

# **PAUL: A SERVANT OF JESUS CHRIST**

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## **CHAPTER SEVEN**

### **THE EMERGENCE OF THE LIFE PURPOSE**

(Acts 22:17-21)

Ah! Fragments of a whole, ordained to be  
Points in the life I waited. What are ye  
But roundels of a ladder, which appeared  
Awhile the very platform it was reared  
To lift me on?"

- Browning

IT is a matter of absorbing interest to a mother to watch the unfolding character of her child from the apparent shapelessness of infancy to the defined outlines of marked individuality. But it is still more interesting to trace the successive stages of the emergence of the life purposes of a new-born soul.

At the moment of conversion there are two questions that arise naturally upon our lips:

- First, Who art Thou, Lord? And
- Next, What wilt Thou have me to do?

As to the first, we can only await the gradual revelation, as when the dawn slowly breaks on a wide spread landscape. It will take an eternity to know all that Jesus Christ is and can be to his own. As to the second we are no less dependent on the Divine revealing hand, indicating the path we are to tread, showing the scheme which the Divine mind has conceived.

Often at the beginning of the new life we attempt to forecast the work which we hope to accomplish. We take into account our tastes and aptitudes, our faculties and talents, our birth and circumstances. From these we infer that we shall probably succeed best along a certain line of useful activity. But as the moments lengthen into years, it becomes apparent that the door of opportunity is closing in that direction. It is a bitter disappointment.

We refuse to believe that the hindrances to the fulfillment of our cherished hopes can be permanent. Patience, we cry, will conquer every difficulty. The entrance may be strait, but surely it is passable. At last we shall reach the wide and large place of successful achievement.

We cast ourselves against the closing door, as sea birds on the illuminated glass of the lighthouse tower, to fall dazed and bewildered to the ground. And it is only after such a period of disappointment that we come to perceive that God's ways are not as our ways, nor his thoughts as our thoughts; and that He has other work for us to do, for which He has been preparing us, though we knew it not. When we are young we gird ourselves, and attempt to walk whither we will; but in after years we are guided by Another, and taken whither we would not.

There is a marvellously apposite illustration of these facts of common experience in the life story which we are considering.

Without doubt, at the beginning of his Christian career, the Apostle felt strongly drawn to minister to his own people. He was a Hebrew, and the son of Hebrews. The pure blood of the chosen race flowed through his heart, nourishing it with the great memories of the past. What was the meaning of his having been cradled and nourished in the heart of Judaism, except that he might better understand and win Jews? Did not his training in the strictest sect of their religion, and at the feet of Gamaliel, give him a special claim on those who held "that jewel of the law" in special reverence and honor?

But he was destined to discover that his new-found Master had other purposes for his life, and that he had been specially prepared and called to preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and make all men see the fellowship of the mystery which from all generations had been hid in God.

How this discovery was made to him is an interesting study, because, though at the moment of his arrest it was clearly announced by the Lord Himself that he was to be sent to the Gentiles; yet, apparently, it did not dawn on his mind then to how large an extent his energies and time would be monopolized by ministering to those who were, at that time, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, strangers from the covenant of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.

## **I. PAUL'S CHERISHED HOPE**

During his sojourn in the Sinaitic peninsula we may well believe that his soul turned towards his people with ardent desire.

Was he not an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin; and could he be indifferent to the needs of his brethren according to the flesh? Surely it would not be difficult to unfold the meaning of the sacred symbolism through which their forefathers had been disciplined in those very wastes.

- That the rock was Christ;
- that the water which flowed over the sands foreshadowed his mission to the world;

- that the law given from Sinai had been fulfilled and re-edited in the holy life of Jesus of Nazareth;
- that the sacrifices, offered on those sands, had pointed to the death of the Cross; and
- that the fire which burned in the bush had also shone on his face to teach all this, and much more, and to lead his people from the desert wastes of Pharisaism to the heavenly places of which Canaan was the type, was the hope and longing of his heart.

What work could be more congenial to his tastes and attitudes than this?

On his return to Damascus he at once commenced his crusade in the synagogues.

**“Straightway,”** we are told, **“he preached Christ in the synagogues, that He is the Son of God. But all that heard him were amazed . . . But Saul increased the more in strength, and confounded the Jews which dwelt at Damascus, proving that this is the very Christ.”**

How encouraged he was by these early successes! How evidently God seemed to be setting his seal and imprimatur on his decisions! Visions of national repentance and conversion passed across his eager soul, and he dared to hope that he should live to see the dry bones become a great army for God.

But the vision was soon overcast.

So violent was the hatred with which he was regarded by his fellow-country men, that he was in imminent danger of his life. They seem to have instigated the governor, who held the city of the Damascenes with a garrison, to assist them with patrols. The gates were watched day and night, that he might be killed if he endeavored to escape. And finally he was lowered under cover of the night by a basket over the city wall.

Still, however, his purpose was unchanged.

He went up to Jerusalem with the intention of seeing Peter. But in this he would probably have failed had it not been for the intervention of Barnabas, who, according to an old tradition, had been his fellow-student, educated with himself at the feet of Gamaliel. Through his good offices he was brought into contact with Peter and James, and was, not improbably, received into the house of Mary, the mother of Mark, and sister to the good Cypriot (Colossians 4:10).

A blessed fortnight followed. He was with them, coming in and going out at Jerusalem, and especially engaged in holy and loving fellowship with Peter, the acknowledged leader of the Church.

It is surely an innocent use of the imagination to think of these two sitting or walking together on the housetop, when the sun was westering, conversing of the great past. On one occasion their theme would be the Lord's early ministry in Galilee, so closely associated with Peter's opening manhood; on another, the discourses and scenes of the last hours before his crucifixion; on another, the precious death and burial, the glorious resurrection and ascension, and the appearances of the forty days.

“Tell me all you can remember of the Master,” would be the frequent inquiry of the new disciple of him who had been so specially privileged as a witness of that mystery of love. And it must often have come to pass that as they communed together of all those things that had happened, Jesus Himself drew near, and their hearts burned within them.

What Peter could not tell him, James could. For he had shared the home of Nazareth, but had remained unbelieving till the Resurrection convinced him. He would recount the story of the early years, and corroborate Peter’s narrative of events from the Easter dawn to the Day of Pentecost.

But Saul had other business in those happy days. He seems to have avoided the churches of Judaea which were in Christ, and to have again sought the synagogues. **“He spake . . . and disputed against the Grecian Jews.”**

On many a spot where he had contended against Stephen he stood now to contend for the truths which he had first heard from the martyr’s life. How well he could understand the passion with which his statements were received; but how skillfully would he drive home the goad, which had at last compelled his own surrender! But here also his efforts were met by rebuffs: **“They went about to slay him.”**

Yet in spite of coldness and antipathy, he clung tenaciously to his cherished purpose. He had great sorrow and unceasing pain in his heart; he could have wished himself anathema from Christ for his brethren’s sake, his kinsmen according to the flesh. And when he knelt quietly in the Temple and heard authoritatively from the Master’s lips that Jerusalem would not receive his testimony, he could hardly believe it, and clung still to his hope, and pleaded against the idea that the door was closing in his face.

“Surely,” he cried, “it cannot be that Jerusalem will refuse my words! She has such ample proof of my sincerity, she must be willing at least to listen to the arguments which I have found so imperative; surely my marvellous change must arrest and impress her. Let me stay. To transfer me elsewhere would be a serious waste of power. I shall do better work here among people who know me so well, and conditions I can understand, than would be possible anywhere else in the world.”

In a similar manner we have all cherished our life purposes.

We have forecasted our future, as liable to lie in a certain direction, and have dearly desired that it should do so. When hindrances have been put in our way, and when we have met with strong opposition and rebuff, we have still clung to our hope.

Only very slowly have we yielded and accepted the inevitable. To renounce it has been like tearing out our heart. Not till long years have passed have we realized that the Lord’s plan was so much wiser and grander than our own. Then suddenly we have awoke to discover that whilst we were desiring to do one thing, God was leading us to do another, and that what we have counted secondary was primary, for his glory, and the lasting satisfaction of our own heart.

## II. THE CLOSING DOOR

It began to close at Damascus; it closed still further when persecution arose at Jerusalem: but the final act was as Saul was praying in the Temple.

It would appear that he had gone there to be alone, away from the many voices that were endeavoring to counsel him. For though he had been but a few days in the city, antipathy against him had already risen to such a height that his life was in danger; and it was necessary to consider seriously what to do should he stay, or go? should he brave the storm, or flee before it?

Some advised one course, and some another. The babble of voices confused him, deafening the whisper of the still, small voice; his attention was too distracted by human suggestions to be perfectly open to the directing finger of God. So he betook himself to the Temple, where his Master had so often been; where so many symbols spoke of Him; where holy associations gathered like troops of white-robed angels. And, as he knelt in prayer in some quiet spot, he saw Him, whom his soul loved and sought. How many visit the Temple without seeing Him! but if we see Him, we are oblivious to all beside.

There is One who is greater than the Temple. And the risen Lord gave clear and unmistakable directions, as He always will to those who can say with the Psalmist: **“My soul, wait thou only upon God; for my expectation is from him.”**

**“I saw Him saying unto me, Make haste, and get thee quickly out of Jerusalem; for they will not receive of thy testimony concerning Me.”**

It is easy to explain why they would not accept his testimony.

There was too much of the Cross in it. He had discovered aspects of the death of Jesus, which were in keen antagonism to all that savored of Pharisaism. It was sufficiently mortifying to their pride to learn that the son of the carpenter was the long-anticipated Messiah; but to be told further that the true life could only be entered by union with that supreme act of self-renunciation was intolerable.

This side of Christianity is now too little appreciated, and so the offence of the Cross has largely ceased. But wherever it is consistently advocated and practiced, it is certain to arouse the sharpest controversy.

Saul, as we have seen, did not willingly accept this as the ultimatum, and still argued that Jerusalem would afford the most suitable sphere for his ministry. It is a mistake to argue with God, as though to bend Him to our will. **“Woe unto him that striveth with his Maker; let the potsherd strive with the potsherds of the earth.”**

But all debate was at last summarily closed by the words, **“Depart, for I will send thee far hence to the Gentiles.”**

Ah, Saul! thou hast argued, and striven, and tried to carry thy way; thou hast almost demanded that the Lord should adopt thy views, and been very loath to believe that they may not hold. Thou has knocked vehemently against the closed doors; but it is of no avail. The Lord loves thee too well to yield to thee. Some day thou wilt come to see that He was doing better for thee than thou knewest, and was sending thee into a yet wider and more productive sphere of service.

### **III. THE OPENED DOOR**

So the disciples brought the hunted preacher down to Caesarea, and sent him forth to Tarsus; and not improbably he resumed his tent making there, content to await the Lord's will and bidding. But the years passed slowly. Possibly four or five were spent in comparative obscurity and neglect.

That he wrought for Christ in the immediate vicinity of his home is almost certain, as we shall see; but the word of the Lord awaited fulfillment.

At last one day, as he waited, he heard a voice saying in the doorway, "Does Saul live here?" And in another moment the familiar face of his old college friend was peering in on him, with a glad smile of recognition.

Then the story was told of the marvellous outbreak of God's work in Antioch, of the overflowing blessing and the breaking nets, and Barnabas pleaded with him to return to help him gather in the whitening harvest of the first great Gentile city which the Gospel had moved.

**"He brought him to Antioch; and it came to pass that a whole year they assembled themselves with the church and taught much people."**

Be not afraid to trust God utterly. As you go down the long corridor you may find that He has preceded you, and locked many doors which you would fain have entered; but be sure that beyond these there is one which He has left unlocked. Open it and enter, and you will find yourself face to face with a bend of the river of opportunity, broader and deeper than anything you had dared to imagine in your sunniest dreams. Launch forth on it; it conducts to the open sea.

**~ end of chapter 7 ~**

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