

# PAUL: A SERVANT OF JESUS CHRIST

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## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### THE CONFLICT OF PAUL'S LIFE

(Acts 15; Galatians 2)

“Some law there needs be, other than the law  
Of our own wills; happy is he who finds  
A law wherein his spirit is left free.  
. . . I will not bend again  
My spirit to a yoke that is not Christ's.”  
- H. Hamilton King

In the separation of Abraham from country, kindred, and father's house, the story of his people was foreshadowed. As Balaam, under the inspiration of the Almighty, said, “**Lo, the people shall dwell alone, and shall not be reckoned among the nations.**”

Their dress, rites, customs, and religious habits, were carefully and expressly determined to accentuate their separation, that, being withdrawn from the influence of surrounding nations, they might be fitted to receive, keep, and transmit the knowledge of God.

In no other way could they have borne the precious deposit entrusted to them down the centuries, and maintained their unbroken witness to the unity, spirituality, and holiness of God. Not otherwise could they have become the religious poets, prophets, and teachers of mankind.

The laws of separation were so rigid that Peter did not scruple to remind Cornelius and his friends of the risk he ran in crossing the threshold of a Gentile's house, although his host was a man of high rank, of irreproachable character, and well reported of by all the nation of the Jews.

And when Peter was come up to Jerusalem, even his fellow-believers, who were of the circumcision, found grievous fault with him: “**They that were of the circumcision contended with him, Saying, thou wentest in to men uncircumcised, and didst eat with them.**”

The law of commandments, contained in ordinances, some of them ordained through Moses, and many superadded by successive generations of doctors and rabbis, stood like a middle wall of partition between Jew and Gentile.

All these barriers and restrictions were represented in the initial act of Judaism, the rite of circumcision, the importance of which had been magnified to a most preposterous extent. It was affirmed by one rabbi that but for circumcision Heaven and earth could not exist; and by another that it was equivalent to all the commandments of the law. It was counted more desirable for a Gentile to submit to this rite than to obey all the affirmative precepts of Moses, or to love God and his neighbor. It was supposed that Adam, Noah, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and Balaam, had all been born circumcised; and that subsequently the rite was under the special and peculiar charge of the great prophet Elijah, who was always at hand to see to its due observance.

The rigor of these observances was heavy enough in Jerusalem. But in foreign parts, amid great Gentile communities, with whom the Jews were constantly engaged in commerce, it became customary to relax the stringency of the bonds of Judaism, though always maintaining circumcision, the intermarriage of Jew with Jew, and that particular method of preparing animal flesh for food which is still in vogue amongst Jews.

It was clear, therefore, that any innovation which Christianity might introduce into Judaism would be more likely to reveal itself at a distance from Jerusalem, where it would not be instantly repressed by the unbending conservative sentiment so strongly entrenched in the metropolis of the national faith.

We are not surprised, therefore, that Antioch became the scene of that forward movement, led by Barnabas and Paul, which consisted in openly welcoming Gentile converts into the Christian community, without insisting on their previous conformity to the venerable rite of circumcision.

This marked a great advance. Hitherto, especially in Judaea, the Christians were regarded by the people as a Jewish sect; and so long as they were prepared to attend the Temple services, conform to the regulations, and maintain the institutions of Judaism, their belief in Jesus as the long-promised Messiah was regarded as a peculiarity which might be condoned and winked at.

It was permissible that they should meet in the love feast, so long as they did not forsake the Temple; they might pray to Jesus as God if they acted in all other respects as devout Jews. But if this rule had been universally maintained, Christianity, like a stream in a marshy land, would have speedily been lost to view. After a few brief years it would have been indistinguishable.

And Judaism, with its intolerable burden and exaggerations, would have stood forth among men as the only representative of the purest faith which had ever visited our world. The world of the Gentiles would have been hopelessly alienated; the coming of the Kingdom of God would have been put back for centuries, even if it had ever emerged from the stifling conditions of its cradle.

All this, however, was prevented by the policy to which Barnabas and Paul had been led.

In the Epistle to the Galatians (2:4, 12) we have a pleasant glimpse of the liberty which the converts in Antioch had in Christ Jesus. Circumcised and uncircumcised joined in the common exercises of Christian fellowship. They ate together without question; and even Peter, when on a visit to Antioch, was so charmed with the godly simplicity and beauty of their communion, that he joined freely with them, and partook of their love feasts and common meals.

The conservative party in the Jerusalem Church, however, on hearing these tidings, was ill at ease. They saw that if this principle were allowed to be universal, it would undermine their authority, and eventually rend their religious supremacy from their grasp. They could not brook the thought that circumcision might fall into disuse, and that the deep spiritual teaching of Moses might become common coin for the handling of Gentile fingers; and, therefore, as the first step, sent down false brethren, who were privily brought in, and came to spy out the liberty which the Church at Antioch practiced. Then, when they were assured of the facts, certain men came down from Judaea, and taught the brethren, saying, **“Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved.”**

It was an important crisis, and led to the breaking out of a controversy which embittered many succeeding years in the Apostle’s life; but it led to some of his noblest Epistles, and to his exposition of the principles of the Gospel with unrivalled clearness and beauty.

## **I. GREAT QUESTIONS WERE AT STAKE**

This, for instance: Whether Christianity was to be a sect of Judaism, a chamber in the Temple, a bud confined in its green sheath, a dwarfed and stunted babe in swaddling clothes that forbade its natural development?

And this: Whether the Levitical institutions of rites and ceremonies, of feasts and fasts, were of a piece with the great moral code of Sinai and Deuteronomy; or might be regarded as temporary and fugitive, brought in for a specific purpose, but to be laid aside when that purpose was fulfilled?

But this most of all: What were the conditions on which men might be saved?

The conditions of salvation are debated in the language of every age. The terms vary, but the controversy is always the same. Substitute Ritualism for Judaism, and the rites of the Church for circumcision, and you are confronted by the same questions and issues as were encountered by our Apostle. Still men say, Except you be christened, confirmed, and received into our church, ye cannot be saved. And it is from Paul’s store of arguments, with which apparently before his old age his adversaries were silenced, that we must find our weapons, as Luther found them before us.

Salvation is not secured by obedience to a rite, by the observance of a code of rules, or even by obedience to a creed, pronounced orthodox. A man may be precise in all of these and yet be under the wrath of God, and his character be scarred by passion and self-indulgence. The only condition of salvation is faith, which believes in Him that justifies the ungodly, and receives into the heart the very nature of Jesus to become the power of the new life.

How infinitely unimportant, then, compared with faith, is any outward rite. It may have its place, as the outward sign and seal of the covenant, but it has no efficacy apart from the spiritual act.

But there is a constant tendency in the human heart to magnify the importance of the outward rite to the minimizing of the value of the spiritual attribute, which it should express or accompany. The outward is so much more accessible, manageable, and computable; the spiritual so removed from human vision and manipulation.

In these days men are prone to magnify the ordinances of Baptism and the Lord's Supper in the precise manner in which these Judaizing Christians magnified circumcision. And when they are allowed to do so, their whole theory of religion becomes mechanical and formal. Those who punctiliously follow their precepts are hopelessly led into the ditch, whilst those who denounce their error are anathematized and consigned to the uncovenanted mercies of God.

Let us never forget, then, that circumcision availeth nothing, nor uncircumcision; but faith which worketh by love, a new creature, and the keeping of the commandments of God. And let us never fail to follow the Apostle's example, who said, "**To whom we gave place in the way of subjection, no, not for an hour, that the truth of the Gospel might continue with you.**"

## II. THE ARGUMENTS ON EITHER SIDE

**"There was much contention."**

Did not Jesus fulfill the law of Moses? Was He not circumcised? And did He not rigorously observe the Temple fasts and feasts, and even pay his share in the Temple tax?

Certainly, said Barnabas and Paul: but you must remember that when He died He said, "**It is finished**"; and the vail of the Temple was rent from the top to the bottom, to show that Judaism had finished its God-given mission.

From that moment He became not a Saviour of Jews only, but the world's Redeemer. When God ratified the new covenant with the blood of Calvary, He made the first covenant old. And that which becometh old and waxeth aged is nigh to vanishing away.

But surely the law given by Moses is permanent! Did not Jesus of Nazareth assert that not one jot or tittle should pass away until all was fulfilled?

Precisely. But surely we must distinguish between the outward and inward, the ritual and ethical, the form and the substance? It is impossible to believe that the sublime ceremonial of Leviticus, which was imposed for a special purpose, can be of the same binding force and moment as the ten words of the Law which are borne witness to by the conscience of all men?

But if you do away with the restrictions of the Law, will you not loosen all moral restraint, and lead to a general relaxation of all bonds in the family and the State?

There is no fear of this, the stalwart defenders of the simplicities of the faith answer from the other side. Souls that are united to Jesus Christ by faith are cleansed by receiving from Him tides of spiritual life and health; so that they become more than ever pure, and holy, and divine.

Do we then make the law of none effect through faith? God forbid; nay, we establish the law. The righteousness of the law is fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus makes us free from the law of sin and death.

### III. THE APPEAL TO JERUSALEM

The disputing and questioning, however, showed no signs of abating, and it was finally decided that Paul and Barnabas, and certain others with them, should go up to Jerusalem to consult the apostles and elders about this question.

They travelled slowly through Phoenicia and Samaria, declaring the conversion of the Gentiles in each of the little Christian communities on their route, until they reached Jerusalem, where, in a great missionary convocation, specially convened, they told all things that God had done with them that is, in cooperation and fellowship with them; as though by blessing them the living Christ were Himself implicated in the methods they had adopted. But their statements were interrupted by the uprising of certain of the sect of the Pharisees that believed, and the heated interjection of the reiterated statement, “**It was needful to circumcise them, and to command *them* to keep the law of Moses.**”

Again a special meeting was summoned: in which there was much questioning. Then Peter arose, and, in effect, said, “This matter was settled in my judgment by God Himself, when in the house of Cornelius the Holy Spirit descended on uncircumcised Gentiles, as on us at the beginning; and as He made no distinction, why should we?”

Next Barnabas and Paul repeated their wondrous story, this time laying emphasis on the fact that they were only the instruments through whom God wrought, and showed how greatly the Gentiles had been blessed, and were being blessed, altogether apart from circumcision.

Lastly, James summed up the whole debate by enumerating some three or four minor points on which he thought it well to insist, for the right ordering of the young communities; but he did not mention circumcision among them, nor insist on obedience to the Mosaic and Levitical institutions. To his sage counsel the apostles and elders agreed.

This unanimity between the leading Apostles and the two Evangelists, who were the cause of the whole controversy, was probably largely due to the private interview which Paul had sought with them, and which most commentators allocate to this period (Galatians 2:2).

He tells us that he went up by revelation, as though, in addition to the request of the Church, there were strong spiritual pressure exerted on him; and when he reached Jerusalem he laid before them who were of repute the Gospel he was preaching among the Gentiles, lest he were running in vain.

But to his great satisfaction they did not comment adversely upon his statements, nor insist upon Titus, a young Greek, being circumcised; and they even went so far as to recognize that the Gospel of the uncircumcision had been entrusted to him, giving him and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that they should go unto the Gentiles, as themselves unto the circumcision. The power of the risen Jesus was so mightily in his servants, that there was no gainsaying their vocation.

The Pharisee party was defeated, and a decree signed in the sense of James address; but from that moment a relentless war broke out, which followed the Apostle for the next ten years of his life, and cost him many bitter tears.

Every church he planted was visited by the emissaries of his virulent opponents, who were not content with insisting on the necessity of circumcision, but asserted that Paul was no Apostle, because he had only seen Christ in vision, and had never companied with Him during the days of his flesh. They traduced his personal character, misrepresented his reluctance to take the gifts of his converts, dwelt with cruel animosity upon his personal defects, and in many cases succeeded in alienating the love and loyalty of his converts.

This cruel persecution is constantly alluded to in the Epistles to the Galatians and Corinthians, and cut Paul to the quick. However, he never owned himself vanquished. By prayers and tears, by arguments and persuasions, by threatenings and expostulations, the heroic lion-heart fought the good fight to the end; and, if we may judge from the tone of his later Epistles, was permitted to see the close of the controversy, in which it was determined once for all that the new-wine Christianity should not be poured into the worn-out bottle skins of Judaism.

- If the conditions of justification are now clearly defined as repentance towards God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ;
- if salvation is as free as the flowers of spring or the air of Heaven;
- if we are able to stand fast in the freedom with which Christ has made us free;
- if we may preach to all and any that those who believe are justified from all things

it is due to the unflinching courage with which the great Apostle of the Gentiles contended for the faith once delivered to the saints, and which led him on one occasion to confront even the Apostle Peter himself, because he was to be blamed (Galatians 2:11).

**~ end of chapter 11 ~**

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