

THE LIFE OF SAINT PAUL

by

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CHAPTER TWO

HIS UNCONSCIOUS PREPARATION FOR HIS WORK

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13. GOD's Plan - Persons whose conversion takes place after they are grown up are wont to look back upon the period of their life which has preceded this event with sorrow and shame and to wish that an obliterating hand might blot the record of it out of existence. Paul felt this sentiment strongly: to the end of his days he was haunted by the specters of his lost years, and was wont to say that he was the least of all the apostles, who was not worthy to be called an apostle, because he had persecuted the Church of GOD. But these somber sentiments are only partially justifiable. GOD's purposes are very deep, and even in those who know Him not He may be sowing seeds which will only ripen and bear fruit. long after their godless career is over. Paul would never have been the man he became or have done the work he did, if he had not, in the years preceding his conversion, gone through a course of preparation designed to fit him for his subsequent career. He knew not what he was being prepared for; his own intentions about his future were different from GOD's; but there is a divinity which shapes our ends, and it was making him a polished shaft for GOD's quiver, though he knew it not.

14. Birth and Birthplace - The date of Paul's birth is not exactly known, but it can be settled with

a closeness of approximation which is sufficient for practical purposes. When in the year 33 A.D, those who stoned Stephen laid down their clothes at Paul's feet, he was "**a young man.**" This term has, indeed, in Greek as much latitude as in English, and may indicate any age from something under twenty to something over thirty. In this case it probably touched the latter rather than the former limit; for there is reason to believe that at this time, or very soon after, he was a member of the Sanhedrin - an office which no one could hold who was under thirty years of age - and the commission he received from the Sanhedrin immediately afterward to persecute the Christians would scarcely have been entrusted to a very young man.

About thirty years after playing this sad part in Stephen's murder, in the year 62 A.D., he was lying in a prison in Rome awaiting sentence of death for the same cause for which Stephen had suffered, and, writing one of the last of his Epistles, that to Philemon, he called himself an old man. This term also is one of great latitude, and a man who had gone through so many hardships might well be old before his time; yet he could scarcely have taken the name of "**Paul the aged**" before sixty years of age.

These calculations lead us to the conclusion that he was born about the same time as JESUS. When the boy JESUS was playing in the streets of Nazareth, the boy Paul was playing in the streets of his native town, away on the other side of the ridges of Lebanon. They seemed likely to have totally diverse careers. Yet, by the mysterious arrangement of Providence, these two lives, like streams flowing from opposite watersheds, were one day, as river and tributary, to mingle together.

15. The place of his birth was Tarsus, the capital of the province of Cilicia, in the southeast of Asia Minor. It stood a few miles from the coast, in the midst of a fertile plain, and was built upon both banks of the river Cydnus, which descended to it from the neighboring Taurus Mountains, on the snowy peaks of which the inhabitants of the town were wont, on summer evenings, to watch from the flat roofs of their houses the glow of the sunset. Not far above the town the river poured over the rocks in a vast cataract, but below this it became navigable, and within the town its banks were lined with wharves, on which was piled the merchandise of many countries, while sailors and merchants, dressed in the costumes and speaking the languages of different races, were constantly to be seen in the streets.

The town enjoyed an extensive trade in timber, with which the province abounded, and in the long fine hair of the goats kept in thousands on the neighboring mountains, which was made into a coarse kind of cloth and manufactured into various articles, among which tents, such as Paul was afterward employed in sewing, formed an extensive article of merchandise all along the shores of the Mediterranean.

Tarsus was also the center of a large transport trade; for behind the town a famous pass, called the Cilician Gates, led up through the mountains to the central countries of Asia Minor; and Tarsus was the depot to which the products of these countries were brought down, to be distributed over the East and the West.

The inhabitants of the city were numerous and wealthy. The majority of them were native Cilicians, but the wealthiest merchants were Greeks. The province was under the sway of the Romans, the signs of whose sovereignty could not be absent from the capital, although Tarsus itself enjoyed the privilege of self-government. The number and variety of the inhabitants were still further increased by the fact that, like the city of Glasgow, Tarsus was not only a center of commerce, but also a seat of learning. It was one of the three principal university cities of the period, the other two being Athens and Alexandria; and it was said to surpass its rivals in intellectual eminence. Students from many countries were to be seen in its streets, a sight which

could not but awaken in youthful minds thoughts about the value and the aims of learning.

16. Who does not see how fit a place this was for the Apostle of the Gentiles to be born in? As he grew up, he was being unawares prepared to encounter men of every class and race, to sympathize with human nature in all its varieties, and to look with tolerance upon the most diverse habits and customs. In after life he was always a lover of cities.

Whereas his Master avoided Jerusalem and loved to teach on the mountainside or the shore of the lake, Paul was constantly moving from one great city to another. Antioch, Ephesus, Athens, Corinth, Rome, the capitals of the ancient world, were the scenes of his activity. The words of JESUS are redolent of the country, and teem with pictures of its still beauty or homely toil - the lilies of the field, the sheep following the shepherd, the sower in the furrow, the fishermen drawing their nets; but the language of Paul is impregnated with the atmosphere of the city and alive with the tramp and hurry of the streets. His imagery is borrowed from scenes of human energy and monuments of cultivated life - the soldier in full armor, the athlete in the arena, the building of houses and temples, the triumphal procession of the victorious general. So lasting are the associations of the boy in the life of the man.

17. Paul's Rome - Paul had a certain pride in the place of his birth, as he showed by boasting on one occasion that he was a citizen of no mean city. He had a heart formed by nature to feel the warmest glow of patriotism. Yet it was not for Cilicia and Tarsus that this fire burned. He was an alien in the land of his birth. His father was one of those numerous Jews who were scattered in that age over the cities of the Gentile world, engaged in trade and commerce. They had left the Holy Land, but they did not forget it. They never coalesced with the populations among which they dwelt but, in dress, food, religion and many other particulars remained a peculiar people. As a rule, indeed, they were less rigid in their religious views and more tolerant of foreign customs than those Jews who remained in Palestine. But Paul's father was not one who had given way to laxity. He belonged to the strictest sect of his religion. It is probable that he had not left Palestine long before his son's birth, for Paul calls himself a Hebrew of the Hebrews - a name which seems to have belonged only to the Palestinian Jews and to those whose connection with Palestine had continued very close.

Of his mother we hear absolutely nothing, but everything seems to indicate that the home in which he was brought up was one of those out of which nearly all eminent religious teachers have sprung - a home of piety, of character, perhaps of somewhat stern principle, and of strong attachment to the peculiarities of a religious people. He was imbued with its spirit. Although he could not but receive innumerable and imperishable impressions from the city he was born in, the land and the city of his heart were Palestine and Jerusalem; and the heroes of his young imagination were not Curtius and Horatius, Hercules and Achilles, but Abraham and Joseph, Moses and David and Ezra. As he looked back on the past, it was not over the confused annals of Cilicia that he cast his eyes, but he gazed up the clear stream of Jewish history to its sources in Ur of the Chaldees; and, when he thought of the future, the vision which rose on him was the kingdom of the Messiah, enthroned in Jerusalem and ruling the nations with a rod of iron.

18. The feeling of belonging to a spiritual aristocracy, elevated above the majority of those among whom he lived, would be deepened in him by what he saw of the religion of the surrounding population. Tarsus was the center of a species of Baal-worship of an imposing but unspeakably degrading character, and at certain seasons of the year it was the scene of festivals, which were frequented by the whole population of the neighboring regions, and were accompanied with orgies of a degree of moral abominableness happily beyond the reach even of

our imaginations. Of course a boy could not see the depths of this mystery of iniquity, but he could see enough to make him turn from idolatry with the scorn peculiar to his nation, and to make him regard the little synagogue where his family worshiped the Holy One of Israel as far more glorious than the gorgeous temples of the heathen; and perhaps to these early experiences we may trace back in some degree those convictions of the depths to which human nature can fall and its need of an omnipotent redeeming force which afterward formed so fundamental a part of his theology and gave such a stimulus to his work.

19. Trade - The time at length arrived for deciding what occupation the boy was to follow - a momentous crisis in every life - and in this case much was involved in the decision. Perhaps the most natural career for him would have been that of a merchant; for his father was engaged in trade, the busy city offered splendid prizes to mercantile ambition, and the boy's own energy would have guaranteed success.

Besides, his father had an advantage to give him specially useful to a merchant: though a Jew, he was a Roman citizen, and this right would have given his son protection, into whatever part of the Roman world he might have had occasion to travel. How the father got this right we cannot tell; it might be bought, or won by distinguished service to the state, or acquired in several other ways; at all events his son was free-born. It was a valuable privilege, and one which was to prove of great use to Paul, though not in the way in which his father might have been expected to desire him to make use of it. But it was decided that he was not to be a merchant. The decision may have been due to his father's strong religious views, or his mother's pious ambition, or his own predilections; but it was resolved that he should go to college and become a rabbi - that is, a minister, a teacher and a lawyer all in one. It was a wise decision in view of the boy's spirit and capabilities, and it turned out to be of infinite moment for the future of mankind.

20. But, although he thus escaped the chances which seemed likely to drift him into a secular calling, yet, before going away to prepare for the sacred profession, he was to get some insight into business life; for it was a rule among the Jews that every boy, whatever might be the profession he was to follow, should learn a trade, as a resource in time of need. This was a rule with wisdom in it; for it gave employment to the young at an age when too much leisure is dangerous, and acquainted the wealthy and the learned in some degree with the feelings of those who have to earn their bread with the sweat of their brow.

The trade which he was put to was the commonest one in Tarsus - the making of tents from the goat's-hair cloth for which the district was celebrated. Little did he or his father think, when he began to handle the disagreeable material, of what importance this handicraft was to be to him in subsequent years: it became the means of his support during his missionary journeys, and, at a time when it was essential that the propagators of Christianity should be above the suspicion of selfish motives, enabled him to maintain himself in a position of noble independence.

21. Education - It is a question natural to ask, whether, before leaving home to go and get his training as a rabbi, Paul attended the University of Tarsus. Did he drink at the wells of wisdom which flow from Mount Helicon before going to sit by those which spring from Mount Zion? From the fact that he makes two or three quotations from the Greek poets it has been inferred that he was acquainted with the whole literature of Greece. But, on the other hand, it has been pointed out that his quotations are brief and commonplace, such as any man who spoke Greek would pick up and use occasionally; and the style and vocabulary of his Epistles are not those of the models of Greek literature, but of the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Hebrew Scriptures, which was then in universal use among the Jews of the Dispersion. Probably his

father would have considered it sinful to allow his son to attend a heathen university. Yet it is not likely that he grew up in a great seat of learning without receiving any influence from the academic tone of the place. His speech at Athens shows that he was able, when he chose, to wield a style much more stately than that of his writings, and so keen a mind was not likely to remain in total ignorance of the great monuments of the language which he spoke.

22. There were other impressions, too, which the learned Tarsus probably made upon him: its university was famous for those petty disputes and rivalries which sometimes ruffle the calm of academical retreats; and it is possible that the murmur of these, with which the air was often filled, may have given the first impulse to that scorn for the tricks of the rhetorician and the windy disquisitions of the sophist which form so marked a feature in some of his writings. The glances of young eyes are clear and sure, and even as a boy he may have perceived how small may be the souls of men and how mean their lives, when their mouths are filled with the finest phraseology.

23. The college for the education of Jewish rabbis was in Jerusalem, and thither Paul was sent about the age of thirteen. His arrival in the Holy City may have happened in the same year in which JESUS, at the age of twelve, first visited it, and the overpowering emotions of the boy from Nazareth at the first sight of the capital of His race may be taken as an index of the unrecorded experience of the boy from Tarsus. To every Jewish child of a religious disposition Jerusalem was the center of all things; the footsteps of prophets and kings echoed in the streets; memories sacred and sublime clung to its walls and buildings; and it shone in the glamour of illimitable hopes.

24. It chanced that at this time the college of Jerusalem was presided over by one of the most noted teachers the Jews have ever possessed. This was Gamaliel, at whose feet Paul tells us he was brought up. He was called by his contemporaries the Beauty of the Law, and is still remembered among the Jews as the Great Rabbi. He was a man of lofty character and enlightened mind, a Pharisee strongly attached to the traditions of the fathers, yet not intolerant or hostile to Greek culture, as were some of the narrower Pharisees. The influence of such a man on an open mind like Paul's must have been very great; and, although for a time the pupil became an intolerant zealot, yet the master's example may have had something to do with the conquest he finally won over prejudice.

25. The course of instruction which a rabbi had to undergo was lengthened and peculiar. It consisted entirely of the study of the Scriptures and the comments of the sages and masters upon them. The words of Scripture and the sayings of the wise were committed to memory; discussions were carried on about disputed points; and by a rapid fire of questions, which the scholars were allowed to put as well as the masters, the wits of the students were sharpened and their views enlarged. The outstanding qualities of Paul's intellect, which were conspicuous in his subsequent life - his marvelous memory, the keenness of his logic, the superabundance of his ideas, and his original way of taking up every subject—first displayed themselves in this school, and excited, we may well believe, the warm interest of his teacher.

26. He himself learned much here which was of great moment in his subsequent career. Although he was to be specially the missionary of the Gentiles, he was also a great missionary to his own people. In every city he visited where there were Jews he made his first public appearance in the synagogue. There his training as a rabbi secured him an opportunity of

speaking, and his familiarity with Jewish modes of thought and reasoning enabled him to address his audiences in the way best fitted to secure their attention. His knowledge of the Scriptures enabled him to adduce proofs from an authority which his hearers acknowledged to be supreme.

Besides, he was destined to be the great theologian of Christianity and the principal writer of the New Testament. Now the New grew out of the Old; the one is in all its parts the prophecy and the other the fulfillment. But it required a mind saturated not only with Christianity, but with the Old Testament, to bring this out; and, at the age when the memory is most retentive, Paul acquired such a knowledge of the Old Testament that everything it contains was at his command: its phraseology became the language of his thinking; he literally writes in quotations, and he quotes from all parts with equal facility - from the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms. Thus was the warrior equipped with the armor and the weapons of the Spirit before he knew in what cause he was to use them.

27. His Religious Life - Meantime what was his moral and religious state? He was learning to be a religious teacher; was he himself religious? Not all who are sent to college by their parents to prepare for the sacred office are so, and in every city of the world the path of youth is beset with temptations which may ruin life at its very beginning. Some of the greatest teachers of the Church, such as Augustine, have had to look back on half their life blotted and scarred with vice or crime. No such fall defaced Paul's early years. Whatever struggles with passion may have raged in his own breast, his conduct was always pure. Jerusalem was no very favorable place, in that age, for virtue. It was the Jerusalem against whose external sanctity, but internal depravity, our Lord a few years afterward hurled such withering invectives; it was the very seat of hypocrisy, where an able youth might easily have learned how to win the rewards of religion, while escaping its burdens. But Paul was preserved amidst these perils, and could afterward claim that he had lived in Jerusalem from the first in all good conscience.

28. He had brought with him from home the conviction, which forms the basis of a religious life, that the one prize which makes life worth living is the love and favor of GOD. This conviction grew into a passionate longing as he advanced in years, and he asked his teachers how the prize was to be won. Their answer was ready - By the keeping of the law. It was a terrible answer; for the Law meant not only what we understand by the term, but also the ceremonial law of Moses and the thousand and one rules added to it by the Jewish teachers, the observance of which made life a purgatory to a tender conscience.

But Paul was not the man to shrink from difficulties. He had set his heart upon winning GOD's favor, without which this life appeared to him a blank and eternity the blackness of darkness; and, if this was the way to the goal, he was willing to tread it. Not only, however, were his personal hopes involved in this, the hopes of his nation depended on it too; for it was the universal belief of his people that the Messiah would only come to a nation keeping the law, and it was even said that, if one man kept it perfectly for a single day, his merit would bring to the earth the King for whom they were waiting. Paul's rabbinical training, then, culminated in the desire to win this prize of righteousness, and he left the halls of sacred learning with this as the purpose of his life. The lonely student's resolution was momentous for the world; for he was first to prove amidst secret agonies that this way of salvation was false, and then to teach his discovery to mankind.

29. At Jerusalem - We cannot tell in what year Paul's education at the college of Jerusalem was finished or where he went immediately afterward. The young rabbis, after completing their studies, scattered in the same way as our own divinity students do, and began practical work in

different parts of the Jewish world. He may have gone back to his native Cilicia and held office in some synagogue there. At all events, he was for some years at a distance from Jerusalem and Palestine; for these were the very years in which fell the movement of John the Baptist and the ministry of JESUS, and it is certain that Paul could not have been in the vicinity without being involved in both of these movements either as a friend or as a foe.

30. But before long he returned to Jerusalem. It was as natural for the highest rabbinical talent to gravitate in those times to Jerusalem as it is for the highest literary and commercial talent to gravitate in our day to the metropolis. He arrived in the capital of Judaism very soon after the death of JESUS; and we can easily imagine the representations of that event and of the career thereby terminated which he would receive from his Pharisaic friends.

We have no reason to suppose that as yet he had any doubts about his own religion. We gather, indeed, from his writings that he had already passed through severe mental conflicts. Although the conviction still stood fast in his mind that the blessedness of life was attainable only in the favor of GOD, yet his efforts to reach this coveted position by the observance of the law had not satisfied him. On the contrary, the more he strove to keep the law the more active became the motions of sin within him; his conscience was becoming more oppressed with the sense of guilt, and the peace of a soul at rest in GOD was a prize which eluded his grasp.

Still he did not question the teaching of the synagogue. To him as yet this was of one piece with the history of the Old Testament, whence looked down on him the figures of the saints and prophets, which were a guarantee that the system they represented must be divine, and behind which he saw the GOD of Israel revealing himself in the giving of the law. The reason why he had not attained to peace and fellowship with GOD was, he believed, because he had not struggled enough with the evil of his nature or honored enough the precepts of the law. Was there no service by which he could make up for all deficiencies and win that grace at last in which the great of old had stood? This was the temper of mind in which he returned to Jerusalem, and learned with astonishment and indignation of the rise of a sect which believed that JESUS who had been crucified was the Messiah of the Jewish people.

31. State of the Christian Church - Christianity was as yet only two or three years old, and was growing very quietly in Jerusalem. Although those who had heard it preached at Pentecost had carried the news of it to their homes in many quarters, its public representatives had not yet left the city of its birth. At first the authorities had been inclined to persecute it, and checked its teachers when they appeared in public. But they had changed their minds and, acting under the advice of Gamaliel, resolved to neglect it, believing that it would die out, if let alone. The Christians, on the other hand, gave as little offence as possible; in the externals of religion they continued to be strict Jews and zealous of the law, attending the temple worship, observing the Jewish ceremonies and respecting the ecclesiastical authorities.

It was a kind of truce, which allowed Christianity a little space for secret growth. In their upper rooms the brethren met to break bread and pray to their ascended Lord. It was the most beautiful spectacle. The new faith had alighted among them like an angel, and was shedding purity on their souls from its wings and breathing over their humble gatherings the spirit of peace. Their love to each other was unbounded; they were filled with the inspiring sense of discovery; and, as often as they met, their invisible Lord was in their midst. It was like Heaven upon earth. While Jerusalem around them was going on in its ordinary course of worldliness and ecclesiastical asperity, these few humble souls were felicitating themselves with a secret which they knew to contain within it the blessedness of mankind and the future of the world.

32. But the truce could not last, and these scenes of peace were soon to be invaded with terror and bloodshed. Christianity could not keep such a truce; for there is in it a world-conquering force, which impels it at all risks to propagate itself, and the fermentation of the new wine of Gospel liberty was sure sooner or later to burst the forms of the Jewish law.

At length a man arose in the Church in whom these aggressive tendencies embodied themselves. This was Stephen, one of the seven deacons who had been appointed to watch over the temporal affairs of the Christian society. He was a man full of the HOLY GHOST and possessed of capabilities which the brevity of his career only permitted to suggest but not to develop themselves. He went from synagogue to synagogue, preaching the Messiahship of JESUS and announcing the advent of freedom from the yoke of the law. Champions of Jewish orthodoxy encountered him, but were not able to withstand his eloquence and holy zeal. Foiled in argument, they grasped at other weapons, stirring up the authorities and the populace to murderous fanaticism.

33. Stephen - One of the synagogues in which these disputations took place was that of the Cilicians, the countrymen of Paul. May he have been a rabbi in this synagogue and one of Stephen's opponents in argument? At all events, when the argument of logic was exchanged for that of violence, he was in the front. When the witnesses who cast the first stones at Stephen were stripping for their work, they laid down their garments at his feet. There, on the margin of that wild scene, in the field of judicial murder, we see his figure, standing a little apart and sharply outlined against the mass of persecutors unknown to fame - the pile of many-colored robes at his feet, and his eyes bent upon the holy martyr, who is kneeling in the article of death and praying: "**Lord, lay not this sin to their charge.**"

34. The Persecutor - His zeal on this occasion brought Paul prominently under the notice of the authorities. It probably procured him a seat in the Sanhedrin, where we find him soon afterward giving his vote against the Christians. At all events, it led to his being entrusted with the work of utterly uprooting Christianity, which the authorities now resolved upon. He accepted their proposal; for he believed it to be GOD's work. He saw more clearly than anyone else what was the drift of Christianity; and it seemed to him destined, if unchecked, to overturn all that he considered most sacred.

The repeal of the law was in his eyes the obliteration of the one way of salvation, and faith in a crucified Messiah blasphemy against the divinest hope of Israel. Besides, he had a deep personal interest in the task. Hitherto he had been striving to please GOD, but always felt his efforts to come short; here was a chance of making up for all arrears by one splendid act of service. This was the iron of agony in his soul which gave edge and energy to his zeal. In any case he was not a man to do things by halves; and he flung himself headlong into his task.

35. Terrible were the scenes which ensued. He flew from synagogue to synagogue, and from house to house, dragging forth men and women, who were cast into prison and punished. Some appear to have been put to death, and - darkest trait of all - others were compelled to blaspheme the name of the Saviour. The Church at Jerusalem was broken in pieces, and such of its members as escaped the rage of the persecutor were scattered over the neighboring provinces and countries.

36. It may seem too venturesome to call this the last stage of Paul's unconscious preparation for his apostolic career. But so indeed it was. In entering on the career of a persecutor he was going

on straight in the line of the creed in which he had been brought up; and this was its reduction to absurdity. Besides, through the gracious working of Him whose highest glory it is out of evil still to bring forth good, there sprang out of these sad doings in the mind of Paul an intensity of humility, a willingness to serve even the least of the brethren of those whom he had abused, and a zeal to redeem lost time by the parsimonious use of what was left, which became permanent spurs to action in his subsequent career.

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