

# THE LIFE OF SAINT PAUL

by

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## CHAPTER NINE

### HIS GREAT CONTROVERSY

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145. The version of the apostle's life supplied in his own letters is largely occupied with a controversy which cost him much pain and took up much of his time for many years, but of which Luke says little. At the date when Luke wrote, it was a dead controversy, and it belonged to a different plane from that along which his story moves. But at the time when it was raging, it tried Paul far more than tiresome journeys or angry seas. It was at its hottest about the close of his third journey, and the Epistles already mentioned as having been written then may be said to have been evoked by it. The Epistle to the Galatians especially was a thunderbolt hurled against his opponents in this controversy; and its burning sentences show how profoundly he was moved by the subject.

146. The Question at Issue - The question at issue was whether the Gentiles were required to become Jews before they could be true Christians; or, in other words, whether they had to be circumcised in order to be saved.

147. It had pleased GOD in the primitive times to choose the Jewish race from among the nations and make it the repository of salvation; and, till the advent of CHRIST, those from other nations who wished to become partakers of the true religion had to seek entrance as proselytes within the sacred enclosure of Israel. Having thus destined this race to be the guardians of revelation, GOD had to separate them very completely from all other nations and from all other aims which might have distracted their attention from the sacred trust which had been committed

to them. For this purpose he regulated their whole life with rules and arrangements intended to make them a peculiar people, different from all other races of the earth. Every detail of their life - their forms of worship, their social customs, their dress, their food - was prescribed for them; and all these prescriptions were embodied in that vast legal instrument which they called the Law. The rigorous prescription of so many things which are naturally left to free choice was a heavy yoke upon the chosen people; it was a severe discipline to the conscience, and such it was felt to be by the more earnest spirits of the nation.

But others saw in it a badge of pride; it made them feel that they were the select of the earth and superior to all other people; and, instead of groaning under the yoke, as they would have done if their consciences had been very tender, they multiplied the distinctions of the Jew, swelling the volume of the prescriptions of the law with stereotyped customs of their own. To be a Jew appeared to them the mark of belonging to the aristocracy of the nations; to be admitted to the privileges of this position was in their eyes the greatest honor which could be conferred on one who did not belong to the commonwealth of Israel. Their thoughts were all pent within the circle of this national conceit. Even their hopes about the Messiah were colored with these prejudices; they expected Him to be the hero of their own nation, and the extension of His kingdom they conceived as a crowding of the other nations within the circle of their own through the gateway of circumcision. They expected that all the converts of the Messiah would undergo this national rite and adopt the life prescribed in the Jewish law and tradition; in short, their conception of Messiah's reign was a world of Jews.

148. Such undoubtedly was the tenor of popular sentiment in Palestine when CHRIST came; and multitudes of those who accepted JESUS as the Messiah and entered the Christian Church had this set of conceptions as their intellectual horizon. They had become Christians, but they had not ceased to be Jews; they still attended the temple worship; they prayed at the stated hours, they fasted on the stated days, they dressed in the style of the Jewish ritual; they would have thought themselves defiled by eating with uncircumcised Gentiles; and they had no thought but that, if Gentiles became Christians, they would be circumcised and adopt the style and customs of the Jewish nation.

149. The Settlement - The question was settled by the direct intervention of GOD in the case of Cornelius, the centurion of Caesarea. When the messengers of Cornelius were on their way to the Apostle Peter at Joppa, GOD showed that leader among the apostles, by the vision of the sheet full of clean and unclean beasts, that the Christian Church was to contain circumcised and uncircumcised alike. In obedience to this heavenly sign Peter accompanied the centurion's messengers to Caesarea and saw such evidences that the household of Cornelius had already, without circumcision, received the distinctively Christian endowments of faith and the HOLY GHOST, that he could not hesitate to baptize them as being Christians already. When he returned to Jerusalem, his proceedings created wonder and indignation among the Christians of the strictly Jewish persuasion; but he defended himself by recounting the vision of the sheet and by an appeal to the clear fact that these uncircumcised Gentiles were proved by their possession of faith and of the HOLY GHOST to have been already Christians.

150. This incident ought to have settled the question once for all; but the pride of race and the prejudices of a lifetime are not easily subdued. Although the Christians of Jerusalem reconciled themselves to Peter's conduct in this single case, they neglected to extract from it the universal principle which it implied; and even Peter himself, as we shall subsequently see, did not fully comprehend what was involved in his own conduct.

151. Meanwhile, however, the question had been settled in a far stronger and more logical mind than Peter's. Paul at this time began his apostolic work at Antioch, and soon afterward went forth with Barnabas upon his first great missionary expedition into the Gentile world; and, wherever they went, he admitted heathens into the Christian Church without circumcision.

Paul in thus acting did not copy Peter. He had received his Gospel directly from Heaven. In the solitudes of Arabia, in the years immediately after his conversion, he had thought this subject out and come to far more radical conclusions about it than had yet entered the minds of any of the rest of the apostles. To him far more than to any of them the law had been a yoke of bondage; he saw that it was only a stern preparation for Christianity, not a part of it; indeed, there was in his mind a deep gulf of contrast between the misery and curse of the one state and the joy and freedom of the other. To his mind to impose the yoke of the law on the Gentiles would have been to destroy the very genius of Christianity; it would have been the imposition of conditions of salvation totally different from that which he knew to be the one condition of it in the Gospel.

These were the deep reasons which settled this question in this great mind. Besides, as a man who knew the world and whose heart was set on winning the Gentile nations to CHRIST, he felt far more strongly than did the Jews of Jerusalem, with their provincial horizon, how fatal such conditions as they meant to impose would be to the success of Christianity outside Judaea. The proud Romans, the high-minded Greeks, would never have consented to be circumcised and to cramp their life within the narrow limits of Jewish tradition; a religion hampered with such conditions could never have become the universal religion.

152 But, when Paul and Barnabas came back from their first missionary tour to Antioch, they found that a still more decisive settlement of this question was required; for Christians of the strictly Jewish sort were coming down from Jerusalem to Antioch and telling the Gentile converts that, unless they were circumcised, they could not be saved. In this way they were filling them with alarm, lest they might be omitting something on which the welfare of their souls depended, and they were confusing their minds as to the simplicity of the Gospel.

To quiet these disturbed consciences it was resolved by the church at Antioch to appeal to the leading apostles at Jerusalem, and Paul and Barnabas were sent thither to procure a decision. This was the origin of what is called the Council of Jerusalem, at which this question was authoritatively settled.

The decision of the apostles and elders was in harmony with Paul's practice: the Gentiles were not to be required to be circumcised; only they were enjoined to abstain from meat offered in sacrifice to idols, from fornication, and from blood. To these conditions Paul consented. He did not, indeed, see any harm in eating meat which had been used in idolatrous sacrifices, when it was exposed for sale in the market; but the feasts upon such meat in the idol temples, which were often followed by wild outbreaks of sensuality, alluded to in the prohibition of fornication, were temptations against which the converts from heathenism required to be warned. The prohibition of blood - that is, of eating meat killed without the blood being drained off - was a concession to extreme Jewish prejudice, which, as it involved no principle, he did not think it necessary to oppose.

153. So the agitating question appeared to be settled by an authority so august that none could question it. If Peter, John and James, the pillars of the church at Jerusalem, as well as Paul and Barnabas, the heads of the Gentile mission, arrived at a unanimous decision, all consciences might be satisfied and all opposing mouths stopped.

154. Attempt to Unsettle - It fills us with amazement to discover that even this settlement was not final. It would appear that, even at the time when it was come to, it was fiercely opposed by some who were present at the meeting where it was discussed; and, although the authority of the apostles determined the official note which was sent to the distant churches, the Christian community at Jerusalem was agitated with storms of angry opposition to it. Nor did the opposition soon die down. On the contrary, it waxed stronger and stronger. It was fed from abundant sources. Fierce national pride and prejudice sustained it; probably it was nourished by self-interest, because the Jewish Christians would live on easier terms with the non-Christian Jews the less the difference between them was understood to be; religious conviction, rapidly warming into fanaticism, strengthened it; and very soon it was reinforced by all the rancor of hatred and the zeal of propagandism. For to such a height did this opposition rise that the party which was inflamed with it at length resolved to send out propagandists to visit the Gentile churches one by one and, in contradiction to the official apostolic rescript, warn them that they were imperiling their souls by omitting circumcision, and could not enjoy the privileges of true Christianity unless they kept the Jewish law.

155. For years and years these emissaries of a narrow-minded fanaticism, which believed itself to be the only genuine Christianity, diffused themselves over all the churches founded by Paul throughout the Gentile world. Their work was not to found churches of their own; they had none of the original pioneer ability of their great rival. Their business was to steal into the Christian communities he had founded and win them to their own narrow views. They haunted Paul's footsteps wherever he went, and for many years were a cause to him of unspeakable pain. They whispered to his converts that his version of the Gospel was not the true one, and that his authority was not to be trusted. Was he one of the twelve apostles? Had he kept company with CHRIST? They represented themselves as having brought the true form of Christianity from Jerusalem, the sacred headquarters; and they did not scruple to profess that they had been sent from the apostles there. They distorted the very noblest parts of Paul's conduct to their purpose. For instance, his refusal to accept money for his services they imputed to a sense of his own lack of authority: the real apostles always received pay. In the same way they misconstrued his abstinence from marriage. They were men not without ability for the work they had undertaken: they had smooth, insinuating tongues, they could assume an air of dignity, and they did not stick at trifles.

156. Unfortunately they were by no means without success. They alarmed the consciences of Paul's converts and poisoned their minds against him. The Galatian church especially fell a prey to them; and the Corinthian church allowed its mind to be turned against its founder. But, indeed, the defection was more or less pronounced everywhere. It seemed as if the whole structure which Paul had reared with years of labor was to be thrown to the ground. For this was what he believed to be happening. Though these men called themselves Christians, Paul utterly denied their Christianity. Theirs was not another Gospel; if his converts believed it, he assured them they were fallen from grace; and in the most solemn terms he pronounced a curse on those who were thus destroying the temple of GOD which he had built.

157. Paul Crushes the Judaizers - He was not, however, the man to allow such seduction to go on among his converts without putting forth the most strenuous efforts to counteract it. He hurried, when he could, to see the churches which were being tampered with; he sent messengers to bring them back to their allegiance; above all, he wrote letters to those in peril - letters in which the extraordinary powers of his mind were exerted to the utmost. He argued the subject out with all

the resources of logic and Scripture; he exposed the seducers with a keenness which cut like steel and overwhelmed them with sallies of sarcastic wit; he flung himself at his converts' feet and with all the passion and tenderness of his mighty heart implored them to be true to CHRIST and to himself. We possess the records of these anxieties in our New Testament; and it fills us with gratitude to GOD and a strange tenderness to Paul himself to think that out of his heart-breaking trial there has come such a precious heritage to us.

158. It is comforting to know that he was successful. Persevering as his enemies were, he was more than a match for them. Hatred is strong, but stronger still is love. In his later writings the traces of his opposition are slender or entirely absent. It had given way before the crushing force of his polemic, and its traces had been swept off the soil of the Church. Had the event been otherwise, Christianity would have been a river lost in the sands of prejudice near its very source; it would have been at the present day a forgotten Jewish sect instead of the religion of the world.

159. Christian Jews and the Law - Up to this point the course of this ancient controversy can be clearly traced. But there is another branch of it about the course of which it is far from easy to arrive at with certainty. What was the relation of the Christian Jews to the law, according to the teaching and preaching of Paul? Was it their duty to abandon the practices by which they had been wont to regulate their lives and abstain from circumcising their children or teaching them to keep the law? This would appear to be implied in Paul's principles. If Gentiles could enter the kingdom without keeping the law, it could not be necessary for Jews to keep it. If the law was a severe discipline intended to drive men to CHRIST, its obligations fell away when this purpose was fulfilled. The bondage of tutelage ceased as soon as the son entered on the actual possession of his inheritance.

160. It is certain, however, that the other apostles and the mass of the Christians of Jerusalem did not for many a day realize this. The apostles had agreed not to demand from the Gentile Christians circumcision and the keeping of the law. But they kept it themselves and expected all Jews to keep it. This involved a contradiction of ideas, and it led to unhappy practical consequences. If it had continued or been yielded to by Paul, it would have split up the Church into two sections, one of which would have looked down upon the other. For it was part of the strict observance of the law to refuse to eat with the uncircumcised; and the Jews would have refused to sit at the same table with those whom they acknowledged to be their Christian brethren. This unseemly contradiction actually came to pass in a prominent instance. The Apostle Peter, chancing on one occasion to be in the heathen city of Antioch, at first mingled freely in social intercourse with the Gentile Christians. But some of the stricter sort, coming thither from Jerusalem, so cowed him that he withdrew from the Gentile table and held aloof from his fellow-Christians. Even Barnabas was carried away by the same tyranny of bigotry. Paul alone was true to the principles of Gospel freedom, withstanding Peter to the face and exposing the inconsistency of his conduct.

161. Paul never, indeed, carried on a polemic against circumcision and the keeping of the law among born Jews. This was reported of him by his enemies; but it was a false report. When he arrived in Jerusalem at the close of his third missionary journey, the Apostle James and the elders informed him of the damage which this representation was doing to his good name and advised him publicly to disprove it. The words in which they made this appeal to him are very

remarkable. **"Thou seest, brother,"** they said, **"how many thousands of Jews there are who believe; and they are all zealous of the law; and they are informed of thee that thou teachest all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise their children, neither to walk after the customs. Do therefore this that we say to thee: We have four men who have a vow on them. Take them and purify thyself with them, and be at charges with them, that they may shave their heads; and all may know that those things whereof they were informed concerning thee are nothing, but thou thyself also walkest orderly and keepest the law."**

Paul complied with this appeal and went through the rite which James recommended. This clearly proves that he never regarded it as part of his work to dissuade born Jews from living as Jews. It may be thought that he ought to have done so - that his principles required a stern opposition to everything associated with the dispensation which had passed away. He understood them differently, however, and had a good reason to render for the line he pursued.

We find him advising those who were called into the kingdom of CHRIST being circumcised not to become uncircumcised, and those called in uncircumcision not to submit to circumcision; and the reason he gives is that circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. The distinction was nothing more to him, in a religious point of view, than the distinction of sex or the distinction of slave and master. In short, it had no religious significance at all. If, however, a man professed Jewish modes of life as a mark of his nationality, Paul had no quarrel with him; indeed, in some degree he preferred them himself. He stickled as little against mere forms as for them ; only, if they stood between the soul and CHRIST or between a Christian and his brethren, then he was their uncompromising opponent. But he knew that liberty may be made an instrument of oppression as well as bondage, and, therefore, in regard to meats, for instance, he penned those noble recommendations of self-denial for the sake of weak and scrupulous consciences which are among the most touching testimonies to his utter unselfishness.

162. Indeed, we have here a man of such heroic size that it is no easy matter to define him. Along with the clearest vision of the lines of demarcation between the old and the new in the greatest crisis of human history and an unfaltering championship of principle when real issues were involved, we see in him the most genial superiority to mere formal rules and the utmost consideration for the feelings of those who did not see as he saw. By one huge blow he had cut himself free from the bigotry of bondage; but he never fell into the bigotry of liberty, and had always far loftier aims in view than the mere logic of his own position.

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