

MOST ASHAMED OF THE GOSPEL

By D.A. Carson

One of the most surprising passages in Paul's letters to the Corinthians occurs at the end of 2 Corinthians 11. There Paul declares that, for the sake of his argument, he will "boast" about things that show his weakness. What he offers is this: "In Damascus the governor, under Aretas the king, was guarding the city of the Damascenes with a garrison, desiring to arrest me; but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and escaped from his hands" (11:32-33). But why should the apostle want to expose his weaknesses? And why should he think that this brief recital accomplishes the task?

The first of these two questions is not difficult. The context (2 Cor. 10-13) shows that Paul is dealing with a church increasingly corrupted by triumphalism. The Corinthians have become enamored of puffy leaders who parade their rhetoric, disdain manual labor, charge high fees for their teaching, and proclaim their superior spirituality. Without overtly denying a single item of orthodox truth, the "package" of their faith is so far removed from the truth that the apostle charges them with preaching "another Jesus whom we have not preached" (11:4). You would scarcely know that their Jesus ever endured the odium of the cross. You certainly wouldn't know that His followers are expected to take up their cross and follow Him.

This lands Paul in a dilemma. The "false apostles" (11:13) have been discrediting his credentials in order to undermine his authority, even his believability. If he responds by parading those credentials and trumpeting his virtues, he descends to their level and jeopardizes the gospel of the Cross. But if he says nothing, he is in danger of losing this entire church to the clever manipulation of these "deceitful workers" (11:13). What shall he do? Paul inverts the categories of his opponents: he cautiously and with full embarrassment starts to mention some of his credentials (speaking, he says, as a "fool" and not as a Christian, (11:16—21), and then bursts into a list of "virtues" and "credentials" that they would never think of boasting about. He "boasts" that he has worked (i.e., with his own hands) harder than they have – when no first century Greek teacher would ever stoop to any I manual work whatsoever. He "boasts" that he has a longer prison record than they do, that he has been flogged and beaten more than they have, that he has been shipwrecked more times, that he has faced dangers, deprivation, and debilitating hunger more often – all the marks of a failure, even a dangerous failure, as far as they are concerned. But that is his point: his categories and values are far removed from theirs, often the inverse of theirs. As a matter of principle, he will "boast" about the things that show his weakness (11:30).

To climax his list, Paul offers one more example. He is so ashamed of this incident that he actually puts himself under an oath so that he will be believed (11:31). Then he relates the incident: the incident on the Damascus wall when he escapes the guards in a fish basket lowered

through a window. Why does he think this incident exposes his weakness?

Normally Paul was not inclined to run from attack. In Ephesus, when thousands of angry citizens chant for two hours, “Great is Diana of the Ephesians!” a heart less stout than the apostle’s might have been excused for staying away. But Paul wants to speak to the crowd, and the disciples must actively prevent him from attending (Acts 19). Here in Damascus, however, Paul slips away, scuttling into the darkness – and apparently he views it as a moment of shame, a lapse into cowardice.

Perhaps it looked even worse to him because of the most important military award one could receive in those days. The *corona muralis* was awarded to the first soldier of centurion rank or higher to go over the wall at the end of a siege. It took a great deal of courage to go up over the wall; Paul confesses that he was the first down.

And this is the high point of his “boasting” about his weakness! This is the thing of which he is most ashamed! Elsewhere Paul says that he is not ashamed of the Gospel (Rom. 1:16). Perhaps he felt that on that occasion he had been.

This event reflects two important realities. *First*, in Paul’s life the thing of which he was most ashamed or about which he felt he had displayed the most weakness was an incident when, under great pressure, he had fled from his opponents instead of heralding the Gospel to them, whatever the cost. Most of us, if we are frank, remember other things to be ashamed about: overt sin, willful disobedience. Perhaps we should learn some shame for the times when we are silent about the Gospel – normally in circumstances much less sensitive than those the apostle faced.

Second, Paul could “boast” about these events because he knew that the power of the Gospel most mightily displayed itself in him in his weakness. In other words, Paul relies on grace, and grace answers to need and weakness, not self-sufficiency and strength. And grace and the transforming power of the Gospel are more important to him than human autonomy and puffy self-importance.

Dr. Carson is research professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.