

# PAUL: A SERVANT OF JESUS CHRIST

By

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## CHAPTER FIVE

### A LIGHT FROM HEAVEN

(ACTS 26:13)

“As to Thy last Apostle’s heart  
Thy lightning glance did then impart  
Zeal’s never-dying fire.”

- Keble

IF the importance of events can be estimated by the amount of space given in Scripture to their narration, the arrest placed by the risen Lord upon the career of Saul of Tarsus must take the second place in the story of the New Testament. It is described three times, with great minuteness of detail first by Luke, and twice by himself and the narration occupies more space than the story of any other event except the crucifixion of our Lord.

This must be accounted for, partly because of the important part played by the Apostle in the molding of the early Church, and partly because his conversion was due to the personal agency of the risen Lord, who appeared as literally as during any of the appearances of the Forty Days. This was no mere vision, like that which John had when he was in the Spirit, no mere transient impression on the sensitive plate of the imagination, no evanescent, dream like fancy; but a manifestation of the risen Lord, like that which won the faith of Thomas.

It was one of the deepest convictions of the Apostle in all his after life that he had veritably and certainly seen the Lord; and was therefore as really empowered to be a witness of his resurrection as any who had companied with Him, beginning from the baptism of John until the day that He was received up. “**Am I not an Apostle? . . . Have I not seen Jesus Christ our Lord?**” he asks (I Corinthians 9:1). And after enumerating the Lord’s appearances after his resurrection, he adds, placing that scene on the road to Damascus on a level with the rest, “**Last of all he was seen of me also, as of one born out of due time**” (15:8).

Ananias used the same phrase when, entering the darkened chamber in which the Apostle lay like an eagle with broken wing, he said, “**The Lord, even Jesus, that appeared unto thee in the way which thou camest, hath sent me.**”

Six days before, Saul had left Jerusalem with a small retinue furnished as his escort by the high priest. The journey was long and lonely, giving time for reflection, of which he had known but little during the crowding events of the previous months. He had been too closely occupied by those domiciliary visits, those constant trials, those scourgings, tortures, and martyrdoms; and in the incessant occupation he had been drifting with the rush of events, without taking his bearings or realizing their precise direction.

It was high noon. Unlike most travelers, he forbore to spend even an hour in the retirement of his tent for shelter from the downward rays of the sun, piercing like swords, whilst all the air was breathless with the heat. He was too weary of his own musings, too eager to be at his work.

Suddenly the little cavalcade left the stony wastes over which the track had lain, and began to pass beneath the nickering shadows of ancient olives, whilst Damascus suddenly came into view, amid a soft haze of verdure: its gardens, orchards, and groves making an emerald setting for its terraced roofs and white glistening cupolas.

The goal of the long journey was well in sight. Within an hour or two he would be within the gates, and traversing the street called Straight, to deliver his commission to the authorities, and to ascertain the best point for commencing proceedings.

But suddenly a great light above the brightness of the Syrian noontide sun shone around him; and a voice, amid the blaze, unintelligible and inarticulate to his companions, though clear enough to himself, was heard, speaking in the familiar Aramaic, and calling him by name (Acts 26:14).

There can be no doubt, in the light of the passages we have noticed, as to the origin of that light it came straight from the face of the glorified Saviour. With some such light as this it had become illumined on the Mount of Transfiguration, when his face did shine as the sun, and his garments grew white as the light, and all the snows around reflected the golden sheen.

Something of the same beauty and splendor was described by John in after years, when he tells of the vision given him in Patmos; but even this must have fallen far behind the Master's actual appearance on the way to Damascus. In the one case his countenance was as when the sun shineth in his strength: in the other its glory was above the brightness of the sun.

In the light of that moment the Apostle saw many things. It was like a sudden flash light flung over an abyss, revealing secret things which had been entirely hidden, or but dimly understood.

*In the glory of that light he became convinced of the truth of Christianity.*

His objection to Christianity was not that Jesus of Nazareth had been crucified.

Had this been all, the young Pharisee would have respected Him. His blameless life; his teaching of the spirituality and unity of the Divine Nature; his belief in the resurrection of the dead; his fearless exposure of what was false and vicious, would even have attracted his admiration. But it was intolerable that He should pose as the Messiah, or that his followers should charge the rulers with the murder of the long-expected King.

There was only one thing that could convince him. He must see this Jesus of Nazareth, whom he knew to have been crucified, living on the other side of death: he must be able to recognize and establish his identity: he must hear Him speak. Such evidence given to himself would be conclusive; but nothing less would avail. If from Heaven the Man of Nazareth and the Cross were to speak to Him, radiant with light, exerting Divine power his objections would be scattered, and with another of his followers he would be compelled to cry, **“My Lord and my God!”**

But this very revelation was made to him. It could not be a dream, a vision, an hallucination. He was too sane to base the entire change of his career upon anything so flimsy; and in his writings he always distinguishes between these, and that appearance of the Lord on the road to Damascus. No, as Barnabas said afterwards, by way of explanation to the Apostles, **“he had seen the Lord in the way, and that he had spoken to him.”**

He felt instantly that life must have henceforward a new meaning and purpose, and he must live to establish the faith of which he had made such determined havoc.

*In the glory of that light he beheld the supreme revelation of God.*

Nature had told something of God. His glory had shone from rolling worlds, and from the outspread expanse of oceans and seas; had covered morning skies with daffodil, and evening clouds with crimson and gold; had goldened in the harvest fields and kindled around bush and brake, flower and bracken.

From the first, God had not left Himself without witness, in that He did good, and gave rains from Heaven and fruitful seasons, filling men’s hearts with food and gladness. The heavens had told his glory, and the firmament shown his handiwork. Day unto day had uttered speech of Him, though there was neither speech nor language. Night unto night had shown knowledge, though their voice could not be heard. Thus through the things that had been made, the invisible things of God had been revealed, even his everlasting power and divinity. But this light was above the brightness of the sun, and made all Nature’s wonders pale, as stars at dawn.

There had been a further revelation to Israel.

The light that shone on the face of Moses was emblematic of the fuller disclosures of Himself which God gave to his chosen people. So excellent was that light that the children of Israel could not look steadfastly upon Moses for the glory of his face, and he was finally compelled to cover it with a vail. But that vail also had become emblematic of the blindness of Israel to the greatness of the revelation made to them.

But the glory of God on the face of Jesus was above the brightness of any previous dispensation. That was of the letter, this of the spirit; that was the ministration of death, this of life that was temporary, and passed away, this was the final and permanent outshining of the love of God. There is no conceivable method of Divine manifestation that can excel the light which shines from the face of Jesus. They were human features that looked down on the persecutor through the open doorway of Heaven; but they were aglow with the light of that Shekinah which passed between the pieces of Abraham's sacrifices, shone in the burning bush, lighted the march of Israel through the Red Sea, and at the dedication of Solomon's Temple drove the priests before its waves of billowy glory from the holy place into the outer court. He beheld the glory of God in the face of Jesus whom he had persecuted.

Would you know God? You must study Him in Jesus. So utterly did the Son of Man renounce his own words, and works, and will, that we know comparatively little of Him. All was from the Father, and to the Father. The words He spake were the Father's; the works He wrought the Father's; the reconciliation perfected for erring man, achieved through Him by the Father, who was "in Christ reconciling the world to Himself." We need nothing beyond j there is nothing beyond. In Heaven itself we shall still behold the light of the glory of God in the face of Jesus, our eyes getting stronger to bear it, our insight being always deeper and more perfect. That light shone before the first ray of sunlight gleamed over the abyss; and it will shine when sun, moon, and stars are dark and cold.

### **IN THE REVELATION OF THAT LIGHT SAUL OF TARSUS SAW THE REAL NATURE OF THE WAR WHICH HE HAD BEEN WAGING AGAINST THE RELIGION OF JESUS**

The earliest name of the new sect, as we have seen, was "**the Way**." In after years the Apostle was proud to adopt and use it: "**I confess unto thee, that after the way which they call heresy, so worship I the God of my fathers.**" It was a pathetic and significant title; these simple souls had found a new and living way to the knowledge and worship of God, consecrated through the rent flesh of Him whom their chief priests and rulers had delivered up to be condemned to death.

The young man Saul was exceedingly mad against the pilgrims of the Way. He made havoc of them, and the word is that which would be used of wild boars uprooting tender vines. He devastated them with the fury of an invading army.

Not content with attacks on their public meetings, he paid visits to their homes, dragging forth the patient, holy women as well as the uncomplaining men, scourging them, thrusting them into prison, putting them to death, and compelling them to blaspheme the holy name by which they were called. He breathed out threatening and slaughter, as a cruel monster might snort fire. He was so mad against them, that when the Church at Jerusalem lay desolate, and its garden was torn and trampled into a desert, he pursued the same methods in distant cities, and on the present memorable occasion had received letters to bring those of the Way that were there in bonds unto Jerusalem to be punished.

Great prospects began then to unfold before the persecutor, and though his tender nature must have revolted from his sanguinary and ruthless efforts, though the sight of suffering inflicted at his instigation must have been very abhorrent, he was incited to pursue the path he had entered by the enthusiastic encomiums and plaudits of his co-religionists.

There was, however, a deeper motive at work. **“I verily thought with myself, that I ought.”** This work of extermination seemed to him part of his religious duty. He owed it to God to stamp out the followers of Jesus, and the more revolting it was to his nature, the more meritorious it was in the sight of Heaven. Might not these efforts condone for a coming short in respect to the demands of God’s law, which now and again forced itself home on his inner consciousness?

Might not his victory over the reluctance of his heart be expiatory and atone for many failures? But, like the Roman soldiers who crucified the Lord, he knew not what he did.

**“I was a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious; howbeit I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly in unbelief.”**

As, however, that light fell upon his path, he suddenly awoke to discover that, instead of serving God, he was in collision with Him, and was actually uprooting and ravaging that for which the Son of his love had expended tears and blood.

- In persecuting the sect of the Nazarenes he was persecuting the Son of God.
- By every blow he struck at the infant Church, he was lacerating those hands and piercing that side.
- By every sigh and groan extorted from the members of the Body he had elicited from the Head.

From Heaven, then, the remonstrance, **“Saul! Saul! why persecutest thou Me?”**

It was a terrible and overwhelming discovery. The earth seemed to yawn before him. Somehow his religion had brought him into collision with God in the person of those who were dear to Him, and evidently, instead of their being wrong and he right, they were right, and he wrong; instead of his fanatical zeal being pleasing to God it was grievous to Him, and heaping up wrath against a day of wrath. Ah! it is an awful discovery when a great light from Heaven shows a man that what he has regarded his solemn duty has been one long sin against the dearest purposes of God.

### **THAT LIGHT ALSO REVEALED THE INADEQUACY OF HIS RELIGIOUS LIFE**

He had lived out all that he thought to be right. There was no prescription of the elders to which he had not conformed. So far as he knew what religion prescribed, he was blameless. Yea, had he not gone beyond its prescriptions in the zeal with which he had harried the Church? But of late he had been compelled to confess to a dull sense of uneasiness and dissatisfaction. He studiously fought against it by immersing himself more sedulously than ever in the work of persecution; yet there it was, and sometimes the evil thing (as he thought it) cast a petrifying glance upon his utmost efforts.

Two causes further instigated this uneasiness.

First, he felt that his religion did not satisfy him; it gave him no such tender views of the love of God as had impressed Moses or Daniel, and it seemed ineffective to curb the imperious demands of sin.

- Often the good he would he did not, whilst the evil he hated he did.
- Often he felt himself a captive, sold under sin.
- Often he cried aloud that he was a wretched man bound to an intolerable yoke, which chafed him to the quick.

And there seemed no deliverance. Always those cases of minute casuistry, always the same exactions of outward obedience, always the same weary sense of failure as the attempt to spend one day of perfect obedience was reviewed from the evening hour. Was there nothing better?

Then it seemed as though these humble disciples of Jesus of Nazareth had something better.

- The meekness with which they bore their sufferings was far removed from obstinacy;
- the purity of their home life vindicated their professions;
- the light that shone upon their dying faces;
- the prayers for their persecutors, which they offered with their dying breath, evidenced the possession of a secret of which he knew that he was destitute.

Could that religion be right which threw him into antagonism with such lovely traits and characteristics? Besides, he had often heard them speaking of their Teacher, his life of beneficence, his pure and lofty teachings, his maxims for the regulation of the inner life, his directions for the behavior of his followers and when they did so they touched chords which responded deep down in his soul.

It seemed to him sometimes as though this Nazarene had discovered the Pearl of great price, and held the secret of a Blessed Life. Yet how could He be the Messiah who had come to such an end! And how absurd it was to say that He had risen, when the Roman sentries had solemnly averred that his body had been stolen by his disciples, whilst they slept.

But all these questionings about his religious life were brought to a head and confirmed when suddenly he beheld Jesus of Nazareth enthroned on the right hand of power, and shining with a light above the brightness of the sun. What could he say of a righteousness which had led him to reject and persecute the Son of God? Of what value was it? Surely that which had led him to reject and persecute the Son of God Himself in the persons of his adherents must have been a deadly and pernicious delusion. He had thought himself blameless; but in the beam of that light he discovered that he was of all sinners the chief, that he was not worthy to be called a son, and might be thankful if he were numbered among the hired servants.

**NOW, TOO, HE DISCOVERED THE SOURCE OF HIS UNEASINESS OF HEART AND CONSCIENCE**

Hitherto he may have attributed it to a morbid and melancholic element in his constitution, to the reaction of his mind from the sight of suffering, to a weakness of which he ought to rid himself as speedily as possible. He now saw that these strivings were the prickings of the great Husbandman's goad, by which He had long been attempting to bring him into that attitude, and lead him to undertake that life work which had been prepared for him from the foundation of the world.

When the Master said, "**It is hard for thee to kick against the pricks** (goad)," his speech betrayed Him. It was said of Him during his earthly ministry that without a parable He did not speak to his people. Now from Heaven his lips took up the wonted strain.

He likened Himself to one who had purchased a young heifer at a great price. He has brought it into the field to drag the plough in a certain direction; but it resists and seeks another, compelling its owner to use the sharply-pointed goad, pressing it against its flanks till it obeys his will.

Saul suddenly awoke to find that he had been purchased by the Lord, who had been seeking for a long time to make him take the predestined track, and that all the bitter remorse of conscience had been intended for this sole purpose. It was a new conception of the religious life. Henceforth he was not to do his own prompting, but God's; not to be clothed in his own righteousness, but in God's; not to cut up and destroy, but to construct; not to oppose the Nazarene, but to take his yoke, to bear his burden, to do his will.

### **THAT LIGHT ALSO REVEALED TO HIM THE COURSE OF HIS FUTURE LIFE**

Henceforth he was to be a minister and a witness of those things which he had seen, and of those in which Christ would still appear to him. All that was required of him was to live in unbroken accord with the risen Saviour, beholding his beauty, inquiring in his temple, receiving his messages for transmission to others.

It was enough. He meekly asked what he must do; what the new and rightful Master of his life would have him do. And in answer, he was told to take the next step, which lay just before him, and suffer himself to be led into the city.

He little weened how great things he would have to suffer (Acts 9:16). These were a secret which Christ whispered in the ear of his friend, Ananias. It would be enough for the new convert to learn it afterwards. After all, men do as much by suffering as by active toil; and the world owes as much to the anguish of its martyrs as to the words and deeds of its apologists and workers.

And then there arose before him in a flash on the high road, and in fuller development during the three days retirement in the house of Judas, the Lord's ideal of his life that he should be sent to Jew and Gentile; that by his simple witness he would be used to open blind eyes; that men might turn from darkness to light, from the power of Satan unto God, so as to receive remission of sin and inheritance among the sanctified.

That conception molded his life, lingered always in his memory, and formed the basis of one of his noblest outbursts (Colossians 1).

- To know the Divine will,
- To see the righteous One,
- To hear a voice from his mouth,
- To be his witness and chosen vessel,
- To bear his name before Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel,

such was henceforth the prize of the mark of his high calling towards which he began to press (Acts 9:15; 22:14).

He felt that he had been apprehended; he realized something of the purpose for which he had been apprehended; and with patient faith he resolved, so far as in him lay, to apprehend it.

How could he be other than obedient to the heavenly vision that summoned him to a life of self-sacrificing toil? As a token of his meek submission, he allowed them to lead him by the hand into the city, which he had expected to enter as an inquisitor; and bent low to receive instruction from one of those simple-hearted believers, whom he had expected to drag captive to Jerusalem.

Such are the triumphs of the grace of God, and in his case it was shown to be exceedingly abundant.

**~ end of chapter 5 ~**

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