

# PAUL: A SERVANT OF JESUS CHRIST

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## CHAPTER NINE

### THE APOSTLE OF THE GENTILES

(Romans 11:13)

He looked abroad, and spake of some bright dawn  
Of happiness and freedom, peace and love;  
Day long desired, and now about to break  
On all the nations.”

- Trench

IT is probable that during his years of quiet work in Cilicia and Syria, Saul of Tarsus was being led with increasing clearness to apprehend God's purpose in his life that he should be the Apostle of the Gentiles.

- The heavenly voices at the commencement of his Christian career had announced that he would be sent to them (Acts 26:20).
- Ananias had been informed that he was to be a chosen vessel to bear the name of Jesus before the Gentiles and kings (9:15).
- The vision in the Temple had culminated in the words, “**Depart: for I will send thee far hence unto the Gentiles**” (22:21).

And there is no doubt that the exigencies of his labor, for so many years, amid populations largely composed of Gentiles, made him feel the impulse of the current that was bearing the whole Church towards a new departure. Up till now Judaism had been the only door into Christianity; hence forth the door of faith was to stand wide open to Gentiles also, without circumcision. Some suggestion of this is furnished by his own lips, “**But shewed first unto them of Damascus, and at Jerusalem, and throughout all the coasts of Judaea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, and do works meet for repentance**” (26:20). But still the true channel bed of his life was hardly discovered until circumstances transpired which will now demand our notice.

## I. SUMMONED TO ANTIOCH

Halfway through Luke's narrative the center of interest shifts from the mother Church at Jerusalem to one which had been founded shortly before the time we are describing, in the gay, frivolous, busy, beautiful city of Antioch.

Connected with the commerce of the Western world by the River Orontes, which flowed majestically through the marble palaces and crowded wharves that lined its banks, and communicating with the thoughtful conservative East by the caravans that brought the merchandise of Mesopotamia and Arabia through the passes of the Lebanon, Antioch was an emporium of trade, a meeting place for the Old World and the New, "an Oriental Rome, in which all the forms of the civilized life of the empire found some representation."

It is forever famous in Christian annals, because a number of unordained and unnamed disciples, fleeing from Jerusalem in the face of Saul's persecution, dared to preach the Gospel to Greeks, and to gather the converts into a church, in entire disregard of the initial rite of Judaism. There, also, the disciples of "the Way" were first called Christians from the holy name which was constantly on the lips of teachers and taught. But the imposition of that name shows that the people of Antioch were aware that a new body or sect was in process of formation.

From Antioch issued the first missionary expedition for the evangelization of the world. In post Apostolic days it was famous as the see of the great bishop, saint, and martyr, Ignatius.

The population of Antioch was a rabble of all races; but the Greek element predominated, with its licentious rites, its vivacious, sparkling intellect, its marvellously elegant and subtle tongue, its passion for the theatre, the arena, and the racecourse.

There was need indeed that the river of Life should find its way into that swamp of beautiful but deadly corruption; but probably none of the leaders of the Church would have dared to take the initial step of conducting its streams thither.

Peter and the Church at Jerusalem were only just learning, through amazing incidents in the house of Cornelius, that God was prepared to grant to Gentile proselytes repentance unto life. It was left, therefore, to a handful of fugitive, Hellenistic Jews, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, to break through the barriers of the centuries, and begin preaching the Lord Jesus to the Greeks at Antioch. Instantly the Divine Spirit honored their word, gave testimony to the word of God's grace, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord (Acts 11:19-21).

As soon as tidings of these novel proceedings reached Jerusalem, the Church dispatched Barnabas, who was himself a Cypriot, to make inquiries and report. His verdict was definite and reassuring. He had no hesitation in affirming that it was a definite work of God's grace; he rejoiced that the simple souls had been thrust into so ripe and plentiful a harvest; and he carried on the work which had been inaugurated with such success that "**much people was added unto the Lord.**"

His success, however, only added to the perplexity and difficulty of the situation, and he found himself face to face with a great problem. The Gentiles were pressing into the Church, and taking their places on an equality with Jews at the Supper and Love feasts, an action which the more conservative Jews greatly resented. The single-hearted man was hardly able to cope with the problem.

But he remembered that at his conversion his old friend and fellow-student had been specially commissioned to preach to the Gentiles; and hoping that he might be ready with a solution, he departed to Tarsus to seek Saul, and having found him he brought him to Antioch. **“And it came to pass, that a whole year they assembled themselves with the Church, and taught much people.”**

But this year’s experience at Antioch was of the utmost consequence to Saul.

He learned from Barnabas the conclusion to which the Church at Jerusalem had come, on hearing Peter’s recital of God’s dealings with Cornelius and his household (11:18); he noticed how evidently the Spirit of God set his seal upon appeals, whether by himself or others, addressed directly to the Gentiles, and thus was led with that deep appreciation which comes from the education of circumstances to see that believing Gentiles were fellow-members of the Church and fellow-heirs of the promises.

God made no distinctions; why should he? All the while his horizon was broadening, his confidence increasing, his conception of God’s purposes deepening, and he was formulating the Gospel which he afterwards preached among them (Galatians 2:2).

We need not stay over his brief visit to Jerusalem at the end of his year’s ministry at Antioch, to carry alms from the Gentile Christians to their suffering Jewish brethren. Suffice it to say that it established a precedent which he followed in after life, and proved that there was no sort of antagonism between the new society and the old, but that all were one in Christ.

On this occasion he does not seem to have met the Apostles, who probably had withdrawn from Jerusalem to avoid the murderous hate of Herod (12); and the gift of the Church at Antioch was, therefore, left with the elders of the mother Church (11:30). And nothing occurred to divert the heart of the future Apostle from those resolves which were crystallizing with increasing clearness before him.

## **II. SET APART BY THE HOLY SPIRIT**

It was a momentous hour in the history of the Church when, on the return of Barnabas and Paul from Jerusalem, they met, with three others, for a season of fasting and prayer. What was the immediate reason for this special session we cannot say; but it is significant that the three prophets and two teachers represented between them five different countries. Were they yearning after their own people, and wistful to offer them the Gospel, as they now saw they might offer it, apart from the trammels and restraints of Judaism? We cannot tell. That, however, was the birth hour of modern missions.

The Holy Ghost, Christ's Vicar, the Director and Administrator of the Church, bade the little group set apart two out of their number to a mission which He would unfold to them, as they dared to step out in obedience to his command.

There was no hesitation or delay. The Church set them free from their duties, and the Holy Spirit sent them forth. And that journey was a complete answer to all the questions by which they had been perplexed.

In Cyprus, to which they were first attracted, because Barnabas was connected with it through his birth and estate, though they proclaimed the word of God from one end to the other in the synagogues of the Jews, they had no fruit till the Roman governor called them before him, and sought to hear their message, on hearing which he believed.

After landing on the mainland, Paul, contrary to the judgment of John and Mark, struck up from the seacoast to the far-reaching tablelands of the interior, four thousand feet above the sea level, with the evident intention of establishing churches on the great trade route which ran through Asia Minor from Tarsus to Ephesus. What might not be the result for East and West, if this great mutual bridge were to become a highway for the feet of the Son of God!

But there the same experience awaited him.

The Jews in Antioch and Pisidia refused, whilst the Gentiles welcomed them. Indeed he was compelled to turn publicly from his own countrymen, and hold up the Gospel as light and salvation to those whom the prophet described as at the uttermost end of the earth. Then it was that the word of the Lord spread throughout all the region.

At Iconium, whither they fled before a persecution which made it unsafe to remain in Antioch, they again found the malice of the Jews so persistent that they were driven forth into the Gentile cities and district of Lycaonia, where there were probably no synagogues at all. There, too, they preached the Gospel, and made many disciples.

Everywhere it was the Jewish element that was obstructive and implacable; while the Gentiles, when left to themselves, received them and their message with open arms. God gave manifest testimony to the word of his grace whenever they unfolded it to the Gentiles; set before those eager seekers the open door of faith; and granted signs and wonders to be wrought of His servants hands (Acts 14:3, 27; 15:12).

As Paul quietly studied these indications of God's will, he needed no angel to tell him that as Israel would not hear, God was provoking them to jealousy by them who were not a people. He saw that the original branches were being broken off, that the wild olive grafts might take their place. Blindness was happening to Israel, until the fulness of the Gentiles had been gathered in (Romans 11:8, 17, 25) His love was not abated. How could it be? Were they not his brethren, his kinsmen according to the flesh? But he must follow the divine plan.

Probably Paul's greatest experience of this journey was his first visit to the warm-hearted Galatians, whose country is probably referred to in the vague allusion of Acts 14:24. In any case, his insistence in his Epistle that he had preached to them the Gospel as he had received it direct and undiluted from Christ, compels us to locate his first acquaintance with them at this time, and before that memorable visit to Jerusalem, to which we shall refer presently, and in which he consulted the apostles concerning the Gospel he proclaimed (Acts 15; Galatians 2).

It is probable that he was detained amongst them by a painful attack of his habitual malady, aggravated by climatic changes, or malaria, "**Ye know,**" he says, "**how through infirmity of the flesh I preached the gospel unto you at the first; And my temptation which was in my flesh ye despised not, nor rejected.**"

So far from rejecting him on this account, his sorrows and afflictions only touched them more to the quick, and bound them to him. "**I bear you record,**" he says, "**that, if it had been possible, ye would have plucked out your own eyes and have given them to me.**"

His success among this affectionate people was remarkable, and still further deepened the impression, which was becoming the guiding star of his career, that he must bend his strength to the salvation of the Gentiles, whose cause had been laid on his heart at the hour of his conversion.

### **III. HIS APOSTOLATE RECOGNIZED BY THE APOSTLES**

We do not propose to add anything to the discussion in which so much has been urged on either side, as to the time when the visit to Jerusalem, referred to in Galatians 2, took place. After carefully considering the arguments of those who would identify it with the visit to bring alms mentioned above, and of those who would make it a separate visit for the special purpose of obtaining the opinion of the leaders on his ministry we fall back on the more generally received view that Galatians 2 refers to the visit mentioned in Acts 15, when, as we shall see in a succeeding chapter, he was sent as a deputation from Antioch to Jerusalem to obtain the views of the Apostles on the admission of Gentiles into the Church.

It is sufficient for our present purpose to notice that Paul definitely sought the opinion of those in repute among the Apostles on his teaching, lest by any means he should be running, or had run, in vain. In the course of several interviews it became increasingly evident to James, Peter, and John, that their former persecutor had received a Divine commission to the Gentiles. They realized that he had been entrusted with the Gospel of the uncircumcision.

Peter especially recognized that he who wrought in himself unto the apostolate of the Jew was equally energetic in his fervid soul unto the Gentile. The responsible leaders of the mother Church could not help perceiving the grace that was given to him; and finally they gave to him the right hand of fellowship, that he should go to the Gentiles, whilst they went to the circumcision. This was the further and final confirmation of the purpose which had been forming in his heart; and he recognized that he was appointed a herald and an apostle, a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth.

He gloried in this ministry, and often spoke of the grace which had been given to him, the least of all saints, to preach unto the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ. He never failed to begin his work in any place by an honest endeavor to save some of his own flesh; but he always realized that his supreme stewardship was to those who were called uncircumcision by that which was called circumcision in the flesh made by hands.

By the hand of the risen Jesus he had been appointed to the apostleship. In nothing did he come behind the very chiefest of the Apostles; and truly the signs of an Apostle were wrought through his means, in all signs and wonders and mighty works (I Corinthians 9:1; 15:9; Galatians 1:1).

Surely, then, it is befitting that the Church which bears his name should stand in the heart of the greatest Gentile city of the age, and bear the emblem of the death of Christ above its smoke and turmoil the sign of the work and service of the great Apostle of the Gentiles.

**~ end of chapter 9 ~**

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