

A wonderful theme! This survey of boasting in the Bible warns us against arrogant pride. But we are also warned against spiritual timidity; we need to boast more in the Lord, and the blessings of salvation. Such rejoicing is the path to a healthy spiritual life, and a positive Christ-centred testimony.

Bill James

Principal, London Seminary, London, UK

Josh Moody takes us on a tour of the scriptures that speak about boasting. Building on the foundation of Paul's teaching, especially in Romans but ranging through the two testaments he carefully shows us how the right kind of boasting is an excellent Christian virtue. Building his argument with each text he contrasts the sinful arrogant self-confident boasting of the unbeliever with the humble, steadfast trust in the Lord and desire for His glory alone which marks out the people of God.

Graham Nicholls

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The intrusion of Christianity into the Roman world, a world built on a culture of 'boasting', had many consequences. In this volume of good gospel substance, Pastor Josh Moody helps us redirect our own propensity for the Roman 'boast' in ways that fuel a God-honoring life. I commend it to you.

David Helm

Pastor, Holy Trinity Church, Hyde Park,
Chairman, The Charles Simeon Trust

In *Boasting*, Josh Moody has taken his pastor's heart and biblically grounded insight and given the church an important and needed study of a misunderstood and neglected teaching. Everyone knows how ugly it is to be arrogantly boastful. But the Bible also commands us to boast in Christ for the glory of God. This book clearly and powerfully shows us the difference between sinful, self-centered boasting and boasting that pleases God and exalts in God's greatness. Moody does this by using a careful, comprehensively biblical approach to arrive at his conclusions. I pray that this book will be widely read and that God will get more of the glory, worship, and trust He deserves because of it.

Erik Thoennes

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This book is a great combination of biblical exposition, historical insights and pastoral application. Christians need to grapple with this neglected but important theme of 'boasting', and Josh's exploration of it will certainly help to shape our discipleship. I highly recommend it!

Simon Gathercole

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This one is dedicated to Elijah:

May you never boast in anything except the cross of Christ.

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This book is solely for the glory of God.

At a small consultation of about twenty senior pastors and Christian business leaders in 2010, Billy Graham said he wanted to preach one last time on the text: 'God forbid that I should glory [or, boast], save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ' (Gal. 6:14, KJV).

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Have you ever felt stuck between trying to be humble while also wanting to be confident? Perhaps someone tells you not to ‘push yourself forward’ but then someone else tells you to ‘stand up for what is right’. What is the difference between the two? How is it possible for you yourself to stand up for what is right if you do not at the same time also (in some way or other) assert yourself?

Or, perhaps you are a preacher, and you have been told that preaching is God’s truth mediated through personality. Well, if that is at least one appropriate definition of preaching, then how can you both let God’s truth shine through your personality, and also at the same time get out of the way and let the text speak for itself? However hard you try to ‘let the text speak for itself’, if you are preaching then that voice of the text will still come forward with your own personal voice, your accent, your mode of thinking and operating. How can you preach humbly, when the very act of preaching is to herald the truth?

Or maybe you have noticed the criticism of ‘celebrity pastors’. You don’t want to be one of those, and you don’t want to encourage anyone else to be a ‘celebrity pastor’ either. And yet, at the same time, how is it possible publicly and boldly to advance God’s name if no one even knows your name (if you are the one doing the promotion of God’s name)? Where is the line between self-promotion (usually thought to be wrong) and you yourself promoting God

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(usually thought to be right)? Or, perhaps you wonder how it is possible for someone who is conscious of their own failings and sins to be at the same time rejoicingly confident in their status before God and in their eternal salvation?

I have thought about these questions a lot recently. I have become frustrated by the ‘celebrity’ culture, and yet also equally frustrated by the lack of standing up for what is right, sharing the gospel, and living lives with holy zeal. I believe the answer lies in grasping the biblical teaching about *boasting*. There is the wrong kind, of course, but also (most strangely and most biblically) there is a right kind. There *is* a kind of boasting that is biblical and healthy, humble and holy: good for society, the church, your family, your relationships; good for your marriage, for your parents, for your children; good for God’s glory.

Now, I might as well say it at the outset, but by considering this theme of boasting, the last thing in the world I want to encourage is pride. ‘Let me tell you why I am so brilliant and you are not.’ There are people who are so puffed up that their heads can hardly fit through the doors of their homes, their churches, or their businesses. Unlike most diseases, pride is often invisible to the person in its captivity.

At some point or other, you will figure out if you have cancer, a bowel disease or a serious infection. You will even at some point or other know whether you are addicted to sex or drugs, depressed, angry, or filled with hate, or stealing from your employer. You may deny these things to yourself, but if you are successful at denying them for any length of time, the reason is because you are using a far greater cloaking mechanism, which is really the sin behind the sin: that is pride.

Arrogance is pride on speed. It is not simply feeling good about yourself beyond all possibility of reasonable self-assessment; it is making sure that others know it and pushing them down at the same time. Arrogant people ‘arrogate’ (or take) to themselves things that belong to other

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people: their reputation, goods, or countries. Proud people merely believe they are better than other people, but they haven't yet stepped over the line to shoving their purported superiority down other people's throats.

Those who are proud are usually immune to self-discovery, because the nature of pride is to think that you are fine. I've always loved Charles Spurgeon's famous line about pride, in a paper he wrote on the topic entitled, 'Humility and How I Achieved It.' Woe betide the man who tries to write the book on humility if he does it without a lashing of self-deprecating humour! In fact, in many ways, the best antidote to pride is laughter. Not laughing at other people – that's more pride – but laughing at yourself. We take God seriously; we don't take ourselves seriously. Even that sentence makes us laugh a little.

No, I am not trying to increase the proportion of people who are immune to self-discovery and blind to their own pride – may their tribe decrease. I am trying to show you that there is another way than merely saying: get low, get down, do less, don't be so pushy. Self-denial is important; it is biblical. It is just not the *only* thing the Bible says. If you've never denied yourself, taken up your cross, and followed Jesus, then I encourage you to stop right now and consider this: You are not God. Jesus is God.

But what then? What do we do with the energy that God has given us? What do we do with the gifts that God has given us? How do we use them? How we do make the most of who we are as people, as individuals, as groups? If God is completely and utterly sovereign (as I believe He is), then does that mean that we simply spend our lives getting really low and letting Him get on with running the place? Or is part of His sovereignty expressed in giving us gifts to use for His glory? If the answer is that we are to use our gifts for His glory, then how do we do *that* without self-assertion or pushing ourselves forward – either becoming proud or being accused of being proud?

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For me, the answer is in the biblical teaching about boasting.

This book comes out of an experience we had in our congregation when I preached on a verse in Romans 5. I preached through the Letter to the Romans *very* slowly; I will not tell you how long it took me to get to chapter 5 because it's a little embarrassing. All I can say is I'm a slow learner and Romans is hard, and it has taken me a long time to be sure I got various parts of it myself, let alone communicated it to others.

There we were going through Romans at a snail's pace, and we got to chapter 5, verse 2. It was one of the most surprising experiences I have had as a preacher. God seemed to take hold of that message and make it fly. Now, those of us who are preachers will know that sometimes this happens, and we cannot predict always when, and at other times even the same message does not have the same impact. We do our work, we prepare well, God uses His Word, it never returns empty, but sometimes it produces a thirty times harvest, other times a hundredfold. This was definitely of the hundredfold variety: but more than that, not just an 'anointing' of a subjective kind. There was a resonance in my mind, and all of our minds, on the theme of true biblical boasting.

Now this book is not simply a ridiculously elongated version of that sermon. We will look at that key text itself later in the book. But I also want to scan back and put the whole topic of boasting into biblical context.

My thesis is this: *When you boast rightly, you live rightly, and you bear much fruit to God's honour.*

1.

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The apostle Paul has this reputation of being angular and difficult, troublesome and overly-zealous. Actually, nothing could be further from the truth. Paul had a lot of friends: the first of a few examples we can take. You can find long lists of these friends at the end of his letters, most particularly at the end of Romans. Person after person was greeted by name. There were details; there was affection. We also know that Paul had key co-workers. It is true he had an argument with one of them (an argument with Barnabas about Mark; see Acts 15:39), but the evidence suggests that by the end Paul had reconciled with this co-worker¹. Others were dearly beloved, honoured, fellow workers.² That kind of affectionate, real relationship cannot happen if the person is angular, difficult, troublesome, or hard-to-get-along-with.

This matter of boasting is strange, however, all things considered. Paul, of course, like all followers of Jesus, was against arrogance, self-centred pride, and the like. He urged Christians not to think more highly of themselves than was related to the grace that they had received (Rom. 12:3), but to consider themselves as debtors to mercy alone (a line from the famous hymn, but echoed in Paul in many places, as in Rom. 12:1, Eph. 4:1); he urged them to consider others

1 1 Corinthians 9:6; 2 Timothy 4:11; Colossians 4:10.

2 Look at the beginning of Paul's letters: for instance, Philippians 1:1; Colossians 1:1; 1 Thessalonians 1:1; or the end of his letters, as in, Romans 16:3-16.

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as better than themselves (Phil. 2:3). He wanted followers of Jesus to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ (Eph. 5:21). He wanted leaders to lead with grace and humility, focusing on Christ and the gospel (1 Cor. 11:1). No doubt he would have agreed with Peter that leaders are not to be domineering over those in their care, but be examples to them (1 Pet. 5:2-3); and also with the Letter to the Hebrews, that followers are to submit to the leaders, not in a negative, self-loathing way, but honouring the difficult task of leadership, and being the sort of person that is a joy to lead (Heb. 13:17).

But boasting still remained. At one point, he said it was excluded, and excluded from the Christian by being a debtor to mercy alone, saved by grace, not by works, so that no one can boast. Yet at another point, he said that he boasted. He would go on boasting; he boasted in his weakness. Boasting in Paul is a conundrum.

What does it mean to boast in weakness? What does it mean to be so confident, so assured, so exulting that it can be said that you are boasting – while at the same time, in another way, you are not to be boasting at all? Some, of course, would say that Paul was simply inconsistent in his thinking. Those of us who love the Bible will be unlikely to want to admit that solution, however simple and attractive it might be at one level. Why could we not simply say that Paul, at a human level, was not consistent in his thinking in this regard? Sometimes in the very same letter he would at one time speak against pride and boasting, and a little bit later speak in favour of boasting. The most obvious example of that is Romans, chapters 3 to 5. Chapter 3 culminates in a denial of boasting – it was excluded (Rom. 3:27). Chapter 5 begins with a call to boast – in another way, and in a different manner (Rom. 5:2; ‘rejoice’ or literally ‘boast’).

‘Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord!’³ Yes, but what does that *mean*? What does it mean to ‘boast in the

3 1 Corinthians 1:31; 2 Corinthians 10:17; Jeremiah 9:23-24, ESV.

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Lord'? Does that mean singing songs or going to church? Does it mean doing evangelism or social justice? Is it a disposition of the heart or a kind of psychology? Is it about the orientation of your affections, or is it more about how you think rationally? Or is it more that the 'fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom' (Ps. 111:10)?

It is important to ask what Paul meant by 'boasting', because at a surface level, what he meant by it is not consistent. If Paul was a consistent thinker (as we should at least grant any author the possibility before ruling them inconsistent), then his thinking about boasting must be different from ours. What did Paul mean by boasting? His lack of consistency cannot simply be contextualization. He cannot simply be saying this to one audience in this way, and then using the same word in a slightly different way to a different audience. Anyone who is a teacher, an author, or a preacher will know that that kind of variegated communication is more than legitimate. When you use a word in one context, you may use the same word slightly differently in another context. Failure to spot context in communication leads to all sorts of misunderstanding.

A favourite example of this in my own life was a book I wrote with some friends about a rather academic topic. The weight of the book was well-defined in its promotion, and yet the comments on Amazon – which generally are unwise to read, I am told, but strangely compelling, I find nonetheless – ranged from those who loved its content to those who said it was hard to grasp, difficult, or above their heads. Other things I have written have been at a less academic level. But there I was using a similar form of communication (a book) with some similar words to communicate in quite a different way to a different audience! The old story is that Queen Victoria so loved the famous children's story *Alice in Wonderland* that she ordered the next book by the same author as soon as it was published – only to discover

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that the next book was a very technical treatise on higher mathematics.

But Paul cannot be doing that. He cannot be using the same word in different ways as he communicated to different contexts, because some of the conflict in the meaning of the word (broadly speaking, either meaning something negative or something positive) is found in the same letters written to the same churches, therefore the same audience. It is unlikely that Paul was inconsistent unintentionally in the space of a few hundred words in the same letter. Not if we grant Paul any modicum of intelligence or skill as a writer.

A further possibility, a simple-level answer to the inconsistency in Paul – that lets the inconsistency be, rather than digs for any deeper meaning – is that Paul was *deliberately* inconsistent. A certain form of writing intends to shake up the reader by using words in different ways in the same context in order to create a sort of cognitive dissonance that causes the reader to ask harder questions than appear on the surface. Could Paul have been using this technique? It is not impossible, but it is unlikely because this technique only mirrors parallel developments in other art, the surrealists and other non-literalistic movements of a similar kind that took place hundreds of years after Paul was writing. To call Paul deliberately inconsistent to cause a response as a non-literalistic author is a gross anachronism not too dissimilar to wondering whether Paul wrote on a MacBook or PC laptop.

So what is behind this apparently inconsistent use of boasting in Paul? Or to put it more simply, what on earth did Paul mean by saying that in some way or other it was a good thing to boast (while having also said it was not a good thing to boast)? Boasting in Paul was somehow integral to who he was and what he did and what he represented as a Christian figure in the early church – the great apostle, missionary, author. Something integral to his personality revolved around understanding this matter of boasting.

Paul's story

But if it was so integral to his agenda and his person, then how did that show itself in the story of his life? What did it mean for Paul to boast in practice in the actual decisions of his life? If we can get a handle on how he lived out his idea of boasting in his work and in his living, then it might help us put feet on the idea of boasting in our own lives, too, and apply it to our situations and our lives.

None of us is the Apostle Paul – inspired author of Holy Scripture – and yet all of us face daily challenges when the wrestling with what it means to be humble, and yet also to take initiative, can be very real indeed. How do we honour the growing identity of our teenage son while at the same time continuing to take the appropriate lead over his life? How do we respect our boss while at the same time taking initiative and leadership of our own work area?

This matter of boasting is far more than something for an apostle and far more than something only for a religious person. It is something for us all. If it was so central to Paul's thinking, then perhaps the way it impacted his life could show us that it is potentially central not only to our thinking, but also to our living as well. Certainly, a pastor, minister, vicar, priest, or monk needs to be humble, and yet at the same time also lead and take action, and sometimes risk daringly for Christ. So for a minister or religious leader, then, this matter of boasting could be very real and relevant for their lives, but not only for the religious life. It could also impact all lives – from the bus driver to the astronaut.

How, then, did Paul's *thinking* about boasting impact his actual *living*? To answer that question, we will need to have a clear picture of Paul's life story. Fortunately, we have plenty of material to help us answer that question because Paul's life is described in some detail by his companion Luke in the book of the Bible called the Acts of the Apostles.

That story begins as a description of the pouring out of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles, and then focuses in

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more and more on one particular apostle, the Apostle Paul. Paul was hardly mentioned at all to begin with. But then the story of the religious persecutor of the early Christian movement – who was converted dramatically on the road to Damascus, and then was sent by the church at Antioch as a missionary – became so dramatically central that it began to dominate the rest of Luke’s account of the early days of the New Testament church, so much so that the second half of the Acts of the *Apostles* could also be renamed the Acts of the *Apostle*.

Paul certainly had no problem with pushing himself forward – or at least he apparently had no problem with Luke pushing him forward. I am not for the moment suggesting that Paul was self-serving: that would not do justice to the man who was whipped and beaten, and would give his right eye for the churches that he founded. He literally died for other people – and frequently risked his life for them along the way. It would be absurd to allow ourselves to characterize Paul in any way, shape, or form as self-serving. No doubt he was a sinner, so he was not entirely void of selfishness. (Who could be? Only God is perfect.) But Paul’s evident ability to take up the limelight or move to the centre of the stage cannot be interpreted as a self-serving agenda. His vigorous activities were for the good of others, for the founding of churches, for the shepherding of people, and for the preaching of God’s gospel (not his own gospel).

But nonetheless, Paul did take up the lion’s share of the attention of the Christian movement in the pages of Acts and (arguably) within the New Testament too, or at least certainly as evidenced by the number of letters that he wrote. Paul wrote more letters that are retained in the canon of the New Testament than any other apostle. He did not himself – it is true – write one of the four Gospel accounts of the life of Jesus. But even so, tradition has it that Luke’s Gospel (the same Luke who wrote the Acts of the Apostles) was the record of Paul’s preaching of Jesus, as well as the careful

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gathering of all the facts; that Paul's preaching was fuelled by the sort of evidence that he gathered from others and from Luke's work; and that Luke's Gospel was authorized by the apostolic authority of Paul. That, at least, is the tradition. While scholars have debated that since, the very fact that Paul is viewed as somehow or other also behind Luke's Gospel, as well as his own letters, and the way he dominates the second half of Acts, shows what a powerful figure Paul became in the minds of the New Testament church.

This has led some to feel deeply ambivalent about Paul. Some have even suggested that the Christianity we have inherited is as much (if not more) 'Paulinism' as it is 'Christianism'. They view the Gospels, and then they view Paul, and they see a disparity – forgetting, I and many others would argue, the reality that the Gospels were actually written after many of the letters and authorized by the men who wrote the letters. Comparing the tenor and tone of the New Testament Gospel accounts of Jesus to the letters written to the churches about how to follow Jesus as a local church is like comparing chalk with cheese. The one records the preaching of Jesus, the other records preaching about Jesus; the one records the Jesus who preached, the other records the people who preached Jesus. Finding a difference between them is as unsurprising as finding a difference between the autobiographical accounts of a great political leader like Winston Churchill and the records of his speeches in the House of Commons. Neither are untrue, neither are false; they are simply different because they are records of different aspects of his life. Paul's preaching was about Jesus; the Gospel accounts record the life of this Jesus that he preached.

If this is true, then, we would expect to see Paul's life – this life of a particularly unique individual – increasingly wrapped around and enveloped by the other completely and utterly unique and uniquely masterful personality that resonates throughout the Scriptures. You would expect to

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find, as it were, Jesus and Jesus' cross increasingly bleeding through the personality of Paul. While Paul is still his own person, we would expect to see him increasingly become more and more himself as he becomes more and more the person he was meant to be, as designed by his Creator, and as redeemed by his Saviour. And if boasting was as significant (not central – we would expect Jesus Himself to be central) to Paul's thinking as we have discovered, then in Paul's living we would expect to see that this boasting was somehow connected to his enraptured encounter and following of Christ. In other words, we would expect to find out in practice and in the story of his own life what it meant for Paul to 'boast in the Lord'.

To see whether this is actually the case – whether boasting in the Lord for Paul, in his own life, was integral to his joy in Jesus in a practical and real sense – we will need to do a little bit more than rehearse his well-known story. The basic facts are clear and reasonably familiar. Paul (then known as Saul) was a Pharisee. He trained in Jerusalem under Gamaliel, one of the great famous Rabbinic masters of his age. He was 'top of his class', excelling in his discipleship. He was from Tarsus, and he was a tentmaker.

Paul persecuted the early church, going from house to house dragging Christians off to jail. He approved of the stoning to death of one of the early Christian leaders, a deacon named Stephen. Incensed with religious fervour, Paul was given permission to pursue this persecution agenda yet further and was travelling to Damascus for this purpose when a bright light shone around him and a voice spoke to him. He was blinded, and his companions, while they saw the light, heard no voice. But the voice said to Paul, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' A Christian disciple named Ananias was told by the Lord to go visit this Saul. He initially resisted, understandably enough given that Paul was persecuting Christians like Ananias, but then agreed to go and pray for Paul. Paul was again able to

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see, and from then on went on to serve Jesus in a blaze of passionate commitment.⁴

Paul went down to Jerusalem to meet with the apostles there. He went to Antioch to join the international community of Christians in that city and became one of its leading preachers. He was sent out, along with his friend Barnabas, from that church to plant churches. From then on Paul began first one journey and then others, planting churches and visiting churches he had planted. He confronted the Jerusalem leaders regarding 'Judaizers' who had come out from them claiming their authority, telling the Christians (that Paul had led to Jesus) that, unless they followed the whole law as well, they could not be saved. Paul had nothing against the law per se, but he saw this as a denigration of Jesus' role as sole Saviour and preached passionately against this legalism in his letter to the Galatian churches, and then in the council of Jerusalem when he told how the Gentiles had been converted.

Paul kept on preaching and planting churches. He conceived a vision of collecting money from the wealthier Gentile churches to take to the poorer Jerusalem church. As he went back to Jerusalem to give this gift, Paul was warned by a prophet named Agabus that going to Jerusalem would mean that he would be imprisoned. Paul took this as a warning, but not a divine command, and determined to go anyway. He was duly arrested in Jerusalem, and then when his life was put in danger by followers of the law, he appealed to the highest court in the Empire, namely the personal court of Caesar himself. As a Roman citizen from his birth in Tarsus, Paul was allowed this right. Finally, after a shipwreck (Paul had warned the captain not to sail so late in the season, and when his warning was ignored, spoke to them about their safety through a divine word from God), he arrived in Rome. Luke's account in the Acts of the Apostles left Paul in his own house, under house arrest,

4 See Acts 9.

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awaiting trial, and doing what Paul did best: preaching, first to the Jewish synagogues of the city before taking the gospel to the Gentiles.

Those are the bare facts. They are colourful, arresting, and well-known. But what do they mean? In particular, what do they mean for this topic of boasting? How did boasting, and Paul's thinking about it, impact his life? Certainly, Paul was no wallflower, no shrinking violet. Paul's life was on a purpose, on a mission: he had something that he was called to accomplish, and, with deep conviction that this was his life's work, he went after it with every bone of his being. This begins to look a little like the kind of boasting that we read about in Paul's letters, and the thinking that we have discerned behind Paul's use of that term starts to percolate through the story of his life.

But we need to do some more digging. There are intriguing holes in the bare facts of the well-known story of Paul's life. Was Paul single? Why? Was he never married, or did he become unmarried for one reason or another? Paul preached against the law and yet circumcised Timothy; he lived in accordance with the law when in Jerusalem, and shaved his head in what was probably a kind of Nazirite vow. Paul had good friends, a team that he worked with. Yet he had a falling out with Barnabas, and his letters are filled with the kind of passionate friction that you would rarely discover in a more peacemaking character. His letters certainly read differently than the other apostles such as John, or even James or Peter, who were equally clear on sin. Paul's determination to cause a church to become Christ-like had an intensity and a burning ardor to it that was quite unlike the kind of emotion you read in the other letters.

Why did Paul go to Jerusalem when warned by the Spirit about what would happen when he got there? What happened to Paul after the story of Acts closed and the narrative discontinued in the text of the Bible with no more information given, at least from the standpoint of Acts?

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How do the rest of Paul's letters fit into the narrative of Acts? And (for our purposes) what does all this mean for his understanding of boasting?

Are we reading about someone who was – to use non-medical language – a little screwy at times; who, if not mentally unhinged for sure, was certainly emotionally wrought and passionately engaged; who might have had one or two 'issues' from his childhood if he were put on a counsellor's couch today? To what extent was Paul whole? To what extent was the way he acted inspired by God – brilliant teacher, inspired author, shaped by purpose – and to what extent was it driven by unrecognized needs? To what extent were his ability and willingness to push himself forward in the cause of Christ shaped by his purpose and a mature, deep understanding of boasting? And to what extent was it all just the outworking of a personality desperate to make up for the terrible guilt that he felt about having persecuted Christ's church?

To answer these questions, we need to take seriously not only the obvious facts about Paul's life, but read them in the light of his letters and so discern their meaning, as well as imagine possible backgrounds that will fit into that meaning. We need not colour in the lines to get a picture, certainly not make up or invent anything, but listen carefully to what is being said, why it is being said, and therefore what it could mean. We don't need to put Paul on the couch, but we do need to treat him with the respect he deserves.

We can dispense with the idea that he was driven by guilt very quickly. If any man knew what it was to be free from guilt, it was Paul. He preached grace incessantly. And yet, of course, one wonders why he preached it so incessantly? Perhaps he knew firsthand how important it was to hear that message of grace over and over again. When we read Galatians and find a man who was almost violently opposed to legalism, can we detect someone who knew all too well what it was like to live legalistically? A man who has been in

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the jaws of a shark is unlikely to recommend the experience to others.

But if Paul was not driven by guilt, could he have been driven by its counterpoint – that is, by the ‘zeal of the convert’? Could it be that Paul had discovered in his own experience exactly what it was like to be surrounded by innumerable rules and to try to attain them, and (in his own estimation) actually become legalistically faultless, yet still be empty? Those who say that Paul did not wrestle with a sense of guilt, at least pre-conversion, have not walked in the shoes of a successful legalist. Being a successful legalist is far worse than being an unsuccessful legalist.

An unsuccessful legalist, one who knows that he fails in some regard, at least has the comfort of knowing that there is more left for him to achieve. His gnawing sense of unease can be daily satiated by the thought *if only I did this, or that, or the other, then I would be free!* But the successful legalist is not so fortunate. In his own estimation, he has done all that needs to be done. But he is still driven on; he still feels empty. Yet there is nothing that he can see within his own framework and mental worldview left for him to achieve.

It is a desperate situation, one that Jesus diagnosed in Paul at his conversion when he said that it was hard for Paul to ‘kick against the goads’. Jesus has this ability to cut to the chase, pull no punches, and tell it like it is. That is, he saw Paul like a donkey, and a donkey that was not willing to go where his master wanted him to go. He was rebelling against God’s true intention through the Scriptures. He was a successful legalist, viewing the law as a series of achievable standards for human beings, rather than understanding its deeper meaning. As Paul said in Romans, it was when he read that he should not covet that he realized that he had not kept the law at all. He was legalistically faultless externally, but internally he was full of brokenness and disappointment. The gnawing sense he had as a successful legalist, refusing the prodding and poking and conviction of God that he was

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on the wrong path, kept him ceaselessly unhappy, looking for more and more extreme forms of devotion, even to the persecution of his fellow Jews who were now following the Messiah.

So if Paul was not *now* riven by guilt, he certainly had been – even if he had not realized it himself until Christ pointed it out to him. (‘It is hard for you to kick against the goads,’⁵ or, in other words, ‘It is hard for you to constantly be prodded and pushed, and urged and convicted, to go in a certain direction, a place of healing and joy, and to refuse and keep on going down the same old legalistic path.’) If Paul certainly had been riven by guilt, and now in Christ was gloriously, marvellously free of that guilt, could it be that Paul was now, as a Christian leader, driven on by the zeal of the convert? That is, was Paul’s motivation, the reason behind his concept of boasting, a zeal that came from an over-compensation of what he had been trapped by in the past?

You see this sort of thing all the time. There is the person who *used* to think that sports cars were the best thing ever to own, who *now* realizes that really it is better to have an off-road 4x4 Jeep. He now can be the kind of person who so distances himself from sports cars that he almost cannot prevent himself from sneering at people who still like those silly, small, puny vehicles – when he has a great big, whacking Hummer 4x4. Similarly, the person who *used* to like Superhero movies, and *now* cannot stand them and is bored by them and never wants to see them again, is hard-pressed to avoid saying that the person who still likes Batman is juvenile or immature or ‘has not seen the light’.

Paul, quite literally, did see the light. Is it possible that his passionate zeal for grace, and this idea of enthusiastic boasting in that grace, came from the zeal of the convert? That he had seen the light, and to compensate for the years that he spent beforehand, he now was driven to make up for

5 Acts 26:14.

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it by rescuing as many people as possible from the situation into which he had put himself?

It is certainly possible that Paul was driven by the zeal of the convert. Possible, that is, until you consider Paul's life as a whole: what we know about him before his Damascus Road conversion, as well as what we know about him after his Damascus Road conversion. You see, people who are driven on by a desire to overcompensate for the mistakes of the past tend to act with the kind of passion, a sort of false zeal, that is not true to their own nature and personality. Before they saw the light, they were rather sleepy and disinterested. Now they are running around everywhere, acting out of character by telling people they are going to hell unless they convert – and telling them three times a day before breakfast and their first cup of coffee. They are, in other words, this 'zeal of the convert' kind of people, not being true to themselves. They are driven on by something, not expressing something true of who they really are.

But it was not so with Paul. Paul was always zealous. He told us as much; his zeal before he came to Christ was almost all-consuming. He still had zeal after coming to Christ, though a different kind. Paul was not like a person who has a fake kind of zeal stuck on to his personality by some psychological manipulation of a cult. He was like the person who has always been rather good at doing carpentry, who used to construct handmade rocking chairs to sell in his boss's store, but who is now making them for his own shop and has gone into business by himself. Nothing in his core personality, preferences, or gift-makeup has really changed; on the other hand, everything in his person has changed. It is now being done for a different purpose, a different goal. But he is still recognisably the same person. That picture is much more like Paul. He would have been one of the most zealous Pharisees of his (and any) age. Instead, he became one of the most zealous Christians of his (and any) age. Paul's core person was fundamentally and completely

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changed from Saul the persecutor of Christians, and yet he was still the same person at the same time. This was no doubt what freaked out the Christians who remembered the Saul who had dragged some of them off to prison.

No, in order to understand Paul's motivations – surely as complex as our own motivations (and who knows the heart but the Lord?) – we need to move beyond the pop-psychology or the simplistic reductionism of late nineteenth-century-theological criticism and embrace a more truly critical, genuinely understanding, insightful approach to the drives of this person we call Paul. Could it be, in other words, that he was not driven on by something, but that he was driving? The difference is all-important. The person who is driven is being driven by something or by someone. But the person who has a purpose, a goal, or an objective is pursuing that purpose, goal, or objective. They are driving; they are not being driven by anyone or anything else.

Of course, Christians would want to say that they are not in the driver's seat of their lives, but that Jesus Himself is sovereign over them. And, of course, that was true for Paul and should be true for each of us: increasingly so as we surrender more of our lives to Jesus. But the strange, wonderful, glorious truth about surrendering your life to Jesus is that, as you lose your life for Him, you find your life. This experience – some would call it paradoxical – is at the core of what is so attractive about the call of discipleship. We find ourselves as we lose ourselves in some bigger purpose. This is different from being driven on by some psychological urge. It is like finding who we are for the first time. Nowhere is this paradox truer – some would say that it is only ever true – than with Jesus Himself.

So Paul had Jesus driving his life, and in that sense he was being driven by his Lord and Master, Christ. But Jesus is not that sort of Master. He does not drive us like a herd of cattle. He calls us to Himself, like an ancient Shepherd, and His sheep hear His voice, and they follow Him.

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Each of us may express this paradox in different ways: not truly a paradox, as conventionally understood, meaning a contradiction, but a three-dimensional Trinitarian truth. Each of us will find within our own lives and within our own personalities the call of Christ shaping us: as He wants to shape us to be more who we were meant to be as individuals. The call of Christ is collective; it does come to us all, the whole church, corporeally. But it also comes to us individually, as Christ calls us by name, and we hear His voice and we follow Him. We are driving, but now we have purpose. We are free to live lives as we were designed to live them, no longer being shaped by external forces and expectations or by internal compulsions and drives, but now truly being who we were made to be in relation to the One who made us. And each of us will find our own way of being a child of the Father God.

For Paul, it centred around this idea of boasting. Each time we look at the story of Paul's life, we see this zealous, passionate, committed, emotional (that is, in the sense of affectional), relational, highly intellectual, suffering, devoted, friendly but not weak, educated but not bookish, preacher but not preachy person – and each time running through it is a sort of exuberant exulting. A kind of, well, boasting.

The letters

In several places in Paul's correspondence, this idea of boasting comes across. We need to look at those places and discover what they mean in their context, within the purpose and meaning of each individual letter, and then see if there is a concurrent connection of meaning across the various letters to find ourselves closer to what Paul meant by boasting. We will touch on Paul's use of boasting in Romans (a key text for any understanding of what Paul said, and in particular what he said about boasting), but it will be limited by the desire to look specifically and closely at the

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key text about boasting in Paul's writings: Romans 5:2. We will do that in a later chapter in this book, but now we will survey, at a higher, less detailed level, the writings of Paul with regard to boasting. Is it possible that this is at least a key to understanding what Paul said, who Paul was as a person, and what that can mean for us as we learn from his example as he followed the example of Christ?

Romans

Let's start with Romans, which is Paul's most famous letter and has been highly praised by its readers ever since it was first read. It is viewed as one of the greatest works of literature, one of the most inspirational pieces of spiritual writing, and also (frankly) as one of the most difficult texts to understand. Questions about the overlying message of Romans abound, but even more surprisingly, there is no clear agreement among scholars as to what exactly made Paul write Romans in the first place. Most of his letters have a reasonably obvious rationale for their writing, even if the precise nature of that rationale is also debated; in other letters, unlike in Romans, the zone of reason for writing is fairly well agreed. But in Romans, some say he wrote it because this was his theological masterpiece; others say he wrote it to deal with a rising tension between Jews and Gentiles in the Roman church. There are others who say he wrote it because he wanted to prepare the way for asking Rome to support his missionary work to Spain. Some say Romans is a theological treatise for its own sake; others that it is written to increase unity and mutual understanding between Jews and Gentile Christians in the church at Rome. There are those who say it was a fundraising letter. Other possibilities also exist: Paul at times appeared to be defending himself against charges of being antinomian, as it is technically known. That is, people were saying that Paul's preaching of grace was giving people licence to live immoral lifestyles. So Romans deals a lot with the law and

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also with a call to live as obedient to God with what Paul called ‘the obedience of faith’. Some others then say that perhaps Romans had several different purposes and ask why we should identify one over against the other.

My own view is that Paul tells us later in the letter precisely why he was writing it when he said that he had written quite boldly at times so that, increasingly from Rome, there would be a gospel movement to all nations. I believe Paul saw Rome as a key epicentre. It is hard for us to imagine again exactly how central Rome was to the ancient world. Rome was everything for many people. ‘All roads lead to Rome’ – it was the centre of the world. For a missionary, apostle, and church planter like Paul, this was the urban centre to motivate movement towards outward expansionism for the cause of Christ.

I think this overarching purpose is why Paul touched on other things too: defending his own ministry against misunderstandings, looking for money for the gospel purpose, writing a theological treatise that would stand the test of time. Anyone who has been in church planting, missionary work, or leading a church towards a growth mindset for the cause of Christ will know that it is paramount that there is a deep, real, practical, and profound theological superstructure to the whole thing. Paul was trying to put in place foundational building blocks for the church at Rome to have the kind of global impact that indeed it did have, in one way or another.

With that in mind, we find throughout the letter a thread that connects to this idea of boasting; or if not a thread, a see-saw, or even better a switch. In the first half of Romans, Paul’s use of boasting was always negative. He talked about religious people who boasted about their relationship to God (Rom. 2:17). He talked about the same sort of religious people who boasted about the law of God (2:23). In each case they were hypocritical, for they did not keep the law that they boasted about. Then he went on to say, most

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remarkably, that this boasting was entirely ‘excluded’ (3:27) because actual salvation is by grace, not by works or by law. So in this early part of Romans, the idea of boasting for Paul was negative; it was counterposed to actual religious performance so that it showed the sort of hypocrisy that some religious people can fall into – the Pharisees who were often shown by Jesus to be hypocrites, while boasting about their tithes and their fasting.

But then, the switch in Romans 5. Paul changed how he used boasting: ‘we boast in the hope of the glory of God’ (verse 2, my translation). So now boasting is positive. It is exulting, exciting, celebratory. It is also something that shows our triumph even over suffering: ‘we boast in our sufferings’ (5:3, my translation).

Notice that Paul did not say we boast *because* of our sufferings, or even *in spite of* our sufferings. He said we boast *in* our sufferings. Why? Paul’s thinking, as he went on to explain, was that for the Christ-follower, suffering has a purpose: it makes us stronger; it does not defeat us; it prepares us; and it strengthens us. Suffering ‘produces’ something under God’s sovereign hand of love in our lives: it produces perseverance, character, and hope (5:3-4). In other words, it makes us strong people who will keep going and always be filled with confident joy about the future that will come under God’s mighty power. This is all a very positive view of boasting.

Then, to cap off this top-and-tail pericope in verse 11, he said wait, there’s more. Not only is there all this exulting, this boasting, in hope of the glory of God and in sufferings – so nothing need dissuade us from boasting – but we also actually boast ‘in God’. That is, we are now able to be so confident in our relationship to God that we boast in God Himself. Nothing can move us therefore. But the switch in Romans is remarkable: in Romans 2:17, boasting in their relationship to God was negative; now in Romans 5:11, boasting in God was positive!

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Paul did not return to boasting again in Romans until much later in the book (11:18, NRSV). There he offered a word of warning. ‘Do not boast over those branches’; that is, you Gentiles who are now grafted into the vine of God, don’t boast about that to the other people, the Jewish people. He said, ‘Do not be arrogant, but tremble’ (Rom. 11:20). There is a warning that we do not become arrogant in case we too are ‘cut off’. So boasting is not without its dangers or limits. And it should not lead to boasting over other people. We are not better than anyone else, for it is all by grace.

But then finally, Paul said that he himself boasts: ‘Therefore I boast in Christ Jesus in my service to God’ (Rom. 15:17, my translation). This again is a positive view of boasting and one that is modeled by Paul himself. It came at a point in the letter where he was concluding his argument and bringing himself in as an example of what he had been saying. Therefore, because of this purpose of writing the letter, and because of the truth of what he had been saying, ‘Therefore I boast in Christ Jesus in my service to God.’

Why this switch from negative to positive? In what sense are we to boast in, towards, and about God, about Jesus, and in what sense are we not to do so? One view is that Paul was simply expressing the salvation-historical reality that had taken place. In other words, because Jesus had now come, then they were no longer to boast in the law (meaning in this case the Mosaic Law of the Old Testament); now instead, they were to boast in Jesus.

This is an attractively simple explanation: simple, not simplistic. Underneath the cover of simplicity are various kinds of complexity. In what sense is circumcision now fulfilled in Christ? How does baptism fit into that framework? (There are many different views on that!) What, most confoundingly difficult, is the nature of the law, which it appears we are to obey, and the law that we are now not to boast in?

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The standard explanation of that problem is that there are different types, kinds or usages of the law in Paul. He sometimes by the law meant the *ceremonial* law (that is, the temple rituals of various kinds that were mandated in the Old Testament now no longer necessary). Sometimes he meant the *sacrificial* law (that is, the sacrifice of goats and lambs that was all fulfilled in Christ's once-for-all sacrifice). At other times he meant the *moral* law (that is, the Ten Commandments and God's moral instructions that are fulfilled in those who follow Christ, in the sense that now by God's Spirit they are enabled increasingly to obey God's law from the heart). The difficulty with this extremely helpful categorization is that it is not self-evidently explicit in what Paul was writing. It appears like a useful construct from the outside, rather than an authentic expression of the way Paul himself wrote about the law.

However, that juxtaposition, because it is a framework rather than an expression of what Paul said in his way of saying, is unhelpfully rigid when we consider the matter of boasting. Take, for instance, maps. We use maps all the time. Whether we use Mapquest, GPS navigation, or an atlas, we often use maps when we travel. It would be perfectly possible to argue, in fact impossible to dispute, that maps are not an authentic description of the terrain around us in the actual way that the terrain is formed. How could they be? A one-to-one precise rendition would be an exact copy of what was there, and it would be impossible to carry that around in your pocket or have it come up on your GPS screen in your car. An exact, authentic, full-scale representation of a mountain is an exact copy of that mountain. It's not a map at all; in fact, it's just another mountain. Nice as that is, it doesn't help you understand or navigate your way up a difficult climb.

So the question is whether this well-known map of Paul's use of the law – if certainly not the exact copy of the way Paul himself talked about the law – is a useful map of what

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Paul said. That it most certainly is, and most definitely is useful; otherwise, we would not be so familiar with it, or have the ease of understanding it, once it is explained.

However, if it is useful, is it *also* accurate? A map can be useful, in the sense of being relatively easy to follow, but take you to the wrong place when you follow it. That map, while useful in the sense of easy to use, is actually useless in the sense of being helpful for your navigation purposes.

So the question is not really whether this threefold description of Paul's use of the law is an exact copy of the *way* Paul said it. (That it surely is not – but to have that, you should just photocopy the text in the original and be done with it.) Nor is the question only whether this description of Paul's use of the law is useful. (Something can be useful, but not accurate, or not as accurate as would be truly useful, and such maps of thought, while meeting the ease-of-use qualification of being marketable, can actually sometimes be dangerous, because they may lead you off a cliff or into a muddy bog).

The real question is whether using this way of thinking of the law actually leads you, when you follow it, to a better understanding of what Paul was saying in various places. Does it help you arrive at your destination, closer to an understanding of the text? Is it, in other words, a useful and reasonably accurate map?

The answer to that last question – whether dividing the law into ceremonial, sacrificial, and moral is a useful and reasonably accurate map of Paul's thinking – seems to me to be certainly, yes. I remember teaching the Letter to the Galatians to a group of pastors, and pastors-in-training, in a South American city. We were engaged in the text, taking it seriously, and digging into it with humour and joy as we worked together through the passages of Galatians, that rich and controversial book. As we did so and looked at how Paul was talking about circumcision, the law, the way of the Spirit, justification by faith, and all the rest, it became

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apparent that what was required was a fairly sizeable, but manageable, tool to land on an understanding of the law as a framework in the minds of us all, so that we could get back to hearing from Paul himself. The framework of the three divisions of the law was practical, simple, useful, and certainly reasonably accurate.

It is undeniably not entirely accurate, however. Paul sometimes used the word 'law' as a principle; he talked of the 'law of the Spirit', for instance. There are also many other debates surrounding Paul's use of the law. But for the purposes of understanding what Paul meant by boasting – and whether the switch he made in Romans between boasting as something negative to boasting as something positive, is basically a switch due to the salvation-historical coming of Jesus – this map of the law is accurate enough.

Is it then true that when Paul switched from boasting as a negative to boasting as a positive, he was saying that they were to stop boasting in the ceremonial or ritual law, and to start boasting in Jesus – who not only fulfilled the ceremonial and ritual law, but also by His Spirit enabled them to increasingly fulfill the moral law in their own persons, too?

The difficulty with this view is that when Paul talked about the negative kind of boasting, he did not refer to ceremonial or sacrificial matters. He referred to moral matters: stealing, for instance, or hypocrisy. Plus, Paul did not ever make the argument, that I can detect, along these lines: 'It was okay to boast in the law before Jesus came, but now that Jesus has come, stop boasting in the law and start boasting in Jesus.' Even if we divide up what Paul meant by law into ceremonial and sacrificial and moral, and even if we take seriously that the negative boasting he referenced is the moral, in what sense then did Paul mean that it was okay to boast in their moral performance, but now they were to boast in Jesus (especially as moral performance was plainly still very important to Paul)? Even more confusingly – given

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his point about the negative kind of boasting is that those who do that kind are hypocritical (they say they do not steal, but really in other ways they do ‘rob temples’), also given Paul’s point about negative boasting, is that it is not real, authentic, and does not match actual performance – how then can it be said that this is only, or merely, a salvation-historical matter?

Even more, this view of the switch in Paul’s boasting in Romans begins to unravel when we realize that in the Old Testament, boasting in God was praised. We will look at that more in another chapter and, in particular, how boasting was praised as a wise life. But if boasting, in some sense, was a good thing in the Old Testament – and if Paul had at least (let’s be generous!) a rudimentary understanding of the Scriptures of his heritage in which he was trained, in which he excelled, and in which he was a notable expert – then how could Paul have been arguing that ‘boasting in the law used to be okay, but now it is not okay; instead boast in Jesus’, if Paul was saying that boasting in the law was hypocritical? If he said ‘it used to be okay to boast in the law, but now it is not anymore, now boast in Jesus’ that argument would be permissible. But Paul does not say that. What he actually says is: ‘boasting in the law is hypocritical because you don’t keep the law, but boasting in Jesus is authentic because by God’s Spirit you are enabled gradually to fulfil the law.’

So this is not a ‘was like that’ but ‘now is like this’ argument. His argument is a ‘doing it that way doesn’t work’ but ‘doing it this way does work’. What Paul seemed to be assuming and saying was that *some* (but by no means all) of the Jewish people of his day had got the wrong end of the stick about the law. They had made the law something that was the centre of their religion, when all along the law was *really always* designed to be something that was pointing to ‘the one who is to come’. Apparently, in Paul’s day, this *misunderstanding* of the law, against which he is teaching, was

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picking up speed. It was becoming more prevalent, not less, more common not less. Why? Because ‘he who is to come’ (in Paul’s view) *had come* and so those who rejected ‘he who is to come’ hung on ever more firmly to the law, instead of the One to whom the law is pointing. They were an inch away in their initial navigation from Southampton but by the time they had crossed the Atlantic they had missed New York City altogether and ended up in the Arctic Circle.

Now we come to the really interesting part about this switch regarding boasting in Romans. If this way of understanding it is correct – if Paul was saying that some of the Jewish people of his day were moving further and further away from the true understanding of the Scriptures and the law, and were starting to treat the law as the centre of their religion in a (what we would call) legalistic sense, and he was trying to expose the ridiculous uselessness of this approach because it led to hypocrisy, in order to show his readers the beauty of Jesus as the fulfilment of the law – if that is the right way of interpreting boasting in Paul, then what we have is a brilliant tool for our own use too.

Sometimes it is said that ‘religion is the default mode of the human race’. I have used phrases like that on occasion; I think there is truth to it. We tend, as human beings, to become legalistic. But I think it is subtler than that, and more helpful. The reality is that some humans are not legalistic at all. They are vicious and lawless, vile and murderous, and feel little, if any, twinges of conscience about beating down their fellow human beings. Their problem is not (self-evidently) too much law.

For those who begin to be moral, however, who want to care for those around them, and may even want to please the Supreme Being that is traditionally called God in the English language, then there is an immediate trap that is sprung for the unwary. It is what Paul meant by the negative kind of boasting. We begin to think we are better than others; we begin to think we have arrived. We are so desperate, some

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of us, to please God that we start to psychologically blind ourselves to when we know we are not pleasing God. We advance the case of our moral performance as an argument against our moral failures, to bury them and hide them. This is not a problem for a particular kind of person only, much less a particular kind of ethnic group. This is a problem for all of us *once we start on the journey of trying to please God*.

Jesus discussed this, taught on this, and encountered this a lot. He was living and preaching among the most religious people who had existed. And when He was there, they were especially attuned to their need to be religious. They had been exiled for worshipping false idols. The people returned, and their most recent national heroes, the Maccabees, had been zealots for the law. They began to overreact. Where their forefathers had been slackers, at least some of them, and had been sent into exile as a result, they became zealots. Jesus told stories about them – the Pharisee who went up to pray and thought he was more righteous than the man who prayed and repented; the two sons, one who stayed with his father and was a goody-goody, and the other who went far away, but then returned and was embraced; the two sons, one who said, ‘Yes, I’ll work in your vineyard,’ and did not, and the other who said he would not, and did.

Paul told the same story. It was not just that he was saying that you can never be good enough for God and therefore you need grace (though that is true). Nor was it just that he was saying that the whole of the Old Testament Scriptures was fulfilled in Jesus, therefore stop boasting in the Old Testament law and start boasting in Jesus (though it is certainly true that ‘let him who boasts boast in the Lord!’). What Paul was saying is that for the religious, for the man or woman who wants to please God, there is a danger: a danger of trying to please God *the wrong way*. That way is doing good things, but using them as a shield against a deep relationship with God – because you can’t admit to yourself, to God, or anyone else that you fail. That way leads

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to hypocrisy. This however is *not* the only kind of *wrong way* to go about living. There is all the idolatrous, gross evil that Paul also preached against in the early chapters of Romans. But this way, the religious way, is the way that is most likely to be the danger for those who are reading what he wrote!

So by the switch from the negative to the positive boasting in Romans, Paul meant a switch from boasting in your own moral performance (and so hiding yourself from the truth that you need grace and forgiveness, and Jesus), to boasting now in what God has done for you in Christ (and so increasingly opening yourself up to God's grace and power, and His Spirit, that you might live for Him and become like Him more and more and more).

We took the longest time surveying Romans – no doubt Paul's most influential piece of writing. We will take less time on his other letters.

1 Corinthians

The background to the Corinthian correspondence is usually described as follows. Corinth had been planted by Paul. Apollos had come along afterwards. The Corinthians interpreted Apollos' speaking gifts as more in line with their expectation of a public speaker in the classical sense. The Corinthians were very pleased with their spiritual giftedness, especially the gift of speaking in tongues. The Corinthian church began to divide along the lines of their most influential teachers. In addition, the Corinthian church had a well-known case of scandalous sexual immorality about which no one had done anything decisive. There were other questions as well that came to Paul which he dealt with and which we have recorded in our two surviving letters.

In the midst of all this, in 1 Corinthians, as well as 2 Corinthians, there is a theme of boasting. Unlike in Romans, there is not a clear switch from the negative to the positive, but both elements are present. The negative elements of boasting – hubris, pride, arrogance – are more obvious and

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familiar. But the positive elements of boasting in 1 Corinthians are less often noted. For instance, after Paul said that the gospel of Jesus Christ excluded boasting because God chose the foolish things of this world to shame the wise so that no one can boast before Him (1 Cor. 1:27-29), he concluded with a quotation from the prophet Jeremiah when he said, ‘Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord’ (1:31). So Paul was not against boasting *per se*; not all boasting is wrong. Some boasting is good, the kind of boasting that is ‘in the Lord’ (whatever that may mean – and that question is what we are seeking to answer).

Again, later in the letter, after Paul had talked in various places about how the Corinthians had become puffed up, and described his ultimate antidote to their hubris/pride, which was love (in his justly famous 1 Corinthians 13), Paul then at the end had a highly enigmatic – apparently throwaway – line about boasting. It again suggested there is a positive element to boasting. He said (in word-for-word transliteration), ‘Each day I die, by your boasting, brothers, which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord’ (15:31). What did Paul mean by that? The NIV translates, ‘I face death every day – yes, just as surely as I boast about you in Christ Jesus our Lord.’ Which suggests that the NIV thinks that Paul meant that the boasting here was in the positive sense and referred entirely to Paul’s boasting in Jesus Christ (see the earlier quotation from Jeremiah, ‘Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord’). The ESV translates, ‘I protest, brothers, by my pride in you, which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die every day!’ Which suggests that the ESV also thinks the word boast here (translated ‘pride’) was positive, but in this case, thinks that it referred to Paul’s attitude towards the Corinthian Christians, which was also somehow an expression of his personal relationship to Jesus Christ, and so modified the ‘pride’ in them in an acceptable, even admirable way. The Authorized Version (known also as the King James Version), translates, ‘I protest by your rejoicing

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which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die daily.’ This suggests that the translators thought Paul was also talking about boasting (translated ‘rejoicing’) in a positive sense, but in this case, they thought the people doing the boasting/rejoicing were the Corinthians (not Paul as ESV suggests), though at the same time this boasting/rejoicing was something that he had somehow concurrently in his own relationship to Jesus.

Whenever there is a tricky verse to understand, it is often because there is an important truth that we find hard to grasp in our own current set of presuppositions, attitudes, worldviews, and assumptions. There is a cognitive dissonance generated by the words because we assume one thing about what is being said, and the text is saying something else, or at variance to what we assume, and therefore we don’t get it. Sometimes there are other reasons, but this cognitive dissonance reason is common – and therefore when a text is hard to understand, the best thing is to push into it more and try to grasp it more, until light shines.

What then did Paul mean in 1 Corinthians 15:31? My own view is that Paul was summarizing, in highly condensed form, both the positive and the negative aspects of boasting that he held to be true at different times in different ways.

On the one hand, he was dismayed, utterly distraught, undone, and at the point of actual physical death – and not just once or occasionally, but every single day; he died daily. He had suicidal ideation, or at least he had ‘cidal’ ideation – he felt like he was dying. Something inside him died daily when he thought of the Corinthians boasting; it was just killing him. So (to put it mildly) there is that negative aspect of the verse.

On the other hand, there is also the positive. Paul also said here that he does, though, boast himself, but his boasting was quite different from that of the Corinthians. His boasting was not thinking he was better than the Corinthians, the other apostles, or any other person; rather, he boasted in

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Christ Jesus. The tension in the verse – exploding out like a volcano suddenly erupting – is encapsulated in the phrase, ‘I die every day.’ The source of this tension was that the Corinthians had got it so badly wrong. It was not that they were boasting that was wrong. They certainly had a lot to boast about! But what they had to boast about was not themselves, or their teachers, or their gifts – that boasting was always complete nonsense and ridiculous, divisive, unloving, as well as dangerous to the whole community of the church. What they *did* have to boast about – and this was massive, and in this boasting Paul ‘rejoiced’ himself – was this boasting ‘in Christ Jesus our Lord’.

2 Corinthians

Boasting is everywhere in 2 Corinthians. It is a highly dominant theme in this letter to the Corinthians, a follow-up to the previous letter, and in which at least some of the problems that Paul had identified earlier had been addressed. However, not all was perfect by any means, and Paul now addressed the matter of boasting head-on. In fact, he used the word ‘boast’ twenty-three times, and each time, not as a side matter, but as central or as close to central as the point being made. Unlike in Romans, there was no switch from the negative to the positive. And unlike in 1 Corinthians, the positive boasting was not confined almost entirely to a personal relationship to the Lord. It is clear in 2 Corinthians that Paul thought that positive boasting might legitimately include boasting about other people, boasting about their own ministry – as long as that ministry was assigned to them by the Lord.

One example will suffice – 2 Corinthians 1:12 – ‘Now this is our boast: Our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, with integrity and godly sincerity. We have done so, relying not on worldly wisdom but on God’s grace.’ So it is evident that for Paul, positive boasting included not just a

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personal relationship to God, but things that we do – things we do in the church, and things we do in the world – as long as they are done with sincerity and with God's grace. This boasting in one sense is about 'the heart' (5:12), but it is also something that can be visible in another way: 'Therefore show these men the proof of your love and the reason for our pride [boast] in you, so that the churches can see it' (8:24). Paul seemed aware that his boasting could be misinterpreted, but he pushed on regardless: 'So even if I boast somewhat freely about the authority the Lord gave us for building you up rather than tearing you down, I will not be ashamed of it' (10:8).

With that kind of boasting going on, Paul though – and most famously – at the end started to recalibrate. What did he really *mean* by boasting? Is this *actually* the same as hubris, pride, arrogance, over-self-confidence? He grounded the idea of boasting in the same text from Jeremiah that he used in the previous letter: 'But, "Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord." For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends.' (10:17-18). And what does that mean? Most astonishingly of all, for Paul, it meant weakness. 'If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness' (11:30). And by weakness what did he mean? He meant suffering. Beatings. Shipwreck. Being lowered from a basket over a wall to escape persecution.

Then, in 2 Corinthians 12, Paul identified an area of weakness that he did not specify (and which has caused endless, fruitless speculation) when he said that 'a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan' was given to him to 'torment' him (verse 7). Despite his pleading with the Lord three times that it be removed (verse 8), God refused, saying, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness,' to which Paul immediately concluded about boasting: 'Therefore I will boast all the more gladly

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about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me' (verse 9).

It is apparent, then, that by boasting Paul meant something counter-intuitive. Not only can it mean something negative as well as something positive, depending on what kind of boasting we are talking about, it can also mean (even when positive) something broadly related to our concept of success, as long as that effectiveness is by God's grace. However, at the same time, the real boasting, and where Paul landed that discussion, is intimately related to a boasting about weakness, by which Paul evidently meant specifically suffering for Jesus and especially for His church. 'Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches' (11:28).

On top of this, there is this mysterious element for Paul, that he does not entirely reveal, some personal pain, suffering or spiritual attack, through which he learnt directly by a word from Jesus, that 'my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' From that word Paul concluded that he would 'boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me' (12:9).

Before we go on, let us recap. Boasting may be positive or negative. When positive, it is rooted in a boasting in the Lord. It can be related to spiritual effectiveness in ministry, church planting, preaching, 'fruit'/success, as long as that is by the grace of God, and it can also be related to activities outside of the specifically religious ('in the world'). However, this boasting, when properly grounded in the Lord, is only truly powerful when it is a boasting about weaknesses, which are not moral weaknesses, but weaknesses related to sufferings for the church. Is this basic framework one that continues in the rest of Paul's letters?

Galatians

As usual, there is both a positive and negative use of the word ‘boast’ in Paul’s letter to the Galatians, but there is an extra dimension too. Whereas before, we have seen a range of application of the core meaning of the word – negative and positive, along a more binary axis – there is at the end of Galatians a dual negative/positive. So in Galatians 6:4 (ESV), boasting in oneself was *positive*, whereas boasting in someone else was *negative*: ‘But let each one test his own work, and then his reason to boast will be in himself alone and not in his neighbor.’

Then in 6:13-14, boasting in the law was negative, whereas boasting in the cross of Jesus was positive: ‘Not even those who are circumcised keep the law, yet they want you to be circumcised that they may boast about your circumcision in the flesh. May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.’ How is this dual element introduced? What is its significance in Galatians, and for us?

Paul, in Galatians, was countering a false teaching from ‘certain men [who] came from James’ (2:12), who were infiltrating the Galatian churches, teaching them: ‘Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved’ (Acts 15:1). The problem in Galatians was about salvation and whether it was purely by grace through faith, or whether some extra additional activity, ceremony or religious practice was required (in their case, circumcision). Given that the false teachers were claiming that Paul’s teaching about grace would lead to bad behaviour and ungodly lifestyles, in the second half of Galatians Paul showed that actually it was the work of the Spirit (not the works of the law) through whom they were, and we are, enabled to become Christ-like.

This background helps us tease out what Paul was saying about boasting as he came to the concluding part of

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Galatians. Paul was saying that a grace-orientated approach to life gives what we would call appropriate self-confidence, rather than insecurity or constantly comparing ourselves with the achievements of other people. Then he said that the law – which had been his *bête noire* throughout the letter – was not to be boasted in, but the cross of Jesus was the only appropriate boast. So we are to boast in ourselves (that is, have the right kind of self-confidence) due to grace, not compare ourselves to other people. We are to boast in Christ, not boast in self-attained moral improvement through a wrong use of the law. Good boasting (as opposed to negative) in Galatians then functions as a result of the good news.

Ephesians

The word ‘boast’ only appears once in the letter to the Ephesians. Here it is entirely negative: ‘For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast’ (Eph. 2:8-9). Boasting then here was something that was entirely excluded from everyone because we are saved only by grace. How that is consistent with Paul’s teaching at the end of Galatians, that we can and should boast in ourselves as opposed to comparing ourselves to other people, is not immediately obvious. Perhaps there is a right kind of boasting in ourselves, self-confidence, and a wrong kind of boasting in ourselves, arrogance.

Philippians

The letter to the Philippians has three occurrences of boasting. Each case is some variant of a positive use of boasting, though the last has an implicit comparison with negative boasting.

In the first instance, Paul was certain that he would not yet die – because it would be good for the Philippians to see him again so that they could boast in Christ Jesus on

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account of Paul, when he visited them (Phil. 1:25-26). This seems to be an expression of the specially close relationship that Paul enjoyed with the Philippian church: they clicked together. When they were together, he knew they would rejoice [boast] in Christ Jesus because he was with them. This suggests two things about Paul's use of boasting: first, it suggests that boasting, when positive, is always somehow rooted in the real person of Jesus; but, second, it also suggests that such boasting in another human being is also possible and delightful.

The second instance of boasting is similar. Paul (in Phil. 2:15-16) wanted the Philippians to shine like stars in the sky, by holding on to God's Word and holding that Word out in gracious witness to those around them, shining like a star, so that he 'will be able to boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor in vain'. So part of the reason why he wanted them to be excellent Christians was so that he could boast about them to Jesus! We are probably, most of us, tempted to think that boasting, whenever good, can only be spiritual. Also, by 'spiritual', most of us will tend to think ethereal, insubstantial, and certainly invisible. But Paul's boasting was rooted in real flesh-and-blood people – albeit ultimately grounded in Christ.

Again, in Philippians 3:3, Paul used the positive way of describing boasting in a mode that was more typical in other letters. Those who received grace and trusted Christ were the real circumcision, whereas those who were trying to distort that grace were not able to boast in any real sense about their relationship to God. We 'boast in Christ Jesus' and 'put no confidence in the flesh', meaning in the legalistic and improper use of the law that was so prevalent in Paul's day among the Pharisees that he knew so well.

1 and 2 Thessalonians

Finally, Paul used boasting once in 1 Thessalonians and again once in 2 Thessalonians. In 1 Thessalonians 2:19,

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Paul described boasting as what he will do in the presence of Jesus when He returns, on account of the Thessalonian church. This boasting was future-looking, but also rooted strongly in the present reality of this particular Christian church. Then in 2 Thessalonians 1:4, the boasting was more *now* (and less *then*), and instead of being only in one church, it was a kind of boasting that was comparative! ‘Therefore, among God’s churches we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring.’ The Thessalonians are not just being held up as an example to other churches. When Paul was talking to other churches, he was consciously, verbally, explicitly boasting about the Thessalonians. And the topic of his boasting? Perseverance. He boasted about them because, despite their suffering and persecution, they kept on going.

Summary

Types of boasting

	Negative	Positive
Romans 2:17	Moral Performance	
Romans 2:23	Hypocrisy	
Romans 3:27	Excluded by Faith	
Romans 4:2	Moral Performance	
Romans 5:2		Hope/Glory/God
Romans 5:3		Sufferings
Romans 5:11		God through Jesus
Romans 11:18	Spiritual Superiority	
Romans 15:17		In Christ Jesus in Ministry to God

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1 Corinthians 1:29	Excluded by Election	
1 Corinthians 1:31		In the Lord
1 Corinthians 3:21	About Men	
1 Corinthians 4:7	About Men	
1 Corinthians 5:6	Moral Libertarianism	
1 Corinthians 9:15		Not Being Paid Voluntarily
1 Corinthians 9:16	Excluded by the Gospel	
1 Corinthians 13:3	Physical Sacrifice	
1 Corinthians 15:31		Over Church in Christ Jesus
2 Corinthians 1:12		About Holiness
2 Corinthians 1:14		About Other Christians
2 Corinthians 5:12		About What is in the Heart
2 Corinthians 7:4		In Church
2 Corinthians 7:14		In Church
2 Corinthians 8:24		In Church
2 Corinthians 9:2		About Church's Generosity
2 Corinthians 9:3		About Church's Generosity
2 Corinthians 10:8		Authority to Build Church
2 Corinthians 10:13		About Own Ministry
2 Corinthians 10:15		About Own Ministry
2 Corinthians 10:16		About Own Ministry

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2 Corinthians 10:17		In the Lord
2 Corinthians 11:10		Not Being Paid Voluntarily
2 Corinthians 11:12		Not Being Paid Voluntarily
2 Corinthians 11:16	Foolish Boasting	
2 Corinthians 11:17	Foolish Boasting	
2 Corinthians 11:18	Foolish Boasting	
2 Corinthians 11:30		In Weakness
2 Corinthians 12:1		Visions from Lord
2 Corinthians 12:5		In Weakness
2 Corinthians 12:6		Visions from Lord
2 Corinthians 12:9		In Weaknesses
Galatians 6:4		In Oneself
Galatians 6:13	In the Flesh	
Galatians 6:14		In the Cross of Jesus
Ephesians 2:9	Excluded by Grace	
Philippians 1:26		In Christ Jesus because of Paul
Philippians 2:16		In Ministry Effectiveness
Philippians 3:3		In Christ Jesus
1 Thessalonians 2:19		In Ministry
2 Thessalonians 1:4		In Perseverance/ Faith

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So, in summary, across Paul's letters we find the word 'boasting' employed in both negative and positive ways – the positive being surprising for English readers, who are used to the word 'boast' only being utilized in a negative sense. But the word Paul used can have both a negative and a positive sense, and Paul employed both in his writings. There is not an apparent, total consistency to his use of the word; there is significant variegation according to context, ministry need, the people to whom he was writing, and the theological or spiritual situation which he was encountering.

But while there is not a total consistency, there are some remarkable patterns. For instance, Paul used the word 'boast' in a broadly speaking, positive sense about twice as often as in a negative sense. By my count, Paul used the word 'boast' as a negative, 15 times. On the other hand, he used the word positively, 34 times – over twice as often as in the negative. That by no means necessarily means that Paul tended to think of boasting more frequently in the positive, because there are other reasons for the disparity of word count. For instance, the word is used largely in the negative in 1 Corinthians, but then (after the Corinthian church had changed some of its ways) the word 'boast' is used largely in the positive in 2 Corinthians, and it is used frequently in 2 Corinthians. In addition, in Romans – very often the place where Paul established his intended balance and framing to his thinking – we find an almost precise balance to the use of the word 'boast'. It is used in the negative in the first major section of Romans, before switching to its being used mainly in the positive thereafter (with one return to the negative at the end of Romans).

This pattern does not establish a clear preference from Paul regarding boasting, that boasting was for him mainly a positive, or that it was twice as often a positive as a negative: because such word counts don't give sufficient subtlety to the context or intention of the individual letters and paragraphs and sentences in which the word is found. But what it does

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establish is that it is very clear that Paul believed that boasting *could*, under certain circumstances, be a positive. It shows that he thought of boasting as something to embrace, and to do so confidently, certainly, boldly. It shows that his thinking of this positive side of boasting was not only limited to the more numinal, spiritual matters – about a relationship to God and the way we tend to think of that in terms of our prayer lives or personal Bible studies – but also about his own ministry; about other Christians; about giving money to a worthy Christian cause; about his own refusal to take a salary when it was his right to receive one; and perhaps most remarkably about sufferings and, most counter-intuitively, about weaknesses.

Can we boast too?

Is boasting, like pride, something to avoid at all costs, and from which we are never entirely free? Or is boasting like confidence, something which is healthy in certain situations when well-grounded, but dangerous when not being confident about the right things? It seems from this survey of Paul that boasting is much more like our word ‘confidence’. We can be self-confident and wrongly so.

I remember someone once telling me that he was borderline genius, that he was certainly going to go to an elite university, and that he hardly needed to try or work hard to get there. This seemed unlikely to me, but mathematical superstars do exist, and we could have unearthed another John Nash of the movie, *A Beautiful Mind*, fame. As it turned out, this individual had wildly overestimated his ability to assess his own gifts. He did not even come close to succeeding in the goals that he assumed he would easily attain.

If anything, you would think that people who tend to overestimate themselves are more common. But even this is complicated. When people overestimate their own abilities, it may be because they genuinely are big-headed

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and ludicrously out of sync with reality. Or it may be that they know just as well as you do their own talents (or lack thereof) and are painfully aware of the fact that actually they find basic arithmetic challenging. What they are doing is kidding themselves in the hope that they can kid you and thereby be accepted, do well, succeed, and prove themselves. In short, what they may need is not to be told to grow up, or that they are actually nowhere near as good as they think they are, but instead to be helped to see who they really are and be confident in that.

Confidence may then not be a sufficiently accurate way of looking at this idea of positive boasting which we find in Paul. Confidence often has the sense of ‘gearing yourself up’ or ‘psyching yourself up’ to do something. It may well be something that you really, truly can do, but before you go out to play the game, you get into a huddle and focus your mind on the success you hope to achieve, and before the big deal goes down, you remind yourself of all your achievements so far so that you carry appropriate confidence to the table. None of this is bad, but this doesn’t seem sufficiently accurate to describe all that Paul was saying about the positive side of boasting. Or at least not by itself.

It also misses some of the joy of it. The word, as Paul used it positively, seems to have a sense of fun, almost mischievousness (especially in those famous chapters in 2 Corinthians where he started to play with the idea of foolish boasting to show those who were doing it just how foolish it really was). There is an exulting (to use an old word), a rejoicing, a thrill. It is not dogged determination, which the word ‘confident’ can suggest, but thrilling wonder at how great something is. It pulls you on; it does not drive you from behind. It is magnetic, not willing yourself to do ‘better and better every day in every way’.

No, I think we are going to have to settle with ‘boast’ – and let the uneasiness of the word unsettle us. You can boast in a good way. Really. Paul did. Did Jesus?