

# PAUL: A SERVANT OF JESUS CHRIST

By

F. B. Meyer, B. A.

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## CHAPTER TWO

### “WHEN I WAS A CHILD”

(Philippians 3:1-11)

“I was bred  
In the great city, pent mid cloisters dim,  
And saw naught lovely save the sky and stars.”  
- Coleridge

NOT far from the easternmost bay of the Mediterranean, in the midst of a rich and luxuriant plain, stood Tarsus, “**no mean city**,” as one of its greatest sons tells us, but at the time of which we write a thriving emporium of trade, and a focus of intellectual and religious activity.

On the edge of the plain, to the north, rose the mighty Taurus mountains, with their peaks of eternal snow, feeding with perpetual freshness and fulness the river Cydnus, which, after pouring over a cataract of considerable size, passed through the midst of the town, and so to the sea. During the last part of its course it was navigable by the largest vessels, which brought the treasures of East and West to the wharves that lined either bank. Here were piled merchandise and commodities of every kind, brought to exchange for the cloth of goats hair for which the town was famous, and which was furnished by the flocks of goats that browsed on the lower slopes of the Taurus, tended by the hardy mountaineers. Tarsus also received the trade which poured through the Cilician Gates a famous pass through the mountains, which led upwards from the coast to Central Asia Minor, to Phrygia and Lycaonia on one side, and to Cappadocia on the other.

In the Jew quarter of this thriving city at the beginning of this era (perhaps about 4 A. D.), whilst Jesus was still an infant in his mother’s arms at Nazareth, a child was born, who by his life and words was destined to make it famous in all after time, and to give a new impulse to men’s religious convictions.

At his circumcision he probably received a double name, that of Saul for his family, and that of Paul for the world of trade and municipal life.

The stamp of the great city left an ineffaceable impression on the growing lad, and in this his early years were widely different from his Master's. Jesus was nurtured in a highland village, and avoiding towns, loved to teach on the hillside, and cull his illustrations from the field of nature. Paul was reared amid the busy streets and crowded bazaars of Tarsus, thronged with merchants, students, and sailors from all parts of the world. Unconsciously, as the lad grew he was being prepared to understand human life under every aspect, and to become habituated to the thoughts and habits of the store, the camp, the arena, the temple. He became a man to whom nothing which touched human life was foreign. He loved the stir of city life, and drew his metaphors from its keen interests.

*He came of pure Hebrew stock. "A Hebrew of (sprung from) the Hebrews."*

On both sides his genealogy was pure. There was no Gentile admixture in his blood, no bar sinister in his descent. His father must have been a man of considerable position, or he would not have possessed the coveted birthright of Roman citizenship.

Though living away from Palestine, he was not a Hellenist Jew; but as distinctly Hebrew as any that dwelt in the Holy City herself. Perhaps given to sternness with his children; or it might not have occurred to his son, in after years, to warn fathers against provoking their children to wrath, lest they should become discouraged.

The mother, too, though we have no precise knowledge of her, must have been imbued with those lofty ideas of which we catch a trace in the mothers of Samuel, John the Baptist, and Jesus. Perhaps she died in his early childhood; or her son would not in after years have so lovingly turned to the mother of Rufus for motherhood (Romans 16:13).

The Hebrew tongue was probably the ordinary speech of that home. This may in a measure account for the apostle's intimate acquaintance with the Hebrew Scriptures, which he so often quotes. It was in Hebrew that Jesus spoke to him on the road to Damascus, and in Hebrew that he addressed the crowds from the steps of the castle.

To him Jerusalem was more than Athens or Rome; and Abraham, David, Isaiah, than the heroes of the *Iliad*. He counted it no small thing to have as ancestors those holy patriarchs and prophets, who had followed God from Ur, wrestled with the Angel at the Jabbok, and spoken to Him at Horeb, face to face.

His pulse beat quick as he remembered that he belonged to the chosen race, God's firstborn, whose were the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promises. However much birth and wealth flaunted before his eyes, he held himself to have been born of a nobler ancestry, to belong to a higher aristocracy. From his tribe had sprung the first king of Israel, whose name he was proud to bear.

*His early education was very religious. He was "a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee."*

In our day the word Pharisee is a synonym for religious pride and hypocrisy.

We must never forget that in those old Jewish days the Pharisee represented some of the noblest traditions of the Hebrew people. Amid the prevailing indifference the Pharisees stood for a strict religious life. As against the skepticism of the Sadducees, who believed in neither spirit nor unseen world, the Pharisees held to the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amid the lax morals of the time, which infected Jerusalem almost as much as Rome, the Pharisee was austere in his ideals, and holy in life.

- The texts on his phylacteries at least evidenced his devotion to Scripture;
- The tithing of mint, cummin, and anise, at least proved the scrupulosity of his obedience to the law;
- His prayers might be ostentatious, but they were conspicuous evidence of his belief in the unseen.

Such was the father of the future apostle. His early home was dominated by these austere and strong religious conceptions, and the boy imbibed them. According to the strictest sect of his religion, he lived a Pharisee. He was proud that at the earliest possible moment he had been initiated into the rites and privileges of his religion, being "**circumcised the eighth day.**"

As he heard of proselytes entering the covenant of his fathers in mature life, he congratulated himself that as a child he had been admitted into covenant relationship with God.

*He was blameless in outward life.*

**"As touching the righteousness which is of the law,** (so far as outward observances went, he was) **blameless.**"

There was no precept in the moral or ceremonial law which he would consciously disregard; and though the rabbis had built upon the law of Moses an immense superstructure of casuistical comments and minute injunctions, he bravely set himself to master them.

He would hold it a crime to enter into the house of a Gentile; and on leaving market or street he would carefully wash his hands of any defilement contracted through touching what had been handled by the uncircumcised.

He often thanked God that he was not as other men. He was taught to fast twice in the week, and give tithes of all he possessed. He would observe the Sabbath and festivals with punctilious and awful care. "Brethren," he said on one occasion, "**I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day.**"

The ardent soul of the young Pharisee was bent on standing in the front rank of saints. Early in life he had made up his mind to win the prize of God's favor. He could imagine nothing more desirable than this. When, therefore, in answer to his enquiry of the recognized religious teachers, he learned that absolute obedience to the words of the rabbis was the only method of achieving the object on which his heart was set, he determined with unremitting devotion to scale the perilous heights, and tread the glacier slopes.

Perhaps he encountered disappointment from the first. Possibly the cry, “**O wretched man that I am,**” began to formulate itself long before he became a Christian. Though outwardly his conduct was exemplary, his soul may have been rent by mortal strife. Often he saw and approved the better, and did the worst; often he lamented the infirmity of his motives and the infirmity of his will. Conscious of shortcomings which no other eye discerned; yearning for power to spend one absolutely holy day, which the rabbis taught, if lived by any one Israelite, would secure the immediate advent of the Messiah.

*His nature must have been warm-hearted and fervid from the first.*

The tears that flowed at Miletus, the heart that was nearly broken on his last journey to Jerusalem, the pathetic appeals and allusions of his Epistles, his capacity for ardent and constant friendships were not the growth of his mature years; but were present, in germ at least, from his earliest childhood.

He must always have been extremely sensitive to kindness, and the contrast between his remembrance of his friends in after life, and his entire reticence about his parents, and brothers or sisters, shows how bitter and final was that disowning which followed on his avowal of Christianity. There is more than appears on the surface in his remark, “**For whom I have suffered the loss of all things.**”

The zeal, which in after years led him to persecute the Church, was already stirring in his heart. “**I am a Jew,**” he once said, “**born in Tarsus, a city in Cilicia, yet brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, and taught according to the perfect manner of the law of the fathers, and was zealous toward God.**”

Indeed, he tells us that he advanced in the Jews religion beyond many of his own age among his countrymen, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of the fathers. He did not hold truth indolently or superficially, or as a necessity of his early nurture and education; but as a tincture which had saturated and dyed the deepest emotions of a very intense nature.

There was a sense in which he might have applied to himself some older words, and said, “**The zeal of Thine house hath eaten me up.**” May there not also have been an undefined hope that his zeal might atone for some of those defects of which he was so painfully conscious, and commend him to God? He knew, by personal experience, what it was to have, as the rest of his brethren after the flesh, a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge.

As a child he would learn by heart Deuteronomy 6:4-9; Psalms 113-118.

The days of his childhood must have passed thus:

- At five he began to read the Scriptures;
- at six he would be sent to the school of a neighboring Rabbi;
- at ten he would be instructed in the oral law;
- at thirteen he would become, by a kind of confirmation, a son of the law.

But it is not likely that he received the culture of the Greek Philosophy, for which Tarsus was rather famous.

This was rendered impossible by the uncompromising attitude of the Jews of the Dispersion to all the Gentile community around them. Between the ages of thirteen and sixteen he would be sent to Jerusalem, to pursue his training for the office of a rabbi, to which he was evidently designated by the ambition of his father. It was easy for the boy to do thus, as he had a married sister in Jerusalem with whom he could lodge during his attendance on the classes of the illustrious Gamaliel. He was “**brought up in this city,**” he said afterwards, “**at the feet of Gamaliel.**”

We must not omit to record that during these boyish years he acquired a trade, which served him usefully when hard pressed for means of livelihood. “*He that teacheth not a trade is as though he taught his son to be a thief*” so ran the old Jewish proverb.

Every Jew was taught a trade, generally that of his father.

Probably Paul’s family for generations back had been engaged in weaving a dark coarse cloth of goats hair. From his childhood he must have been familiar with the rattle of the looms, in which the long hair of the mountain goats was woven into a strong material, suitable alike for the outer coats of artisans or for tents, and known as Cilician cloth, after the name of the province in which Tarsus was situated.

This handicraft was poorly remunerated; but in Paul’s case it was highly suitable to the exigencies of a wandering life. Other trades would require a settled workshop and expensive apparatus; but this was a simple industry, capable of being pursued anywhere and needing the smallest possible apparatus and tools.

Across a gulf of fifty years from the confinement of a Roman prison, Paul had time to review these things which he had before counted gain. To the earnest gaze which he directed towards them, the receding shores of his early life came near again; and as he counted up their treasures he wrote across them loss, dross:

**“But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord”**

It was not a small thing to have come of noble and Godly parentage, to be a child of Abraham, and heir of the promises made to his seed. *But he counted it loss.*

It was not a small thing to have built up by constant obedience and scrupulous care a fabric of blameless reputation. *But he counted it loss.*

It was not a small thing to be conscious of the throbbing of a fervent spirit which would brook no indolence or lethargy, and which transformed duty to delight. *But he counted it as dross.*

*There was calm deliberation in his tone.*

Youth may be impassioned and hasty, but the man who speaks thus is not a youth; his brow is girt with mature wisdom, and his heart stored with the experience of several lives crowded into one. He has spent long years in prison, where there has been plenty of time for reflection, and ample opportunity of weighing the past against the present; but not withstanding all, and that the difficulties of the past are always minimized while those of the present are magnified, he twice over speaks of the advantages and achievements which had been the pride of his early manhood, as loss and worse.

*There was no irreverence in his allusions to the rites of the venerable system in which he had been nurtured.*

For long years Judaism had been the only interpreter to him of the Divine, the only nourishment of his religious instincts. The grounds of trust which he now deemed insufficient had at least been the landing places on the stairway of his upward ascent.

He could not forget that God Himself had been the Architect of the House in which his soul had found a shelter and home; that his voice had spoken in the Prophets, that his thoughts had inspired them, that his purposes had been fulfilled. No thoughtful man will talk contemptuously of his hornbook, or of his first teachers. In these probably lay the rudiments of all he has afterwards learned. But, notwithstanding the noble reverence of the Apostle's soul, he could not but affirm that what he had counted gain was loss.

*The grounds for this verdict are probably to be found in two directions.*

On the one hand, he discovered that the sacrifices of Judaism, as was obvious from their constant repetition, might bring sins to remembrance, but they could not remove them; he discovered that outward rites, however punctiliously observed, did not avail to cleanse the conscience; he discovered that in Judaism there was no power unto salvation, nothing to reinforce and renew the flagging energies of the soul. On the other hand, he had found something better.

The young artist leaves his village home, inflated with pride at his achievements. Nothing like them has ever been seen by the simple neighbors. They count him a prodigy, and he is only too glad to accept their estimate. In his secret judgment he counts himself able to step forth into the arena of the world as a successful competitor for its prizes. So he fares forth, to Paris, to Milan, to Rome. But each month weakens his self-confidence, and gives him a lower estimate of his powers. Presently he becomes the pupil of some master artist; and when, at the expiration of several years, he returns again to his home and opens the portfolio filled with the early studies, he closes it immediately with disgust. He wonders how he could ever have dared to count them art. What things were gain to him, those in the light of all that he has seen and learned, he now counts loss.

So Paul had seen Jesus. Before the glory of that heavenly vision all other objects of attraction had paled.

He counted all things to be loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus his Lord. In comparison with his finished work, all his own efforts were futile. It was a relief to turn from his own righteousness, which was of the law, and to avail himself of God's method of righteousness, which was through faith in Christ.

So long as he anticipated having to meet the demands of God's infinite holiness by his own endeavors, he was haunted with the dread that there might be some fatal flaw; but directly he learned that by renouncing all he might gain Christ; that by forsaking his own efforts and simply trusting Christ he might be found in Him, possessed of the flawless righteousness which had been wrought by his obedience unto death; that by confessing himself unable to do the good he would, and identifying himself with the death of Christ, he might come to know the power of his resurrection, and attain day by day to something of its likeness then with great thankfulness he abandoned his own strivings and efforts, and counted all his former gains but dross and dung; that he might win Christ and all that Christ could be and do.

It is an awful experience, when the soul first awakes to find that he has been making a mistake in the most important of matters, and has nearly missed the deepest meaning of life; when it discovers that the rules it has made for itself, and the structure of character it has laboriously built up, are but wood, hay, and stubble; when it learns that it has been building on an insecure foundation, and that every brick must be taken down.

Ah me! it is a discovery which, when it comes in early manhood, for the moment at least, paralyzes - we fall to the ground, and spend three days and nights stunned and dazed; when it comes at the end of life, is full of infinite regret; when it comes in the other world, is black with the darkness of unutterable despair. The worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched.

There is one test only which can really show whether we are right or wrong: it is our attitude to Jesus Christ.

If our religious life revolves around anything less than Himself - though it be the doctrines of Christianity, work for Him, the rules of a holy life - it will inevitably disappoint and fail us. But if He is Alpha and Omega; if our faith, however feebly, looks up to Him; if we press on to know Him, the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings; if we count all things but loss for the excellency of his knowledge - we may possess ourselves in peace amid the mysteries of life, and the lofty requirements of the great white throne.

**~ end of chapter 2 ~**

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