

VOICES FROM HEAVEN AND HELL

by

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CHAPTER TWELVE

"I Am A Sinner Saved By Grace"

by Paul

"My name is Saul although now I am known as Paul. A change occurred in my life which was far more radical than the change in my name. Those who knew me in my youth and young manhood would consider that change almost unbelievable. It was a change as great as the difference between darkness and light. It can only be attributed to the power and grace of Almighty GOD. Truly I can testify that I am a sinner saved by grace.

"I was born in the city of Tarsus in the Province of Cilicia. Cilicia like all parts of the world at that time was under the control of the Romans. The population of Tarsus consisted chiefly of Greeks. There were of course Roman soldiers and government officials. And there was also a small number of Jews. Through a service rendered to the Roman Government my father became a Roman citizen. So I was free-born.

"Although a Roman citizen my father was a Hebrew of the Hebrews. He belonged to the strictest sect of our religion, namely, a Pharisee. It was his constant fear that his family might become contaminated with the idolatry and immorality of the Greeks and the Romans. We were strictly forbidden to take part in any of the pagan feasts and celebrations.

"My father, however, thought the best way of keeping us undefiled from idolatry was to teach us the tenets of our religion. Almost from an infant I was taught the stories of the Scriptures. The call of Abraham, the struggle between Jacob and Esau, Moses and the Passover, David and Goliath, and Daniel in the lion's den, were all familiar to me. We were taught to keep the law in all its legal aspects. I also learned about the Messiah who was to establish the Kingdom.

"As soon as I was old enough I was sent to the school connected with the synagogue. There I learned to read and write. At the synagogue we learned more about the law and the prophets. When visiting doctors of the law came to Tarsus we were allowed to hear their discussions and even allowed to ask questions.

"My father was not satisfied with the education that was possible in Tarsus and decided to send me to Jerusalem when I reached the age of ten. I can still remember my first glimpse of Jerusalem. I beheld the glittering roof of the Temple, the buildings on Mount Zion, and the ridge of Mount Olives rising high over all. As I passed through the gate of the Holy City I repeated the words of the Psalmist: **'I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go into the house of the Lord. Our feet shall stand within thy gates, O Jerusalem. Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: they shall prosper that love thee. Peace be within thy walls, and prosperity within thy palaces.'**

"I studied at the feet of one of the greatest of all the teachers of the Jews - Gamaliel. He was a man of integrity and wisdom. He was held in reputation of all the people. It was a privilege and an honour to learn from him. He was zealous for the law and for the honour of the Jewish nation. He taught us that only those who rigidly kept the law would live before the Holy GOD of Israel.

"Under the influence and teaching of Gamaliel I became a Pharisee of the Pharisees. It was our pride to keep even the most minute details of the law. My entire life was hemmed in by the law. I rigidly gave a tithe of everything which came into my possession. I fasted at least twice a week. I kept every holy day. My prayers were long and frequent. I kept the traditions concerning the washing of cups, pots, brazen vessels, and tables. I would not eat bread except that I washed my hands after the instructions of the elders. It was a tradition that water be poured over our closed hands so that the water might flow down to the elbows. Unless we washed in this manner we considered ourselves unclean. I lived in constant dread that I would break even one of the thousands of precepts which governed our lives. I wanted to be blameless in keeping of the law.

"Although I zealously kept all the externals of the law and the traditions there was one law which troubled me and that was the tenth commandment. This commandment taught us that we should not covet that which belonged to another. It was my besetting sin that I did covet. I coveted the influence and prominence of certain men. I coveted the wealth of others. I coveted the talents of others. I knew in this that I sinned against GOD. But I felt that my diligence in keeping all the details of the external laws more than made up for my failing in keeping the tenth commandment.

"Through the influence of Gamaliel I also became intensely patriotic. Along with others I felt that in order to keep our unity as a Jewish race we must exalt our religion. A political unity was not sufficient in our day because the Romans had crushed out our political life. We as Pharisees felt that above all things we must cling to the law and the religion of our fathers. Nothing must be allowed to interfere with our religion. Nothing must be permitted which would cause our people to despise the law. Nothing must be tolerated which would cast doubt upon the traditions. Above all things we the Jewish nation must cling to our religion and the law.

"You can well imagine the horror which I felt at something which occurred while I was absent from Judea. Upon finishing my schooling under Gamaliel I went back to visit my parents in Tarsus where I remained for several years. I did hear rumors about a certain JESUS who performed miracles and claimed to be the Messiah. This did not excite me as those who claimed to be the Messiah were many in the history of our nation. But evidently my friends in the city of Jerusalem took a more serious view of it for they influenced the Roman governor, Pilate, to crucify him. That would seem to finish the movement started by this JESUS.

"However, when I returned to Jerusalem I found things in a terrible state. It was claimed that this JESUS had risen from the dead for his tomb was found empty. A number of his followers claimed that they had seen him after his resurrection. One of his followers by the name of Peter had preached on the day of the feast of Pentecost and had succeeded in deceiving some three thousand who became followers of this supposed Messiah. And every day more joined this movement.

"I knew that something drastic had to be done immediately if this movement was to be stopped. The council had already thrown several into prison but they were released. I was somewhat disappointed in the counsel of my beloved teacher, Gamaliel. They had arrested the leading disciples of JESUS. To my mind they should have been put to death. But Gamaliel said: **'Refrain from these men, and let them alone: for if this counselor this work be of men, it will come to nought: but if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it; lest haply ye be found even to fight against God.'**

"For all his wisdom Gamaliel did not see the danger and magnitude of this movement. He did not see that these followers of JESUS were out to destroy the law. They disregarded the Sabbath. They disregarded many rituals and set aside the traditions of the fathers. If they continued to grow and multiply they would destroy the unity of our race. I felt that they must be stopped at all cost. So I organized a number of faithful Pharisees to oppose this movement. The first thing we did was to compose a prayer to GOD. It was in these words that we prayed to GOD: 'Let there be no hope to them who apostatize from the true religion; and let heretics, how many soever they be, all perish as in a moment. And let the kingdom of pride be speedily rooted out and broken in our days. Blessed are thou, O Lord our God who destroyest the wicked, and bringest down the proud.'

"Prayer, however, was not enough. I determined to follow it up with action. I determined to destroy the church of JESUS of Nazareth. I led a mob into every home that honoured the name of JESUS. I caused them to be scourged. Many were cast into prison. If we caught them in the synagogue we had them publicly scourged. Some were put to death. I tried by torture to cause them to blaspheme the name of JESUS. Those who refused were terribly ill treated. As a result the movement was almost stamped out in Jerusalem. Hundreds fled out of the Holy City.

"But even this did not satisfy me. They propagated their heretical religion in distant parts. I was determined to persecute them to the ends of the world. I did this all for the glory of the GOD of Israel. There was one incident during my career as persecutor of the church which stood out. There was a man by the name of Stephen who tried to propagate this heretical religion in the synagogue of the Cilicians. I disputed with him to no avail. So we brought him to the council. Witnesses testified that Stephen spoke blasphemous words against the Temple and the Law. They said: **'We heard this Stephen say that Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place, and shall change the customs which Moses delivered us.'**

"The High Priest asked Stephen whether these things were so. Stephen related some of the history of our race. But he concluded by crying out against us: **'Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye. Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted? And they have slain them**

which shewed before of the coming of the Just One of whom ye have been now the betrayers and murderers; who have received the law by the disposition of angels, and have not kept it.'

"Upon hearing this terrible accusation we cried out and gnashed upon him with our teeth. But he cried out: **'Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God.'** Upon this we cried out with a loud voice and stopped our ears. We cast him out of the city and stoned him. Those who took part laid down their clothes at my feet. As the stones thudded against his body I remember him crying out: **'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.'** And kneeling down he prayed: **'Lord, lay not this sin to their charge.'**

"I was more determined than ever to stamp out these followers of JESUS. Hearing that there were a number of them in Damascus I obtained letters to those in authority in the synagogue there. It was my plan to bring the followers of JESUS bound to Jerusalem. So I joined a caravan traveling to Damascus. As we neared the city suddenly there shone round about me a light from Heaven. I fell to the earth and heard a voice saying unto me, **'Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?'** And I said: **'Who art thou, Lord?'** And the Lord said, **'I am Jesus whom thou persecutest; it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks.'** This astonished me and I trembled like a leaf. I cried out: **'Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?'** And the Lord said unto me, **'Arise, and go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do.'**

"I arose but I could not see. The men which were with me led me by the hand, and brought me into Damascus. I stayed at the house of one Judas, who lived on the street called Straight. For three days and nights I remained blind. I was not able to eat or drink. All that I could think about was my sin, my sin, my sin. I had persecuted the Son of the living GOD. In my mind I heard again the cries of those I had caused to be tortured. And in their cries I heard the voice of the Son of Man: **'Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?'** I heard the weeping of the women whom I had cast in prison. In the midst of their weeping I heard his voice: **'Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?'** And when I remembered how I had tried to make them blaspheme the Holy name of Him in whom they believed, I heard the voice: **'Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?'** I had persecuted the Son of the GOD whom I professed to love and serve.

"During the three days of darkness the face of Stephen came before me. I had encouraged vile men to stone him. They were actually stoning the Lord of Glory. **'Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?'** Would GOD ever forgive? Ah, Stephen had cried out: **'Lord, lay not this sin to their charge.'** Perhaps this prayer of Stephen would save me. I prayed and I prayed: **'GOD have mercy upon my guilty vile soul. GOD have mercy on me a sinner.'**

"GOD did have mercy on me. JESUS appeared to one of His followers whose name was Ananias and directed him to come to me. As Ananias entered into my presence he put his hands upon me in tenderness and said: **'Brother Saul, the Lord, even Jesus, that appeared unto thee in the way as thou camest, hath sent me, that thou mightest receive thy sight, and be filled with the Holy Ghost.'** Upon that the scales fell from my eyes. Ananias baptized me. Now I experienced the blessing of salvation. The Lord forgave me a sinner. I was saved by His marvellous grace.

"As my voice reaches across the generations, it is my hope and prayer that all that hear might

know that JESUS is both Lord and Saviour. He is the Messiah. There is none other name by which men can be saved. We cannot be justified by the keeping of the law. We can be justified only through faith in JESUS the CHRIST. As I once testified to the Philippian Jailor; **'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved and thy house.'**

~ end of chapter 12 ~
