

THE LIFE OF SAINT PAUL

by

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CHAPTER THREE

HIS CONVERSION

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37. Severity of the Persecution - It was the persecutor's hope utterly to exterminate Christianity. But little did he understand its genius. It thrives on persecution. Prosperity has often been fatal to it, persecution never. "**They that were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the word.**" Hitherto the Church had been confined within the walls of Jerusalem; but now all over Judaea and Samaria, and in distant Phoenicia and Syria, the beacon of the Gospel began in many a town and village to twinkle through the darkness, and twos and threes met together in upper rooms to impart to each other their joy in the HOLY GHOST.

38. We can imagine with what rage the tidings of these outbreaks of the fanaticism which he had hoped to stamp out would fill the persecutor. But he was not the person to be balked, and he resolved to hunt up the objects of his hatred even in their most obscure and distant hiding-places. In one strange city after another he accordingly appeared, armed with the apparatus of the inquisitor, to carry his sanguinary purpose out. Having heard that Damascus, the capital of Syria, was one of the places where the fugitives had taken refuge, and that they were carrying on their propaganda among the numerous Jews of that city, he went to the high priest, who had jurisdiction over the Jews outside as well as inside Palestine, and got letters empowering him to seize and bind and bring to Jerusalem all of the new way of thinking whom he might find there.

39. Kicking Against the Goad - As we see him start on this journey, which was to be so momentous, we naturally ask what was the state of his mind. His was a noble nature and a tender heart; but the work he was engaged in might be supposed to be congenial only to the most brutal of mankind. Had his mind, then, been visited with no compunctions? Apparently not. We are told that, as he was ranging through strange cities in pursuit of his victims, he was exceedingly

mad against them; and, as he was setting out to Damascus, he was still breathing out threatenings and slaughter. He was sheltered against doubt by his reverence for the objects which the heresy imperiled; and, if he had to outrage his natural feelings in the bloody work, was not his merit all the greater?

40. But on this journey doubt at last invaded his mind. It was a long journey of over a hundred and sixty miles; with the slow means of locomotion then available, it would occupy at least six days; and a considerable portion of it lay across a desert, where there was nothing to distract the mind from its own reflections. In this enforced leisure doubts arose. What else can be meant by the word with which the Lord saluted him:

"It is hard for thee to kick against the pricks [goad]!"

The figure of speech is borrowed from a custom of Eastern countries: the ox-driver wields a long pole, at the end of which is fixed a piece of sharpened iron, with which he urges the animal to go on or stand still or change its course; and, if it is refractory, it kicks against the goad, injuring and infuriating itself with the wounds it receives. This is a vivid picture of a man wounded and tortured by compunctions of conscience. There was something in him rebelling against the course of inhumanity on which he was embarked and suggesting that he was fighting against GOD.

41. It is not difficult to conceive whence these doubts arose. He was a scholar of Gamaliel, the advocate of humanity and tolerance, who had counseled the Sanhedrin to leave the Christians alone. He was himself too young yet to have hardened his heart to all the disagreeables of such ghastly work. Highly strung as was his religious zeal, nature could not but speak out at last. But probably his compunctions were chiefly awakened by the character and behavior of the Christians. He had heard the noble defense of Stephen and seen his face in the council-chamber shining like that of an angel. He had seen him kneeling on the field of execution and praying for his murderers. Doubtless, in the course of the persecution he had witnessed many similar scenes. Did these people look like enemies of GOD? As he entered their homes to drag them forth to prison, he got glimpses of their social life. Could such spectacles of purity and love be products of the powers of darkness? Did not the serenity with which his victims went to meet their fate look like the very peace which he had long been sighing for in vain?

Their arguments, too, must have told on a mind like his. He had heard Stephen proving from the Scriptures that it behooved the Messiah to suffer; and the general tenor of the earliest Christian apologetic assures us that many of the accused must on their trial have appealed to passages like the fifty-third of Isaiah, where a career is predicted for the Messiah startlingly like that of JESUS of Nazareth. He heard incidents of CHRIST's life from their lips which betokened a personage very different from the picture sketched for him by his Pharisaic informants: and the sayings of their Master which the Christians quoted did not sound like the utterances of the fanatic he conceived JESUS to have been.

42. Such may have been some of the reflections which agitated the traveler as he moved onward, sunk in gloomy thought. But might not these be mere suggestions of temptation - the morbid fancies of a wearied mind, or the whispers of a wicked spirit attempting to draw him off from the service of Heaven? The sight of Damascus, shining out like a gem in the heart of the desert, restored him to himself. There, in the company of sympathetic rabbis and in the excitement of

effort, he would dispel from his mind these fancies bred of solitude. So onward he pressed, and the sun of noonday, from which all but the most impatient travelers in the East take refuge in a long siesta, looked down upon him still urging forward his course toward the city gate.

43. The Vision of CHRIST - The news of Saul's coming had arrived at Damascus before him; and the little flock of CHRIST was praying that, if it were possible, the progress of the wolf, who was on his way to spoil the fold, might be arrested. Nearer and nearer, however, he drew; he had reached the last stage of his journey; and at the sight of the place which contained his victims his appetite grew keener for the prey. But the Good Shepherd had heard the cries of the trembling flock and went forth to face the wolf on their behalf. Suddenly at midday, as Paul and his company were riding forward beneath the blaze of the Syrian sun, a light which dimmed even that fierce glare shone round about them, a shock vibrated through the atmosphere, and in a moment they found themselves prostrate upon the ground. The rest was for Paul alone: a voice sounded in his ears, "**Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou Me?**" and, as he looked up and asked the radiant Figure that had spoken, "**Who art Thou, Lord?**" the answer was, "**I am Jesus, whom thou art persecuting.**"

44. The language in which he ever afterward spoke of this event forbids us to think that it was a mere vision of JESUS he saw. He ranks it as the last of the appearances of the risen Saviour to His disciples, and places it on the same level as the appearances to Peter, to James, to the eleven, and to the five hundred. It was, in fact, CHRIST JESUS in the vesture of His glorified humanity, who for once had left the spot, wherever it may be in the spaces of the universe, where now he sits on His mediatorial throne, in order to show Himself to this elect disciple; and the light which outshone the sun was no other than the glory in which His humanity is there enveloped. An incidental evidence of this was supplied in the words which were addressed to Paul. They were spoken in the Hebrew, or rather the Aramaic tongue - the same language in which JESUS had been wont to address the multitudes by the Lake and converse with His disciples in the desert solitudes; and, as in the days of His flesh He was wont to open His mouth in parables, so now He clothed His rebuke in a striking metaphor: "**It is hard for thee to kick against the pricks.**"

45. Effect on Paul's Thought - It would be impossible to exaggerate what took place in the mind of Paul in this single instant. It is but a clumsy way we have of dividing time by the revolution of the clock into minutes and hours, days and years, as if each portion so measured were of the same size as another of equal length. This may suit well enough for the common ends of life, but there are finer measurements for which it is quite misleading. The real size of any space of time is to be measured by the amount it contains of the soul's experience; no one hour is exactly equal to another, and there are single hours which are larger than months. So measured, this one moment of Paul's life was perhaps larger than all his previous years. The glare of revelation was so intense that it might well have scorched the eye of reason or burnt out life itself, as the external light dazzled the eyes of his body into blindness.

When his companions recovered themselves and turned to their leader, they discovered that he had lost his sight, and they had to take him by the hand and lead him into the city. What a change was there! Instead of the proud Pharisee riding through the streets with the pomp of an inquisitor, a stricken man, trembling, groping, clinging to the hand of his guide, arrives at the house of entertainment amidst the consternation of those who receive him and, getting hastily to a room where he can ask them to leave him alone, sinks down there in the darkness.

46. But, though it was dark without, it was bright within. The blindness had been sent for the purpose of secluding him from outward distractions and enabling him to concentrate himself on the objects presented to the inner eye. For the same reason he neither ate nor drank for three days. He was too absorbed in the thoughts which crowded on him thick and fast.

47. In these three days, it may be said with confidence, he got at least a partial hold of all the truths he afterward proclaimed to the world; for his whole theology is nothing but the explication of his own conversion. First of all, his whole previous life fell down in fragments at his feet. It had been of one piece, and wonderfully complete. It had appeared to himself to be a consistent deduction from the highest revelation he knew and, in spite of its imperfections, to lie in the line of the will of GOD. But, instead of this, it had been rushing in diametrical opposition against the will and revelation of GOD, and had now been brought to a stop and broken in pieces by the collision. That which had appeared to him the perfection of service and obedience had involved his soul in the guilt of blasphemy and innocent blood. Such had been the issue of seeking righteousness by the works of the law. At the very moment when his righteousness seemed at last to be turning to the whiteness so long desired, it was caught in the blaze of this revelation and whirled away in shreds of shriveled blackness. It had been a mistake, then, from first to last. Righteousness was not to be obtained by the law, but only guilt and doom. This was the unmistakable conclusion, and it became the one pole of Paul's theology.

48. But, while his theory of life thus fell in pieces with a crash that might by itself have shaken his reason, in the same moment an opposite experience befell him.

Not in wrath and vengeance did JESUS of Nazareth appear to him, as He might have been expected to appear to the deadly enemy of His cause. His first word might have been a demand for retribution, and His first might have been His last. But, instead of this, His face had been full of divine benignity and His words full of considerateness for His persecutor. In the very moment when the divine strength cast him down on the ground he felt himself encompassed by the divine love. This was the prize he had all his lifetime been struggling for in vain, and now he grasped it in the very moment in which he discovered that his struggles had been fightings against GOD; he was lifted up from his fall in the arms of GOD's love; he was reconciled and accepted forever. As time went on, he was more and more assured of this.

In CHRIST he found without effort of his own the peace and the moral strength he had striven for in vain. And this became the other pole of his theology - that righteousness and strength are found in CHRIST without man's effort by mere trust in GOD's grace and acceptance of His gift. There were a hundred other things involved in these two which it required time to work, out; but within these two poles the system of Paul's thinking ever afterward revolved.

49. Effect on his Future - The three dark days were not done before he knew one thing more - that his life was to be devoted to the proclamation of these discoveries. In any case this must have been. Paul was a born propagandist and could not have become the possessor of such revolutionary truth without spreading it. Besides, he had a warm heart, that could be deeply moved with gratitude; and, when JESUS, whom he had blasphemed and tried to blot out of the memory of the world, treated him with such divine benignity, giving him back his forfeited life and placing him in that position which had always appeared to him the prize of life, he could not but put himself at His service with all his powers. He was an ardent patriot, the hope of the Messiah having long occupied for him the whole horizon of the future; and, when he knew that JESUS of Nazareth was the Messiah of his people and the Saviour of the world, it followed as a matter of course that he must spend his life in making this known.

50. But this destiny was also clearly announced to him from the outside. Ananias, probably the leading man in the small Christian community at Damascus, was informed, in a vision, of the change which had happened to Paul, and was sent to restore his sight and admit him into the Christian Church by baptism.

Nothing could be more beautiful than the way in which this servant of GOD approached the man who had come to the city to take his life. As soon as he learned the state of the case, he forgave and forgot all the crimes of his enemy and sprang to clasp him in the arms of Christian love. Certain as may have been the assurance which in the inner world of the mind Paul had in those three days received of forgiveness, it must have been to him a most welcome reassurance when, on opening his eyes again upon the external world, he was met with no contradiction of the visions he had been looking on, but the first object he saw was a human face bending over him with looks of forgiveness and perfect love.

He learned from Ananias the future the Saviour had appointed him: he had been apprehended by CHRIST in order to be a vessel to bear His name to Gentiles and kings and to the children of Israel. He accepted the mission with limitless devotion; and from that hour to the hour of his death he had but one ambition - to apprehend that for which he had been apprehended of CHRIST JESUS.

~ end of chapter 3 ~

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