this experience he is going to share with them happened in the body or out of the body. He said that only God knows. This man, Paul, was caught up in the third heaven. Paul repeats this a second time, saying that he did not know if it was in the body or apart from the body, and that only God knows.

(2 Cor 12:2-3) “I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago—whether in the body **I do not know**, or out of the body **I do not know**, God knows—such a man was caught up to the third heaven. {3} And I know how such a man—whether in the body or apart from the body **I do not know**, God knows—”

What is the third heaven? The Jewish concept of heavens was that the first heaven was that of the clouds. The second heaven was where the stars and planets were. The third heaven was the abode of God, the angels, and the departed saints. So, Paul was caught up in the third heaven, where Jesus and the Father are. Paul was caught up into the presence of the Lord. Then, Paul refers to the third heaven as Paradise. Paradise is used only three times in the Scriptures. When Jesus was on the cross speaking with the repentant thief, He told him that He would see him in paradise. When people died at that time, they went to Sheol (OT), which is called Hades in the New Testament. There were two places in Hades, the place where the righteous were kept and the place where the wicked were kept. When Jesus died, He went to Sheol, to the part called Paradise. The righteous were there waiting for the Savior so that their sins could be atoned for. Jesus set them free and they are now with the Lord. When believers die today, they go to be in the presence of the Lord, which is heaven. They do not go to Sheol, the place of the dead, but directly to heaven to be with the Lord. Based on this scripture, Paradise is now part of heaven, where the Lord is seated at the right hand of the Father. While Paul was caught up into Paradise, he heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak. What Paul heard in heaven he was not able to utter or express, and he was not permitted to speak them. The KJV says it was unlawful for him to speak. Paul was not able or at liberty to share these visions.

(2 Cor 12:4) “was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak.”

(Lk 23:42–43) “And he was saying, “Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!” {43} And He said to him, “Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise.”

Paul then says, “On behalf of such a man I will boast; but on my own behalf I will not boast, except in regard to my weakness.” Why does Paul boast about these revelations and visions that he had that he cannot share? I believe he boasts about it because he had nothing to do with it. This was something that God did for Paul. God brought Paul up into the heavens for a glimpse of things that He wanted Paul to be aware of. There was nothing there for Paul to boast about.

(2 Cor 12:5) “On behalf of such a man I will boast; but on my own behalf I will not boast, except in regard to *my* weaknesses.”

Let me give a personal example that may help us understand this second boast. I have composed about thirty-five songs. Some of the songs are outstanding. Someone might think that I was an excellent musician if I boasted about these songs. However, let me give some further understanding of these songs. In 1992, I was on a TWA flight from St. Louis to Cedar Rapids to play in a tournament in Iowa City. When the plane got to cruising altitude, the captain came on the intercom and said we could take our seat belts off and the flight crew would begin serving

drinks and snacks. I pulled out my Bible and turned to Romans 11. As soon as I turned to the page the Holy Spirit gave me a song out of verses thirty-three to thirty-six. I am not a skilled musician that writes songs and melodies. The Holy Spirit just occasionally gives me songs. I don't write the lyrics, they come from the Scriptures. I don't develop a melody; the Holy Spirit gives it to me. A few weeks ago, I discovered that this song, The Depths of the Riches of God, has a 3/4 Time on it. I have been using a 4/4 Time picking pattern for the last thirty-one years. It is obvious that I am not an accomplished composer and musician. If I boasted about the songs that I have written, I am boasting in my weaknesses. The glory and honor go to God, as He is the One that has given the revelation and songs. I don't have anything that He has not given to me. In that passage, Paul shared that God's judgments are unsearchable and His ways are unfathomable. Nobody has known the mind of the Lord or became His counselor. Nobody has first given to God so that God must pay him back. All things are from Him and through Him and to Him. All the glory goes to God. When Paul boasted about the revelations, all the glory goes to God. Paul had nothing to do with getting caught up in the heavens and receiving these revelations. Paul was weak.

(Ro 11:33–36) “Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! {34} For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor? {35} Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to him again? {36} For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him *be* the glory forever. Amen.”

Paul did not want to be foolish in boasting about something that he did not have. No one was going to be able to credit him with more than they see in him or hear from him. Paul spoke the truth. What a great model for all of us to follow. Salesmen, government officials, businessmen, and pastors all need to speak only the truth. They don't need to stretch things to make people believe more than they hear or see. Paul did not want to boast, but felt that it was necessary, but in his boasting, he was going to boast in his weaknesses, speaking the truth, so that no one would credit him with more than they saw or heard. Paul exhibited humility in his approach.

(2 Cor 12:6) “For if I do wish to boast I will not be foolish, for I will be speaking the truth; but I refrain *from this*, so that no one will credit me with more than he sees *in* me or hears from me.”

### 3. **Thorn in the Flesh** (2 Cor 12:7-10)

The third weakness that Paul boasted about was the thorn in the flesh. Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations that he received, he was given a thorn in the flesh to keep him from exalting himself. Paul describes this thorn in the flesh as a messenger of Satan that was given to torment him. The KJV translates it as “the messenger of Satan to buffet me.” The Greek word is *kolaphizo*, which means to rap with the fist, to discipline, torment, or punish. Paul's emphasis is on why it was given, which was to keep him from exalting himself, and he mentions this twice. There is a wide array of thoughts about what this thorn in the flesh was. Some think it was a sickness or physical disability, while others take the messenger of Satan more literally. The Greek word for messenger is *angelos*, which is where we get our English word, angel. *Angelos* is used 186 times, and it is translated as angel 179 times. There are fallen angels that are under Satan, and there are angels of God, that are faithfully serving Him. The angels under Satan's rule are normally referred to as demons or unclean spirits. So, there are some who believe that there was a demonic spirit that was specifically assigned to Paul, and it continually and constantly tormented Paul.

(2 Co 12:7) “Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, **to keep me from exalting myself**, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me—**to keep me from exalting myself!**”

There is some debate among scholars as to whether a believer can be possessed by a demonic spirit or not. I believe that when we are born again, we receive the Holy Spirit and we become temples of the Holy Spirit. In Romans 8:14 we see that those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. They are under the authority, direction, supervision, and leading by the Holy Spirit. When a person receives Christ, he is born of the Spirit and sealed with the Holy Spirit. Those who are demon-possessed are under the authority, direction, and leading by the demonic spirit. I do not believe that Paul was led by a demonic spirit. I do not believe he was possessed by a demonic spirit. I believe that a demonic spirit was assigned to Paul and his instructions were to torment Paul. God is sovereign and allowed this demonic spirit to torment Paul so that Paul would not exalt himself. We know that God allowed this because Paul implored the Lord three times that it might leave him. God could have easily made the demonic spirit leave, but He allowed it to remain.

(Ro 8:14) “For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.”

(2 Cor 12:8) “Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me.”

God's response to Paul's request was, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.” God did not remove the demonic spirit, but allowed it to remain. What God did do for Paul was give him the grace to handle whatever was tormenting him. We find a second reason that God allowed this messenger of Satan to torment Paul. The first reason was to keep him from exalting himself, i.e., to remain humble. The second reason was that power is perfected in weakness. This demonic spirit kept Paul in a weak condition, relying upon God's power, which was being perfected in Paul. Therefore, after imploring God three times, Paul said, “Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.” Paul was well content with weaknesses, insults, distresses, persecutions, and difficulties because when he was weak, then he was strong with the power of God. Paul boasted in the thorn in the flesh because through that weakness, the power of God was dwelling in him and being perfected.

(2 Cor 12:9-10) “And He has said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.” Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. {10} Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.”

## **Conclusion and Applications**

Paul felt compelled to boast, even though he said it was not profitable. If he was going to boast, he was going to boast in his weaknesses, which goes contrary to what most of us would do. Paul did not want to have anyone think more of him than they saw or heard, and he spoke the humble truth.

Paul gave three examples of boasting in his weaknesses. The first weakness was his escape from Damascus. The Jews had convinced the ethnarch of Damascus to put Paul to death, so they

assigned guards at all seven of the gates of Damascus to stop him if he tried to escape. The Christians in Damascus heard of the plot and let him down the wall through a small window or door in the wall. Paul fled Damascus as a fugitive, and had to be helped by others to escape. Paul would endure much suffering in the future, but this was a humble and weak beginning.

Paul's second weakness were the visions and revelations that he received in the third heavens. Paul could not express what was said, and was not permitted to say what he heard. Paul did not know if it was an out of the body experience or in the body. These revelations and visions were given to him by God, and it had nothing to do with Paul's greatness. All things come from God.

Paul's third weakness was the thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan, that was given to torment or buffet him. Paul implored the Lord three times to have it removed, but the Lord allowed it to keep buffeting Paul. The Lord allowed it so that Paul would remain humble and not exalt himself because of the visions. Second, the Lord allowed it so that His power would dwell and be perfected in Paul.

Paul's attitudes are great examples for all of us.

- Do we boast about our strengths so that we look good, or do we boast in our weaknesses so that God receives glory and honor?
- Do we boast and stretch the truth to make things look better, or do we speak only the truth, not wanting anyone to think more of us than what they see or hear?
- When things torment us, do we go to God in prayer? Do we implore the Lord three times like Paul?
- Do we ask God for understanding about the things that we are going through? Do we take time to listen to what He is saying?
- When God responds to our prayers, do we accept His answers with a joyful heart, especially when the answer is not what we asked for?
- Are we more concerned about God's character being formed in us, or are we more concerned about our personal comfort? Paul was tormented to keep him from exalting himself, or to remain humble.
- Are we more concerned about God's power dwelling in us and being perfected than our personal comfort?

### **Closing Prayer**

Father God, thank You for Paul's example. Help us not to boast, but if we boast, may our boast be in You and about You. May we not exalt ourselves and try to get others to think more of us than they should. Help us to be humble servants who always speak truth. Help us to come to You with all the problems and afflictions that we encounter. Help us to take things to You in prayer. As we inquire about problems, give us understanding about why You allow obstacles, difficulties, and distresses in our lives. Give us ears to hear. Give us a joyful heart to accept Your answers, even when they are not what we think should happen. You are the Potter and we are the clay. Mold us and make us, this is what we pray. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.





**Paul's Warning and Defense – Part 5 (2 Cor 11:30-12:10)**

**Introduction** (2 Cor 11:30-12:10)

1. **Damascus Wall Escape** (2 Cor 11:30-33, Ga 4:13–14, 6:11, 1 Cor 2:1-5, Ac 9:19–25)

2. **Third Heaven Revelation** (2 Cor 12:1-6, Ro 11:33–36, Lk 23:42-43)

3. **Thorn in the Flesh** (2 Cor 12:7-10, Ro 8:14)

**Conclusion and Applications**