

THE LIFE OF SAINT PAUL

by

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CHAPTER FOUR

HIS GOSPEL

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51. Sojourn in Arabia - When a man has been suddenly converted, as Paul was, he is generally driven by a strong impulse to make known what has happened to him. Such testimony is very impressive; for it is that of a soul which is receiving its first glimpses of the realities of the unseen world, and there is a vividness about the report it gives of them which produces an irresistible sense of reality. Whether Paul yielded at once to this impulse or not we cannot say with certainty.

The language of the book of Acts, where it is said that "**straightway he preached Christ in the synagogues,**" would lead us to suppose so. But we learn from his own writings that there was another powerful impulse influencing him at the same time; and it is uncertain which of the two he obeyed first. This other impulse was the wish to retreat into solitude and think out the meaning and issues of that which had befallen him. It cannot be wondered at that he felt this to be a necessity. He had believed his former creed intensely and staked everything on it; to see it suddenly shattered in pieces must have shaken him severely. The new truth which had been flashed upon him was so far-reaching and revolutionary that it could not be taken in at once in all its bearings. Paul was a born thinker; it was not enough for him to experience anything; he required to comprehend it and fit it into the structure of his convictions.

Immediately, therefore, after his conversion he went away, he tells us, into Arabia. He does not, indeed, say for what purpose he went; but, as there is no record of his preaching in that region and this statement occurs in the midst of a vehement defense of the originality of his

Gospel, we may conclude with considerable certainty that he went into retirement for the purpose of grasping in thought the details and the bearings of the revelation he had been put in possession of. In lonely contemplation he worked them out; and, when he returned to mankind, he was in possession of that view of Christianity which was peculiar to himself and formed the burden of his preaching during the subsequent years.

52. There is some doubt as to the precise place of his retirement, because Arabia is a word of vague and variable significance. But most probably it denotes the Arabia of the Wanderings, the principal feature of which was Mount Sinai. This was a spot hallowed by great memories and by the presence of other great men of revelation. Here Moses had seen the burning bush and communed with GOD on the top of the mountain. Here Elijah had roamed in his season of despair and drunk anew at the wells of inspiration. What place could be more appropriate for the meditations of this successor of these men of GOD? In the valleys where the manna fell and under the shadows of the peaks which had burned beneath the feet of the Lord he pondered the problem of his life.

It is a great example. Originality in the preaching of the truth depends on the solitary intuition of it. Paul enjoyed the special inspiration of the HOLY GHOST; but this did not render the concentrated activity of his own thinking unnecessary but only lent it peculiar intensity; and the clearness and certainty of his Gospel were due to these months of sequestered thought. His retirement may have lasted a year or more; for between his conversion and his final departure from Damascus, to which he returned from Arabia, three years intervened; and one of them at least was spent in this way.

53. We have no detailed record of what the outlines of his Gospel were till a period long subsequent to this; but, as these, when first they are traceable, are a mere cast of the features of his conversion, and, as his mind was working so long and powerfully on the interpretation of that event at this period, there can be no doubt that the Gospel sketched in the Epistles to the Romans and the Galatians was substantially the same as he preached from the first; and we are safe in inferring from these writings our account of his Arabian meditations.

54. Failure of Man's Righteousness - The starting-point of Paul's thinking was still, as it had been from his childhood, the conviction, inherited from pious generations, that the true end and felicity of man lay in the enjoyment of the favor of GOD. This was to be attained through righteousness; only the righteous could GOD be at peace with and favor with His love. To attain righteousness must, therefore, be the chief end of man.

55. But man had failed to attain righteousness and had thereby come short of the favor of GOD, and exposed himself to the divine wrath. Paul proves this by taking a vast survey of the history of mankind in pre-Christian times in its two great sections - the Gentile and the Jewish.

56. The Gentiles failed. It might, indeed, be supposed that they had not the preliminary conditions for entering on the pursuit of righteousness at all, because they did not enjoy the advantage of a special revelation. But Paul holds that even the heathen know enough of GOD to be aware of the obligation to follow after righteousness.

There is a natural revelation of GOD in His works and in the human conscience sufficient to enlighten men as to this duty. But the heathen, instead of making use of this light, wantonly extinguished it. They were not willing to retain GOD in their knowledge and to fetter themselves with the restraints which a pure knowledge of Him imposed. They corrupted the idea of GOD in

order to feel at ease in an immoral life. The revenge of nature came upon them in the darkening and confusion of their intellects. They fell into such insensate folly as to change the glorious and incorruptible nature of GOD into the images of men and beasts, birds and reptiles.

This intellectual degeneracy was followed by still deeper moral degeneracy. GOD, when they forsook Him, let them go; and, when His restraining grace was removed, down they rushed into the depths of moral putridity. Lust and passion got the mastery of them, and their life became a mass of moral disease. In the end of the first chapter of Romans the features of their condition are sketched in colors that might be borrowed from the abode of devils, but were literally taken, as is too plainly proved by the pages even of Gentile historians, from the condition of the cultured heathen nations at that time. This, then, was the history of one half of mankind: it had utterly fallen from righteousness and exposed itself to the wrath of GOD, which is revealed from Heaven against all unrighteousness of men.

57. The Jews were the other half of the world.

Had they succeeded where the Gentiles had failed? They enjoyed, indeed, great advantages over the heathen; for they possessed the oracles of GOD, in which the divine nature was exhibited in a form which rendered it inaccessible to human perversion, and the divine law was written with equal plainness in the same form. But had they profited by these advantages? It is one thing to know the law and another thing to do it; but it is doing, not knowing, which is righteousness. Had they, then, fulfilled the will of GOD, which they knew?

Paul had lived in the same Jerusalem in which JESUS assailed the corruption and hypocrisy of scribes and Pharisees; he had looked closely at the lives of the representative men of his nation; and he does not hesitate to charge the Jews in mass with the very same sins as the Gentiles; nay, he says that through them the name of GOD was blasphemed among the Gentiles. They boasted of their knowledge and were the bearers of the torch of truth, the fierce blaze of which exposed the sins of the heathen; but their religion was a bitter criticism of the conduct of others; they forgot to examine their own conduct by the same light; and, while they were repeating, Do not steal, Do not commit adultery, and a multitude of other commandments, they were indulging in these sins themselves.

What good in these circumstances did their knowledge do them? It only condemned them the more; for their sin was against light. While the heathen knew so little that their sins were comparatively innocent, the sins of the Jews were conscious and presumptuous. Their boasted superiority was therefore inferiority. They were more deeply condemned than the Gentiles they despised, and exposed to a heavier curse.

58. The truth is, Gentiles and Jews had both failed for the same reason. Trace these two streams of human life back to their sources and you come at last to a point where they are not two streams but one; and, before the bifurcation took place, something had happened which predetermined the failure of both. In Adam all fell, and from him all, both Gentiles and Jews, inherited a nature too weak for the arduous attainment of righteousness; human nature is carnal now, not spiritual, and, therefore, unequal to this supreme spiritual achievement.

The law could not alter this; it had no creative power to make the carnal spiritual. On the contrary, it aggravated the evil. It actually multiplied offenses; for its clear and full description of sins, which would have been an incomparable guide to a sound nature, turned into temptation for a morbid one. The very knowledge of sin tempts to its commission; the very command not to do anything is to a diseased nature a reason for doing it. This was the effect of the law: it multiplied and aggravated transgressions. And this was GOD's intention. Not that He was the author of sin; but, like a skillful physician, who has sometimes to use appliances to bring a sore to a head

before he heals it, He allowed the heathen to go their own way and gave.

Paul when he was striving for righteousness by the law. "**Being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.**"

It is a sunny life of joy, peace and hope which those lead who have come to know this Gospel. There may be trials in it; but, when a man's life is reposing in the attainment of its true end, trials are light and all things work together for good.

59. The Righteousness of GOD - Man's extremity was GOD's opportunity; not, indeed, in the sense that, one way of salvation having failed, GOD devised another. The law had never, in His intention, been a way of salvation. It was only a means of illustrating the need of salvation. But the moment when this demonstration was complete was the signal for GOD to produce His method, which He had kept locked in His counsel through the generations of human probation. It had never been His intention to permit man to fail of his true end. Only He allowed time to prove that fallen man could never reach righteousness by his own efforts; and, when the righteousness of man had been demonstrated to be a failure, He brought forth His secret - the righteousness of GOD.

This was Christianity; this was the sum and issue of the mission of CHRIST - the conferring upon man, as a free gift, of that which is indispensable to his blessedness, but which he had failed himself to attain. It is a divine act; it is grace; and man obtains it by acknowledging that he has failed himself to attain it and by accepting it from GOD; it is got by faith only. It is "**the righteousness of God, by the faith of Jesus Christ, unto all and upon all them that believe.**"

60. Those who thus receive it enter at once into that position of peace and favor with GOD in which human felicity consists and which was the goal aimed at by the Jews the law, that the sin of human nature might exhibit all its inherent qualities, before He intervened to heal it. The healing, however, was His real purpose all the time: "**He concluded all under sin, that He might have mercy upon all.**"

61. This righteousness of GOD is for all the children of men - not for the Jews only, but for the Gentiles also. The demonstration of man's inability to attain righteousness was made, in accordance with the divine purpose, in both sections of the human race; and its completion was the signal for the exhibition of GOD's grace to both alike. The work of CHRIST was not for the children of Abraham, but for the children of Adam. "**As in Adam all died, so in Christ shall all be made alive.**" The Gentiles did not need to undergo circumcision and to keep the law in order to obtain salvation; for the law was no part of salvation; it belonged entirely to the preliminary demonstration of man's failure; and, when it had accomplished this service, it was ready to vanish away. The only human condition of obtaining GOD's righteousness is faith; and this is as easy for Gentile as Jew.

This was an inference from Paul's own experience.

It was not as a Jew, but as a man, that he had been dealt with in his conversion. No Gentile could have been less entitled to obtain salvation by merit than he had been. So far from the law raising him a single step toward salvation, it had removed him to a greater distance from GOD than any Gentile, and cast him into a deeper condemnation. How, then, could it profit the Gentiles to be placed in this position? In obtaining the righteousness in which he was now rejoicing he had done nothing which was not competent to any human being.

62. It was this universal love of GOD revealed in the Gospel which inspired Paul with unbounded admiration for Christianity. His sympathies had been cabined, cribbed, confined in a narrow conception of GOD; the new faith uncaged his heart and let it forth into the free and sunny air. GOD became a new GOD to him. He calls his discovery the mystery which had been hidden from ages and generations, but had been revealed to him and his fellow-apostles. It seemed to him to be the secret of the ages and to be destined to usher in a new era, far better than any the world had ever seen. What kings and prophets had not known had been revealed to him. It had burst on him like the dawn of a new creation. GOD was now offering to every man the supreme felicity of life - that righteousness which had been the vain endeavor of the past ages.

63. This secret of the new epoch had not, indeed, been entirely unanticipated in the past. It had been "**witnessed by the law and the prophets.**" The law could bear witness to it only negatively by demonstrating its necessity. But the prophets anticipated it more positively. David, for example, described "**the blessedness of the man unto whom God imputed righteousness without works.**" Still more clearly had Abraham anticipated it. He was a justified man; and it was by faith, not by works, that He was justified - "**he believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness.**" The law had nothing to do with his justification, for it was not in existence for four centuries afterward. Nor had circumcision anything to do with it, for he was justified before this rite was instituted.

In short, it was as a man, not as a Jew, that he was dealt with by GOD, and GOD might deal with any human being in the same way. It had once made the thorny road of legal righteousness sacred to Paul to think that Abraham and the prophets had trodden it before him; but now he knew that their life of religious joy and psalms of holy calm were inspired by quite different experiences, which were now diffusing the peace of Heaven through his heart also. But only the first streaks of dawn had been descried by them; the perfect day had broken in his own time.

64. The Old Adam and the New - Paul's discovery of this way of salvation was an actual experience; he simply knew that CHRIST, in the moment when He met him, had placed him in that position of peace and favor with GOD which he had long sighed for in vain, and, as time went on, he felt more and more that in this position he was enjoying the true blessedness of life. His mission henceforth must be to herald this discovery in its simple and concrete reality under the name of the Righteousness of GOD. But a mind like his could not help inquiring how it was that the possession of CHRIST did so much for him. In the Arabian wilderness he pondered over this question, and the Gospel he subsequently preached contained a luminous answer to it.

65. From Adam his children derive a sad double heritage - a debt of guilt, which they cannot reduce, but are constantly increasing, and a carnal nature, which is incapable of righteousness. These are the two features of the religious condition of fallen man, and they are the double source of all his woes.

But CHRIST is a new Adam, a new head of humanity, and those who are connected with Him by faith become heirs of a double heritage of a precisely opposite kind. On the one hand, just as through our birth in the first Adam's line we get inevitably entangled in guilt, like a child born into a family which is drowned in debt, so through our birth in the line of the second Adam we get involved in a boundless heritage of merit, which CHRIST, as the Head of His family, makes the common property of its members.

This extinguishes the debt of our guilt and makes us rich in CHRIST's righteousness. "**As by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be**

made righteous." On the other hand, just as Adam transmitted to his posterity a carnal nature, alien to GOD and unfit for righteousness, so the new Adam imparts to the race of which He is the Head a spiritual nature, akin to GOD and delighting in righteousness.

The nature of man, according to Paul, normally consists of three sections - body, soul and spirit. In his original constitution these occupied definite relations of superiority and subordination to one another, the spirit being supreme, the body undermost, and the soul occupying the middle position. But the fall disarranged this order, and all sin consists in the usurpation by the body or the soul of the place of the spirit. In fallen man these two inferior sections of human nature, which together form what Paul calls the Flesh, or that side of human nature which looks toward the world and time, have taken possession of the throne and completely rule the life, while the spirit, the side of man which looks toward GOD and eternity, has been dethroned and reduced to a condition of inefficiency and death. CHRIST restores the lost predominance of the spirit of man by taking possession of it by his own Spirit. His Spirit dwells in the human spirit, vivifying it and sustaining it in such growing strength that it becomes more and more the sovereign part of the human constitution. The man ceases to be carnal and becomes spiritual; he is led by the Spirit of GOD and becomes more and more harmonious with all that is holy and divine.

The flesh does not, indeed, easily submit to the loss of supremacy. It clogs and obstructs the spirit and fights to regain possession of the throne. Paul has described this struggle in sentences of terrible vividness, in which all generations of Christians have recognized the features of their deepest experience. But the issue of the struggle is not doubtful. Sin shall not again have dominion over those in whom CHRIST's Spirit dwells, or dislodge them from their standing in the favor of GOD. **"Neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."**

66. The Pauline Gospel - Such are the bare outlines of the Gospel which Paul brought back with him from the Arabian solitudes and afterward preached with unwearied enthusiasm. It could not but be mixed up in his mind and in his writings with the peculiarities of his own experience as a Jew, and these make it difficult for us to grasp his system in some of its details. The belief in which he was brought up, that no man could be saved without becoming a Jew, and the notions about the law from which he had to cut himself free, lie very distant from our modern sympathies; yet his theology could not shape itself in his mind except in contrast to these misconceptions. This became subsequently still more inevitable when his own old errors met him as the watchwords of a party within the Christian Church itself, against which he had to wage a long and relentless war. Though this conflict forced his views into the clearest expression, it encumbered them with references to feelings and beliefs which are now dead to the interest of mankind. But, in spite of these drawbacks, the Gospel of Paul remains a possession of incalculable value to the human race. Its searching investigation of the failure and the wants of human nature, its wonderful unfolding of the wisdom of GOD in the education of the pre-Christian world, and its exhibition of the depth and universality of the divine love are among the profoundest elements of revelation.

67. But it is in its conception of CHRIST that Paul's Gospel wears its imperishable crown. The Evangelists sketched in a hundred traits of simple and affecting beauty the fashion of the earthly life of the man CHRIST JESUS, and in these the model of human conduct will always have to be sought; but to Paul was reserved the task of making known, in its heights and depths, the work

which the Son of GOD accomplished as the Saviour of the race. He scarcely ever refers to the incidents of CHRIST's earthly life, although here and there he betrays that he knew them well. To him CHRIST was ever the glorious Being, shining with the splendor of Heaven, who appeared to him on the way to Damascus, and the Saviour who caught him up into the heavenly peace and joy of a new life. When the Church of CHRIST thinks of her Head as the deliverer of the soul from sin and death, as a spiritualizing presence ever with her and at work in every believer, and as the Lord over all things who will come again without sin unto salvation, it is in forms of thought given her by the HOLY GHOST through the instrumentality of this apostle.

~ end of chapter 4 ~

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