

DAILY BIBLE ILLUSTRATIONS

by

John Kitto, D.D., F.S.A.

Forty-Fifth Week - First Day

PAUL, A NEW CREATION IN CHRIST

"For God is my witness, how greatly I long for you all with the affection of Jesus Christ. And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment, that you may approve the things that are excellent, that you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ, being filled with the fruits of righteousness which are by Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God" (Philippians 1:8-11).

We have more than once directed attention to the great change that was worked in Paul by his conversion to Christ. This change affected not merely his views and sentiments, but his temper and character, his mind and heart.

Let us imagine for a moment that the record of Paul's history stopped with the ninth chapter of the book of Acts and that no gleanings of his later temper and conduct appeared in his epistles. In other words, all that we would know of him after Acts 9 was that he became a great apostle and that he labored with extraordinary diligence and success in the Lord's vineyard. Now let us recall his character before his conversion--its injustice, violence, and cruelty. How then should we picture his subsequent character? Would we not probably picture him as a somewhat harsh, austere, and exacting man, incapable of much tenderness toward others or consideration for their infirmities? We indeed know that great men are not always amiable, that good men are not always kind, and that pious men are not always tender-hearted.

Yet the truth in respect to Paul is the exact opposite. There has not lived a man who more than he manifested such a complete change of character; a man who evinced a gentle, loving and forbearing temper, who showed more tender consideration for others and more generous pity for their temporal and spiritual needs. To say he was merely not so severe in his accusations, neither reviled nor wronged any man, kept his conscience void of offense, and adhered strictly to the laws of truth and justice, integrity and faithfulness in his entire deportment, would be far too little. He was much more than all this. He had learned from his Divine Master lessons of meekness and forbearance, gentleness and kindness, drinking in much of His lowly and lovely spirit. He exemplified it in his patience in the midst of severe "afflictions, in necessities, in distresses, in stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in watchings, in fastings" (2 Cor. 6:4,5). Simply stated, Paul had "put on Christ" and had "crucified the flesh with its affections and lusts."

After Paul's heart of stone had been exchanged for a heart of flesh, his knowledge of human nature no less than his tenderness of heart leads him to carefully cultivate every favorable symptom of goodness in his young converts. He is "gentle among them, even as a nurse cherishes her children." He does not expect everything at once; a beginner in the ways of Christianity is not expected to attain instantaneous perfection. If an error is committed, not all is lost. Neither is hope abandoned when some less happy converts are slow in their progress. He protects their budding graces, fences in his young plants till they take root; and if he rejoices that the hardy are more flourishing, he is glad that the less vigorous are nevertheless alive.

There is scarcely a time when Paul shows forth more gentleness than in his second letter to the Corinthians. His sharp reproof of an offender in the congregation had made him anxious that every breach should be healed and every painful feeling done away before he appeared among them again. He would not have the joy of their meeting overshadowed by any remaining cloud. Every good man sometimes shows a lack of consideration. He does not always identify with the circumstances and character of the people he addresses. But Paul writes to his friends as one who sympathized with them, like one familiar with the infirmities of our common nature. He could make allowances for doubt and distrust, misapprehension and errors. He expected inconsistency and was not deterred by perverseness. He bore with failure where it was not sinful, and reproved stubbornness without being disappointed at meeting with it.

Paul's tenderness for his converts was doubtless increased by the remembrance of his own errors--a remembrance that left a compassionate feeling on his softened heart. However, it never led him to be guilty of that mischievous compassion of preferring the ease of his friends to their safety. He never soothed where it was his duty to reprove. He knew that integrity was the truest tenderness; that a harsh truth which might save the soul was more humane than a soothing sympathy which might endanger it.

Paul's awareness of his own imperfections is everywhere visible. More than once it makes him press upon his friends the duty of bearing one another's burdens. Even in his most severe censures he does not speak with hopeless harshness, and seldom does he treat any as irreclaimable. On the contrary, he generally contrives to leave them some degree of credit; for by stripping erring men of every vestige of character, he seems to feel that he would also strip them of every glimmer of hope, every incitement to reformation.

His sorrows and joys, both of which were intense, never seem to have arisen from anything related merely to himself. His own happiness or distress was little influenced by personal considerations. Only the ups and downs of his converts could raise or depress his feelings. With what anguish of spirit does he mourn over some of them--"of whom," he says, "I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ." Note again his self-renouncing joy: "We are glad when we are weak and you are strong." Again, "Let me rejoice in the day of Christ, that I have not run in vain, neither labored in vain."

Self-denial in all things lay at the root of his regenerated character. We find him willing to forego the most innocent and lawful gratifications rather than grieve or offend the weak: "If meat makes my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world stands lest I make my brother to offend"--lest I be an occasion either of his offending or of his being offended (the original word may perhaps be taken in either of these senses).

Paul's benevolence was not confined within the narrow limits of friends or country. He felt great tenderness and compassion for all the unbelieving. Now we know he felt most strongly and tenderly for those he had left behind, those entangled in the fetters of Jewish prejudice. Language could not express this in stronger terms: "Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they might be saved" (Rom. 10:1). But for the unbelieving in general, he poured out his soul in earnest expostulations and the most ardent prayers to the Father of mercies and God of all grace. Concerning them Paul could truly say with David, "Rivers of water run down my eyes because they do not keep Your law." In his Epistle to the Philippians we find this parallel declaration: "Many walk of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ."

While Paul's zeal for the spiritual welfare of entire communities is noted, he also shows us his attachment to individuals. There is a large number of brethren and sisters mentioned by name at the end of most of his epistles, and they are greeted with the most delicate manifestations of Christian and faithful love. There is Priscilla and Aquila, Paul's fellow helpers who exposed their lives for his. There is Andronicus and Junia, his relations and companions in prison who were in Christ before him. There is Persis, much beloved by him, for she had labored much in the Lord. There is also Rufus, chosen in the Lord, whose mother, Paul says, is mine. These chapters of salutations are too often passed over as of no general interest; but they enable us to penetrate into the apostle's private life and into his dearest relationships.

We find also numerous Christians surrounding Paul for whom he reserves a special affection: Luke, the historian, so faithful and affectionate; Barnabas, his fellow laborer, for whom Paul's love could not be cooled by a temporary alienation; Philemon, to whom Paul writes with the liveliness of affection, which the pen of the most loving woman could not surpass; Epaphroditus, whom God had restored to health in answer to Paul's prayers, lest "he should have sorrow upon sorrow." There were Epaphras and Tychicus too. And above all others, Timothy, to whom Paul wrote with a tender solicitude no mother ever surpassed, and Titus, "his own son in the faith," of whom Paul states that when he came to Troas, "I had no rest in my spirit because I did not find Titus, my brother."

In short, all that Paul said and all that he did, from the day of his conversion to that of his death, was one striking and beautiful comment upon his own declaration to the Philippians, "God is my witness, how greatly I long after you all in the bowels of Jesus Christ."