

# PAUL: A SERVANT OF JESUS CHRIST

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## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### “IN WEAKNESS AND FEAR”

(I Corinthians 2:3)

“Ay, for this Paul, a scorn and a despising,  
Weak as you know him, and the wretch you see,  
Even in these eyes shall ye behold him rising,  
Strength in infirmities and Christ in me.”

- W. H. Myers

FIVE hours sail across the Saronic Bay brought the Apostle to Cenchrea, the port of Corinth to the east; for this great and busy city commanded two waterways. Through her western port, Lechaem, she was in communication with the Adriatic; and through her eastern port, Cenchrea, with the Aegean. The wares of the East thus passed through her to supply the omnivorous appetite of the metropolis, and vast crowds were attracted to her precincts for the purposes of trade. This commanding position thus gave her a quite unusual importance in the eye of the Apostle, ever eager to seize on any advantage which he could use for the Gospel of his Lord. To establish a strong Christian church there would be to cast seeds of Christian teaching on waters that would bear them east and west. Christian missionaries should be strategists, expending their strength where populations teem and rivers of world-wide influence have their rise.

But the Apostle entered the proud and beautiful city “**in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling.**” He could not forget the frigid contempt which he had encountered at Athens, and which was harder to bear than violent opposition. He may have been suffering from some aggravation of his habitual trouble, without Luke’s presence to treat it; and he was profoundly conscious of being deficient in those gifts of learning and eloquence on which the Corinthians set such store. He knew that his speech and his preaching could never be in persuasive words of human wisdom, and it was his fixed determination to know nothing among them but Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.

There were many other difficulties to be encountered, which made his ministry in Corinth the more difficult, and his consequent success the more conspicuous.

## **I. THE NECESSITY FOR CONTINUAL MANUAL TOIL**

In his first Epistle to Corinth, he lays great emphasis on this. Always maintaining the right of those who preached the Gospel to live by the Gospel, he did not use it; but suffered all things rather than hinder its progress or influence. No chance should be given to the merchants and traders that thronged the city from all parts, prepared to sacrifice everything for purposes of gain, to allege that he was actuated by mercenary motives.

He, therefore, resumed his trade of tent making, and was thankful to come across two Christian Jews who had been flung on this shore by the decree of the Emperor, which expelled all Jews from Rome. Suetonius, the historian, tells us that this decree was due to tumults caused by one Chrestus, evidently referring to violent disputes in the Jewish community concerning the claims of Jesus to be the long-expected Messiah.

With them, therefore, he abode and wrought, for they were of the same craft; and a friendship sprang up between him and Aquila, with his wife Priscilla, which was destined to have an important bearing on the spread of Christianity in the metropolis from which they had come, and in Ephesus, to which they would accompany their newly-made friend. Perhaps Paul was in their employ; but in any case work was short and wages scant, so that he was not infrequently in actual want (II Corinthians 11:9; I Corinthians 4:11, 12).

How strange that the movement which was to give Corinth a greater fame than her games, or architecture, or eloquence, emanated from a poor shop in the Jewish ghetto, where a handful of fugitive Jews wrought at their trade, speaking amid their toils of Jesus of Nazareth, who had been crucified in weakness, but was living through the power of God. They also were weak with Him; but they were destined to live and reign with Him, over the hearts of men, through the power of God.

## **II. THE VIRULENT HATRED OF THE JEWS**

According to his usual practice, Paul betook himself every Sabbath to the synagogue, and reasoned, persuading the Jews and Greek proselytes that the conception of the Hebrew Scriptures was precisely that of a suffering and crucified Messiah. This went on for some weeks; but the measure of his labors was somewhat curtailed by the heavy drain of his daily toil. It was not till Timothy and Silas arrived, the one from Thessalonica, and the other from Berea, bringing cheering news of the steadfastness of his converts, their hands full of generous benefactions, that he was able to give himself with more leisure and intensity to the cherished object of his life. **“He was pressed in the spirit, and testified to the Jews that Jesus was Christ”** (Acts 18:5).

This was more than the influential men of the Jewish community could bear; they opposed, blasphemed, and drove him from the synagogue. Their attitude was more than usually virulent. They were unreasonable and wicked; they were animated by the spirit which had led their nation to kill the Lord Jesus and the prophets; they pleased not God, and were contrary to all men; they were filling up the measure of their sins (I Thessalonians 2:14-16; II Thessalonians 3:2).

Their hatred culminated when the Apostle gladly accepted the offer of a God-fearing proselyte, Titus Justus, whose house was close to the synagogue, to hold meetings there. This new move was attended with instant and remarkable success. Among those that migrated with the Apostle from the synagogue was Crispus, its chief ruler, who believed in the Lord with all his house. Many of the people of Corinth, also, heard, believed, and were baptized.

As the new meetinghouse became more crowded, and the movement increased in numbers and influence, the Jews became more and more exasperated, and at last rose in a body, seized Paul, and dragged him before the Roman Governor, who happened to be Gallic, brother to Seneca, the famous philosopher, and Nero's tutor. He was a man of unusual culture and refinement, sweetness, and loveableness. He represented the broad and liberal views of educated Romans, of the policy that Rome should exercise towards the various religions of the provinces; and when he discovered that the charge against Paul was of no imperial importance and had to do indeed not with facts, or civil wrong or moral outrage, but with words, and names, and Jewish law, he would have nothing more to do with it or them, but bade his lictors drive them from the judgment seat.

The Greeks were only too glad that contempt should be heaped on the hated Jews, and took the opportunity of seizing Sosthenes, the new chief ruler of the synagogue who had succeeded to the post vacated by Crispus and beating him in the very presence of the Proconsul. He regarded their horse play, however, with perfect indifference. What did it matter if a Jew got a few stripes more or less? No doubt they were richly merited; and so long as there was no public disturbance, the castigation might serve a useful purpose in cautioning the Jews against bringing their matters into public notice or trespassing on the public patience.

But the incident must have greatly aggravated the hatred of the Jews against the Apostle and his converts; the more so when, as it would appear, Sosthenes himself became a convert, and so intimately associated with the Apostle as to be coupled in after years with himself in the inscription of the first Epistle to the Corinthians – **“Sosthenes our brother.”**

### **III. THE CHARACTER OF HIS CONVERTS**

Corinth has been compared to Paris for its vice; to Newmarket for the preponderance of the sporting interest; to Chicago for the mixture of its population; to Vanity Fair for its frivolity and lightness. Thither gathered the scum of the world. Soldiers and sailors, slaves and prostitutes, jockeys and chariot drivers, athletes and wrestlers; Romans with their imperial bearing; Greeks with their regular features; Jews with their unmistakable badge; Scythians from the shores of the Black Sea; men of Mesopotamia, Pontus, Egypt and Asia Minor all bent on business or amusement, and daubed to a greater or less extent with the exceeding evil of this grossly impure city.

The Temple of Venus, with its thousand priestesses, legalized vice; the Isthmian Games, held once in three years, established betting and gambling; the motley character of the population encouraged a wild admixture of thought and opinion, for which there was no recognized standard or court of appeal.

To such a city Paul opened his message, encouraged by the assurance of the Lord that He had much people there. How often to his tried and persecuted servants does the Master come as He came to the Apostle! They may be conscious of weakness and much fear, may speak his word in trembling, may be derided as a spectacle and laughing stock, may be encompassed with toil and pain and persecution; but He stands beside in a vision, and says: **“Be not afraid, but speak, and hold not thy peace: for I am with thee, and no man shall set on thee to hurt thee.”**

They may gather themselves against him, but not by Him. Whosoever shall gather against him shall fall for his sake. No weapon that is formed against him will prosper; and every tongue that shall rise in judgment against him, he would condemn.

With this encouragement in his heart, Paul labored for a year and six months in this gay and sinful city, with marvellous success. It is true that not many of the wise, or mighty, or noble of this world, were among the chosen ones; they who were accounted as weak, and base, and contemptible, by the high-bred leaders of Corinthian society were selected as the foundation stones of the newly-gathered church. There might be a Crispus and Gaius, a Stephanas and his household, all of whom, contrary to his usual practice, the Apostle baptized before Timothy and Silas arrived; but these were exceptions to the general rule. Perhaps women preponderated in the young community, as the Apostle devotes so much space in his Epistle to regulating their behavior. We know, at least, of Phoebe, the deaconess of the church at Cenchrea, who bore his Epistle to Rome; and of Chloe, whose household slaves were the medium of intelligence when Paul was at Ephesus.

The majority of his converts, however, were of the lowest caste, and of those who had been deeply stained with the vices that made Corinth notorious.

The city was the resort of fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, effeminate, thieves, covetous, drunkards, revilers, and extortioners, and such had they been; but under the preaching of the Cross, in the power of the Holy Ghost, a marvellous change had passed over them they had become washed, sanctified, and justified, in the name of the Lord Jesus, and in the Spirit of our God. Jesus had become their wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption. Delivered from the power of darkness, they had become children of the light and of the day: heirs of God, and joint heirs with the Son of his love.

What a contrast between that little Church and the great heathen world out of which it had been chosen!

We may imagine one of its meetings towards the close of the Apostle's visit. It is a Sabbath evening. Outside, the streets are full of pleasure seekers and revelers. Groups of idlers are discussing the last chariot race, or staking their money on an approaching boxing match. The varied costumes, vivid gestures, handsome equipages, the mimes and plays, the processions and shows, compose a never-palling picture of movement and color. But within the little meeting place all is hushed and still. Paul is speaking of things which eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived; or the men in turn are contributing to the edification of the rest, with a psalm, or a teaching, or a revelation, or the interpretation of an unknown language; while the women, modestly veiled, listen in silence.

Now the love feast is being partaken of, each bringing some contribution of victuals to the common store; and presently the Lord's Supper will conclude the evening engagements, partaken of according to the method delivered to the Apostle by the Lord Jesus Himself (I Corinthians 11 and 12).

This was a marvellous sequel to his timid and unadorned entrance among them. But it is evident that the Apostle was far from satisfied.

- He complained that he could not speak unto them as unto spiritual; but as unto carnal, as unto babes in Christ;
- That he was obliged to feed them with milk, and not with meat.
- He, doubtless, detected the first working of that unhallowed leaven which was afterward to break out in such fearful ferment.
- Even before he left there were probably manifestations of party spirit,
- Of the appraising of gift above grace,
- Of the mistaking license for liberty,
- Of the undue prominence of women in public assemblies,
- Of greed in the love feasts,
- Confusion in the ministrations, and
- Heresy in the doctrine of the resurrection.

It must have been, therefore, with no small misgiving that he tore himself away at the close of his protracted sojourn, leaving the infant community to the tendance of God with much of the same solicitude with which Jochebed launched the cradle ark on the tawny waters of the Nile.

But though he left the city, it produced an ineffaceable effect upon his methods of thought and expression.

- It was there that he came under the influence of those imperial conceptions which were embodied in Rome, the undisputed mistress of the world.
- There he wrote his first two Epistles, those to the Thessalonians.
- There, also, he was compelled to study the intimate questions connected with the formation and government of churches so heterogeneously constituted; and
- There he reached the final form of stating the Gospel.

Years afterward we find him alluding to the mingling of gold, silver, and precious stones, with wood, hay, and stubble, in the construction of temples and other buildings; or comparing the body to a temple; or drawing illustrations from the boxing match and the arena, the triumphal procession and the theatrical representation. It seemed as though his speech were dyed with the coloring borrowed from the spectacles with which he had grown so familiar in the streets of Corinth.

At last, however, he resolved to leave Corinth.

Many reasons prompted this step, and amongst them the desire to proceed to Jerusalem to ascertain the feeling of the mother Church.

Still further to conciliate the conservative element there, he had bound himself in the vow of a Nazarite, and was anxious to perform the concluding ceremonial within the Temple. He was obliged to have his head shorn at Cenchrea, because the month had expired; but he carried the hair with him to be burned on the great altar within the Temple court.

Aquila and Priscilla probably thought that Ephesus would be a better mart for their wares than Corinth, so they sailed with him. And thus the first memorable missionary tour in Greece came to an end, and for the fourth time since his conversion the Apostle approached the city which was doubly dear to him memories of his Lord being now entwined with the sacred associations of David, Solomon, Hezekiah, and Ezra.

**~ end of chapter 15 ~**

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