

PAUL: A SERVANT OF JESUS CHRIST

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CHAPTER THREE

SEPARATED FROM THE BIRTH

(Galatians 1:15)

"What to thee is shadow, to Him is day,
And the end He knoweth;
And not on a blind and aimless way,
The spirit goeth.

"Like warp and woof all destinies
Are woven fast,
Linked in sympathy, like the keys
Of an organ vast."

- Whittier

WHEN he became a man, Paul put away childish things; but there were some things which he could not put away, and there was no need that he should, because they had been planned beforehand by GOD as a special qualification and preparation for his life work.

Over his cradle in the crowded Jewish quarter of Tarsus a Divine purpose hovered. As to Jeremiah, so to him, the Word of the Lord might have come, saying, "**Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee: and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations.**"

He had some inkling of this when he said, in writing to the Galatians, "**It pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb, and called me by his grace, To reveal his Son in me, that I might preach him among the heathen.**"

GOD has a purpose in every life; and where the soul is perfectly yielded and acquiescent, He will certainly realize it. Blessed is he who has never thwarted the execution of the Divine ideal.

One of the most interesting studies in human life is to see how all the circumstances and incidents of its initial stages have been shaped by a determining will, and made to subserve a beneficent purpose. Every thread is needed for the completed pattern; every piece of equipment stands in good stead at the final test.

The future Apostle must be deeply instructed in the Jewish law.

"**The law**" must stand here as a convenient term, not only for the moral and Levitical code, as given in the Pentateuch, but for the minute and laborious additions of the rabbis, who to use one of their own illustrations had so overlaid the sweet flute of truth with their gilding as to silence its music. The righteousness which was of the law consisted in meats, and drinks, and divers ordinances and washings; in the length of fringes and number of tassels; the straining of wine lest there should be the dead body of a fly; the tithing of the stalk as well as the flower of mint; the punctilious measuring of the ground, that not a step might be taken beyond the legitimate Sabbath day's journey. One great rabbi spent the whole week in considering how to observe the coming Sabbath.

No one could have appreciated the intolerable burden of this yoke of legalism which even Peter said neither they nor their fathers were able to bear unless he had been taught, as Paul was, "**according to the perfect manner of the law of the fathers.**"

As Luther was reared in the Roman Catholic Church that he might appreciate the utter impotence of her system to pacify the conscience, or appease the heart, and that, having broken from it, he might show the way of escape to others; so Saul of Tarsus must needs tarry amid the experiences of which he speaks so often in the Epistle to the Galatians, that he might be able to magnify the freedom wherewith CHRIST hath made us free.

He needed to be apt in his quotation and application of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Every question in religious and ordinary Jewish life was settled by an appeal to the Scriptures. No speaker could gain the audience, or hold the attention of a Jewish congregation for a moment, unless he were able to show, the more ingeniously the better, that his statements could be substantiated from the Inspired Word. To the law and the testimony every assertion must be brought. Before that venerable bar every teacher must stand.

It was above all things necessary that Christianity should be shown to be, not the destruction but the fulfillment of the ancient law - the white flower growing from the plant which GOD had brought from Ur of the Chaldees; the meridian day of which the dawn first streaked the sky at Moriah.

What made Paul so "**mad**" against Christianity was its apparent denial and betrayal of the obvious meaning of Old Testament prophecies and types. Neither he nor any of his co-religionists were prepared to accept a humiliated, suffering, dying Messiah, unless it could be shown without controversy that such a conception were the true reading of Moses, the Prophets, and the Law.

If any collection of sincere and earnest Jews had been asked the question, "**Ought not Christ [the Messiah] to have suffered these things, and to enter into his glory?**" they would have unhesitatingly answered No; and would have required one who was thoroughly versed, not only in Scripture, but in the recondite interpretations of the rabbi, to prove to them from the entire range of the Old Testament that it behoved the Messiah to suffer.

This qualification also Paul acquired during his years of training under Gamaliel. Throughout the entire course, "**the oracles of God**" were the only textbook; and every day was spent in the careful and minute consideration of words, lines, and letters, together with the interpretations of the various rabbis.

Men might chafe at his renderings of the ancient words, but they could not dispute his intimate acquaintance with them, and his profound erudition. He knew the whole ground perfectly. There was not a single argument with which he was not familiar, and for which he was not instantly ready with a reply.

The field of Scripture had been repeatedly ploughed over by that keen mind, and its harvests gathered into that retentive memory. There are passages in his writings which are little else than stairways of quotation, one built up from another.

His arguments are clinched by an appeal to the Sacred Word, as though otherwise they would be inconclusive. For illustration he will go, not to the illuminated missal of nature, for which he seems to have had no eye, but to the incidents and narratives which have made the Old Testament the storybook of all the ages. It was this power that gave him an entrance into every synagogue, and carried conviction to so many candid Jews. How richly, for instance, it was appreciated by Bible students, like those whom he met at Berea!

He needed to have large and liberal views.

Jewish intolerance and exclusivism had reared a high wall of partition between Jew and Gentile. The Jews had no dealings with the Samaritans; how much less with the Gentile dogs that crouched beneath the well-spread table of the children! Here is a characteristic saying of one of the doctors of the law:

"If a Gentile fall into the sea, a Jew is not to pull him out;
for it is written, Thou shalt not be guilty of thy neighbor's blood
but the Gentile is not thy neighbor."

The majority of the apostles were largely influenced by this caste spirit.

It was hard for them, though they had been molded by the Lord Himself, to break through the ring fence of early training. Had the shaping of the primitive church been left to them, though theoretically they might have acknowledged the equality of Jew and Gentile in GOD's sight, yet practically they would have drawn distinctions between the Jewish Christians and those other sheep which their Shepherd was bringing, but which were not of the Hebrew fold.

Peter will go into a Gentile house, and eat with the uncircumcised beneath the pressure of the heavenly vision; but when the glory of that memorable day has faded, and certain come down from James, he makes an excuse to withdraw into the impregnable fastness of Jewish superiority.

Evidently another than James, or even Peter, was needed, who would dare to insist on the absolute equality of all who by faith had become stones in the one church, or buildings in the one holy temple, that was growing into an habitation for GOD. The need of a trumpet voice was urgent, to proclaim that JESUS had abolished in his flesh the enmity, that He might create in Himself of the twain one new man, so making peace.

Through the ordering of Divine Providence this qualification also was communicated to the future Apostle of the Uncircumcision.

By birth, as we have seen, he was a Hebrew: not otherwise could he have influenced Jews, or obtained admission into their synagogues. But he had been brought up at the feet of the great Rabbi, who, while revered as "*the beauty of the law*," was recognized also as the most large-hearted of all the Jewish doctors. Grandson of the great Hillel, he was, as the story of the Acts indicates, one of the leaders of the Sanhedrim: "**A doctor of the law, had in reputation among all the people**" (Acts 5:34). But he went so far as to permit and advocate the study of Greek literature.

In his speech before the Sanhedrim, given in Acts 5, we trace the movements of a human and generous mind, willing to admit the workings of the Divine Spirit beyond the limits of rigid orthodoxy, and to follow the torch of truth wherever it might lead a very holy man, deeply attached to the religion of his people, yet accustomed to look at all questions from the standpoint of a large culture and wide charity.

The influence of such a teacher must have been very potent on the young Tarsus student, who had come to sit at his feet, and who regarded him with a boundless enthusiasm. Into the upturned furrows of that impressible nature may have been sown seeds, which under the sun of Christianity would ripen into such sayings as that "**there is neither Jew nor Greek . . . for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.**"

There was needed specially a wide knowledge of the world.

The man who was to be a missionary to men must know them. He who would be all things to all men, that by all means he might win some, must be familiar with their methods of life and thought. A Jerusalem-Jew could not possibly have adapted himself to cultured Greeks and practical Romans, to barbarians and Scythians, to bond and free; to Festus the imperial governor, and Agrippa the Hebrew king; to Onesimus the slave, and Philemon the master, as Paul did.

But this qualification also was supplied without his realizing its worth. From boyhood he was familiar with the tides of Gentile life that flowed up the Cydnus into his native city. Men from all the world came thither for purposes of trade.

The wharves, baths, colonnades, and open places of the city, were thronged with the costumes, and rang with the many tongues of all the lands that touched on the great inland sea. And thus insensibly the horizon of the boy's mind was widened to include the great outer world.

When his training at Jerusalem was complete he must have returned to Tarsus. This surely would be immediately before the appearance of John the Baptist, preaching repentance in the Jordan valley. Paul could not have been in Judaea at this time without making some reference to his marvellous ministry and tragic end.

In the same way he must have missed the ministry and crucifixion of JESUS of Nazareth, and the early years of the existence of the church. But during this interval his education was proceeding. In these years he probably married, else he would not afterwards have occupied a seat in the Sanhedrim; and steadily pursued his trade, or exercised his profession as a rabbi in the local synagogue, or travelled far afield on some religious mission, compassing sea and land to make proselytes.

But imagine what those seven or eight years must have meant to the young Pharisee. Could the young athlete have restrained himself from encounters with the system of things by which he was surrounded?

There was a school of heathen philosophy in search of the supreme good: would he not try a throw with its exponents?

There was a vast system of idolatry, especially of Baal worship: would he not reason with its votaries, arguing that they cannot be gods which are made with hands?

There was wild indulgence of shameless, sensual passion: would he not contrast it with the comparative purity of his own race?

And all the while he would be keenly observing and noting every phase of Gentile heathendom.

The pictures of the world of that age given in the first chapter to the Romans and the first Epistle to the Corinthians, and comprising such dark allusions to the depravity and abandonment of the Gentiles, could only have been given by one who obtained his information first-hand, and by personal observation. What vivid touches there are in his entreaty not to walk "**Having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God . . . Who being past feeling have given themselves over unto lasciviousness, to work all uncleanness with greediness**" (Ephesians 4:18-19).

He needed also to be equipped with the pre-requisites of a great traveller.

For this there were three necessary conditions: speech, safety, sustenance. And each was forthcoming.

Speech.

Greek was the common language of the world, the medium of intercourse among educated persons, as English is in India to-day. And Paul was even more familiar with Greek than with the sacred Hebrew. When quoting the Scriptures he habitually employed the Septuagint (i.e., the Greek) version; and he was able to speak their tongue fluently and elegantly enough to hold the attention of Athenian philosophers.

Safety.

All the world was Roman. Roman governors in every province; Roman usages in every city; Roman coins, customs, and officials. To be a Roman citizen gave a man a standing and position in any part of the empire.

- He might not be beaten without trial; or if he were, the magistrates were in jeopardy of losing their office, and even their life.
- He could demand trial at the bar of Caesar; if he appealed to Caesar, to Caesar he must go.
- He would be permitted to plead for himself before the bar of Roman justice.

So great were the advantages, that men like Lysias the chief captain thought it worthwhile to purchase the right of freedom with a great sum. How great an advantage, then, to be able to say as Paul could, "**I was free born!**"

His family may have been originally settled in Tarsus as part of a Roman colony, and Jews were always considered excellent colonists, and so this inestimable privilege came to cast its sheltering folds around its most illustrious son.

Sustenance.

This also was secured to him. On whatever shore he was cast there were always goats, and always the demand for the coarse cloth at which he had been wont to work from his boyhood.

In all this how evidently was the Divine purpose at work, shaping all things after the counsel of its own will. And what was true in Paul's case is as true for us all. A providence is shaping our ends; a plan is developing in our lives; a supremely wise and loving Being is making all things work together for good. In the sequel of our life's story we shall see that there was a meaning and necessity in all the previous incidents, save those which were the result of our own folly and sin, and that even these have been made to contribute to the final result. Trust Him, child of GOD: He is leading you by a right way to the celestial City of Habitation; and as from the terrace of eternity you review the path by which you came from the morning land of childhood, you will confess that He hath done all things well.

~ end of chapter 3 ~

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