

THE LIFE OF SAINT PAUL

by

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CHAPTER FIVE

THE WORK AWAITING THE WORKER

Paragraphs 68-78.

68-70. Eight years of Comparative Inactivity at Tarsus

Gentiles admitted to Christian Church

71,72. Paul discovered by Barnabas and brought to Antioch

His Work there

73-78. THE KNOWN WORLD OF THAT PERIOD

75. The Greeks;

76. The Romans;

77. The Jews;

78. Barbarians and Slaves.

68. Years of Inactivity - Paul was now in possession of his Gospel and was aware that it was to be the mission of his life to preach it to the Gentiles; but he had still to wait a long time before his peculiar career commenced. We hear scarcely anything of him for seven or eight years; and yet we can only guess what may have been the reasons of Providence for imposing on His servant so long a time of waiting.

69. There may have been personal reasons for it connected with Paul's own spiritual history; because waiting is a common instrument of providential discipline for those to whom exceptional work has been appointed. A public reason may have been that he was too obnoxious to the Jewish authorities to be tolerated yet in those scenes where Christian activity commanded any notice. He had attempted to preach in Damascus, where his conversion had taken place, but was immediately forced to flee from the fury of the Jews; and, going thence to Jerusalem and beginning to testify as a Christian, he found the place in two or three weeks too hot to hold him. No wonder; how could the Jews be expected to allow the man who had so lately been the chief champion of their religion to preach the faith which they had employed him to destroy? When he fled from Jerusalem, he bent his steps to his native Tarsus, where for years he remained in obscurity. No doubt he testified for CHRIST there to his own family, and there are some indications that he carried on evangelistic operations in his native province of Cilicia: but, if he did so, his work may be said to have been that of a man in hiding, for it was not in the central or

even in a visible stream of the new religious movement.

70. These are but conjectural reasons for the obscurity of those years. But there was one undoubted reason for the delay of Paul's career of the greatest possible importance. In this interval took place that revolution - one of the most momentous in the history of mankind - by which the Gentiles were admitted to equal privileges with the Jews in the Church of CHRIST. This change proceeded from the original circle of apostles, in Jerusalem, and Peter, the chief of the apostles, was the instrument of it. By the vision of the sheet of clean and unclean beasts, which he saw at Joppa, he was prepared for the part he was to play in this transaction, and he admitted the Gentile Cornelius, of Caesarea, and his family to the Church by baptism without circumcision. This was an innovation involving boundless consequences. It was a necessary preliminary to Paul's mission-work, and subsequent events were to show how wise was the divine arrangement that the first Gentile entrants into the Church should be admitted by the hands of Peter rather than by those of Paul.

71. As soon as this event had taken place, the arena was clear for Paul's career, and a door was immediately opened for his entrance upon it. Almost simultaneously with the baptism of the Gentile family at Caesarea a great revival broke out among the Gentiles of the city of Antioch, the capital of Syria. The movement had been begun by fugitives driven by persecution from Jerusalem, and it was carried on with the sanction of the apostles, who sent Barnabas, one of their trusted coadjutors, from Jerusalem to superintend it.

This man knew Paul. When Paul first came to Jerusalem after his conversion and assayed to join himself to the Christians there, they were all afraid of him, suspecting the teeth and claws of the wolf beneath the fleece of the sheep. But Barnabas rose superior to these fears and suspicions and, having taken the new convert and heard his story, believed in him and persuaded the rest to receive him. The intercourse thus begun only lasted a week or two at that time, as Paul had to leave Jerusalem; but Barnabas had received a profound impression of his personality and did not forget him. When he was sent down to superintend the revival at Antioch, he soon found himself embarrassed with its magnitude and in need of assistance; and the idea occurred to him that Paul was the man he wanted. Tarsus was not far off, and thither he went to seek him. Paul accepted his invitation and returned with him to Antioch.

72. The hour he had been waiting for had struck, and he threw himself into the work of evangelizing the Gentiles with the enthusiasm of a great nature that found itself at last in its proper sphere. The movement at once responded to the pressure of such a hand; the disciples became so numerous and prominent that the heathen gave them a new name - that name of "Christians," which has ever since continued to be the badge of faith in Christian Antioch, a city of half a million inhabitants, became the headquarters of Christianity instead of Jerusalem. Soon a large church was formed, and one of the manifestations of the zeal with which it was pervaded was a proposal, which gradually shaped itself into an enthusiastic resolution, to send forth a mission to the heathen. As a matter of course, Paul was designated for this service.

73. The Known World of that Period - As we see him thus brought at length face to face with the task of his life, let us pause to take a brief survey of the world which he was setting out to conquer. Nothing less was what he aimed at. In Paul's time the known world was so small a place, that it did not seem impossible even for a single man to make a spiritual conquest of it; and it had been wonderfully prepared for the new force which was about to assail it.

74. It consisted of a narrow disc of land surrounding the Mediterranean Sea. That sea deserved at that time the name it bears, for the world's center of gravity, which has since shifted to other latitudes, lay in it. The interest of human life was concentrated in the southern countries of Europe, the portion of western Asia and the strip of northern Africa which form its shores. In this little world there were three cities which divided between them the interest of those ages. These were Rome, Athens and Jerusalem, the capitals of the three races - the Romans, the Greeks and the Jews - which in every sense ruled that old world. It was not that each of them had mastered a third part of the circle of civilization, but each of them had in turn diffused itself over the whole of it, and either still held its grip or at least had left imperishable traces of its presence.

75. The Greeks were the first to take possession of the world. They were the people of cleverness and genius, the perfect masters of commerce, literature and art. In very early ages they displayed the instinct for colonization and sent forth their sons to find new abodes on the east and the west, far from their native home. At length there arose among them one who concentrated in himself the strongest tendencies of the race and by force of arms extended the dominion of Greece to the borders of India. The vast empire of Alexander the Great split into pieces at his death; but a deposit of Greek life and influence remained in all the countries over which the deluge of his conquering armies had swept. Greek cities, such as Antioch in Syria and Alexandria in Egypt, flourished all over the East; Greek merchants abounded in every center of trade; Greek teachers taught the literature of their country in many lands; and-what was most important of all - the Greek language became the general vehicle for the communication of the more serious thought between nation and nation. Even the Jews in New Testament times read their own Scriptures in a Greek version, the original Hebrew having become a dead language. Perhaps the Greek is the most perfect tongue the world has known, and there was a special providence in its universal diffusion before Christianity needed a medium of international communication. The New Testament was written in Greek, and, wherever the apostles of Christianity traveled, they were able to make themselves understood in this language.

76. The turn of the Romans came next to obtain possession of the world. Originally a small clan in the neighborhood of the city from which they derived their name, they gradually extended and strengthened themselves and acquired such skill in the arts of war and government that they became irresistible conquerors and marched forth in every direction to make themselves masters of the globe. They subdued Greece itself and, flowing eastward, seized upon the countries which Alexander and his successors had ruled. The whole known world, indeed, became theirs from the Straits of Gibraltar to the utmost East. They did not possess the genius or geniality of the Greeks; their qualities were strength and justice; and their arts were not those of the poet and the thinker, but those of the soldier and the judge. They broke down the divisions between the tribes of men and compelled them to be friendly toward each other, because they were all alike prostrate beneath one iron rule. They pierced the countries with roads, which connected them with Rome and were such solid triumphs of engineering skill that some of them remain to this day. Along these highways the issuance of the Gospel ran. Thus the Romans also proved to be pioneers for Christianity, for their authority in so many countries afforded to its first publishers facility of movement and protection from the arbitrary justice of local tribunals.

77. Meanwhile the third nation of antiquity had also completed its conquest of the world. Not by force of arms did the Jews diffuse themselves, as the Greeks and Romans had done. For centuries, indeed, they had dreamed of the coming of a warlike hero, whose prowess should

outshine that of the most celebrated Gentile conquerors. But he never came: and their occupation of the centers of civilization had to take place in a more silent way.

There is no change in the habits of any nation more striking than that which passed over the Jewish race in that interval of four centuries between Malachi and Matthew of which we have no record in the sacred Scriptures. In the Old Testament we see the Jews pent within the narrow limits of Palestine, engaged mainly in agricultural pursuits and jealously guarding themselves from intermingling with foreign nations. In the New Testament we find them still, indeed, clinging with a desperate tenacity to Jerusalem and to the idea of their own separateness; but their habits and abodes have been completely changed: they have given up agriculture and betaken themselves with extraordinary eagerness and success to commerce; and with this object in view they have diffused themselves everywhere - over Africa, Asia, Europe - and there is not a city of any importance where they are not to be found. By what steps this extraordinary change came about it were hard to tell and long to trace. But it had taken place; and this turned out to be a circumstance of extreme importance for the early history of Christianity.

Wherever the Jews were settled, they had their synagogues, their sacred Scriptures, their uncompromising belief in the One true GOD. Not only so: their synagogues everywhere attracted proselytes from the surrounding Gentile populations. The heathen religions were at that period in a state of utter collapse. The smaller nations had lost faith in their deities, because they had not been able to defend them from the victorious Greeks and Romans. But the conquerors had for other reasons equally lost faith in their own gods. It was an age of skepticism, religious decay and moral corruption. But

there are always natures which must possess a faith in which they can trust. These were in search of a religion, and many of them found refuge from the coarse and incredible myths of the gods of polytheism in the purity and monotheism of the Jewish creed. The fundamental ideas of this creed are also the foundations of the Christian faith. Wherever the messengers of Christianity traveled, they met with people with whom they had many religious conceptions in common. Their first sermons were delivered in synagogues, their first converts were Jews and proselytes. The synagogue was the bridge by which Christianity crossed over to the heathen.

78. Such, then, was the world which Paul was setting out to conquer. It was a world everywhere pervaded with these three influences. But there were two other elements of population which require to be kept in mind, as both of them supplied numerous converts to the early preachers: they were the original inhabitants of the various countries; and there were the slaves, who were either captives taken in war or their descendants, and were liable to be shifted from place to place, being sold according to the necessities or caprices of their masters. A religion the chief boast of which it was to preach glad tidings to the poor could not neglect these down-trodden classes, and, although the conflict of Christianity with the forces of the time which had possession of the fate of the world naturally attracts attention, it must not be forgotten that its best triumph has always consisted in the sweetening and brightening of the lot of the humble.

~ end of chapter 5 ~

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