

The Transfiguration - James Hastings

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And after six days Jesus taketh with him Peter, and James, and John his brother, and bringeth them up into a high mountain apart: and he was transfigured before them: and his face did shine as the sun, and his garments became white as the light.—Matt. 17:1, 2.

1. VERY little is said in Scripture concerning the glory and majesty of Christ. A stranger reading the Bible, especially the New Testament, would be impressed far more with the majesty of the Messiah's character, and the glory of His moral qualities, than with anything else. This, undoubtedly, was part of the Divine plan; for the search of men was rather for tokens of material glory than for signs of moral excellence. His coming was principally for the display of the latter, and such signs as might have appealed to the desire of the men whose only conception of glory had come to be that of manifested splendour were denied. The word of the prophet spoken in another connexion had a supreme fulfilment in the Person of Jesus, "There was the hiding of his power." Consequently, that which arrests one in the study of the life of Christ is not outward magnificence, not pageantry or pomp, but something more wonderful, and without which mere outward pageantry and pomp would be nothing worth, even His moral glory. It is the beauty of His character that lays hold upon the inmost spirit, and commands its admiration. To see the Christ in the glories of His character is to lie prostrate before Him in adoration.

2. Yet, while the glory of His power is hidden, and the radiant splendours of His person are veiled, occasionally during His sojourn upon the earth they flashed into prominence. Here upon the mount, before the eyes of the disciples, there flamed forth the magnificence and the majesty of Him who, in order that the weakest and most trembling might hold intercourse with Him, had veiled these splendours behind the human.

¶ To any one who remembers who Jesus Christ is, and what He has been and will be to men, no incident of His life is more credible. In all likelihood Jesus was often transfigured in His nights of lonely prayer, although there were no eyes to see Him. No experience set down in the Gospels more entirely becomes the Lord of glory. To one who walked with God and spoke face to face with Him as a child to a father, round whom God's angels continually hovered, on whom the thoughts of all God's saints were set, it is only natural that the fashion of His face should alter, His raiment become as white as snow, and men of God commune with Him.¹

Let us look at—

- I. The Setting of the Transfiguration.
- II. Its Significance.
- III. Its Practical Suggestions.

I THE SETTING OF THE TRANSFIGURATION

1. "After six days,"—or, as Luke in less definite language says, "About eight days after these sayings,"—"he bringeth them up into a high mountain apart." The point of time at which the Transfiguration occurred is given by all the three Synoptists, and what they tell us is that at a definite point of time in the progress of His public ministry the Lord meditated deeply upon His coming death, and sought to familiarize His disciples with the idea of His atoning death, and to get some sympathy from them in regard to the idea of that death. When He broke the news of it to them first, Peter resisted the idea, saying, "Be it far from thee, Lord: this shall never be unto thee," and with pain and distress Jesus saw that Peter was at this time out of sympathy with the idea of His suffering for him. Six days passed. We do not know how these six days were filled up. It may be that they were filled up by patient conversation between our Lord and His disciples as to the place which this atoning death of His should occupy in the whole scheme of God's dealings with men. It may be that He set forth to them the relation of the previous efforts of God for men, symbolized by the life-work of Moses and Elijah. For all we know, they may have had this work of Moses and Elijah fully in their minds during that week. On the other hand, it may have been a week of absolute silence between our Lord and His disciples, when our Lord was, so to say, alienated from His very own, because they could not understand. We read of His marvelling, being astonished at their incapacity to sympathize with this idea of His death. In any case, it was certainly for relief, for sympathy, for reassurance, and for reconsecration of Himself to the atoning work which He was going out to do, it was for these ends that the Lord Jesus went up to this hill to hold fellowship with His Father.

2. Who were His companions in that mysterious hour? At the foot of whatever peak of Hermon He ascended, He left nine of the Twelve in waiting. There, unattended by any save the chosen three, he took His twilight way up the steep. Peter, James, and John, "the three most receptive of Him and most representative of His Church," who had stood with Him in the solemn presence of death in the house of Jairus, who will be with Him in the sorrows of Gethsemane, would Jesus have with Him amid the glories of the Transfiguration. Peter must be there, for Peter will hereafter stand in many a place where only the recollection of the voice from the cloud will strengthen his wavering courage. When the demon of fear would possess his soul, or the spirit of impetuosity thwart the

Master's purposes; when he would stand up to press home upon the consciences of his fellow-countrymen the claims of his crucified Lord, or resist the persecutions of some of them, or rebuke avarice, shame, and hypocrisy; when he must needs withstand fanaticism in the Church, comfort believers in trial, enforce their practical duties, warn them against temptation or remove their doubts, he will need the experience of that hallowed night when he was an "eye-witness" of his Lord's majesty. James must be there, for the recollection of those scenes will cool his intolerant spirit, temper his ambition, comfort him in Gethsemane, give perseverance in prayer, and nerve his faith as he lays his head upon Herod's block. John must be there, for Jesus, like all mankind, must needs have near Him in His most sacred moments the one nearest His heart. Love will be strengthened by conviction, and these together will stay John's hasty flight from the garden, enable him to brook the frowns of the Sanhedrin, strengthen his heart that it may not break under the shadow of the cross, and give clearness of vision to recognize his risen Lord as His voice descends from the opening heavens into the quarries of Patmos; and when, an old man, he shall sit down pen in hand to tell the world that Jesus was Divine, then he will remember, "we beheld his glory."

3. "He bringeth them up into a high mountain apart." It is not to be supposed that a mountain was absolutely necessary for such an event as the Transfiguration, but it is to be conceded that no other place could have been equally appropriate. The voice from heaven had been heard by the Jordan, at the Baptism; an angel had appeared to Zacharias in the Temple; but neither in the Temple with all its sacred associations, nor by the Jordan, the historic river of the nation, would a spot have been found more appropriate for the occasion than that which was chosen, "a high mountain." Our Lord, apparently, was at home among the everlasting hills; they were to Him a mighty staircase that reached to the throne of God. Never did the tempter make a greater mistake than when he supposed he could lay a snare for Jesus on the top of an exceeding high mountain. There the Saviour was more invulnerable than anywhere else on earth. Among the hills Jesus triumphed over the tempter; among them He made known the laws of the Kingdom of Heaven to men; there He sought communion with God; and there He was transfigured.

¶ Several times the writer has climbed to the loftiest peak of one of the grandest of our Scottish mountains, on each occasion accompanied by a different companion, and always without exception his companion has exclaimed, after some minutes of silence on the summit, Let us sing a psalm of praise. The writer's own feeling was rather, Let us pray, or, Let us speak, the consciousness of the Divine presence being stronger than ever elsewhere experienced. Was this feeling shared by our Lord? Probably it was. He is found so frequently up the mountain. And it is clear that His desire was not merely to get away from the world and its disturbing influence, but to get near to the Father. Amidst the grand majestic surroundings of nature, He found Himself near God, and all night, with the silent stars overhead, He held communion with the Father.¹

¶ One cannot but ask what was the "high mountain" on which six days from the time of Peter's confession, whilst still in this region [of Cæsarea Philippi], "he was transfigured" before His three disciples? It is impossible to look up from the plain to the towering peaks of Hermon, almost the only mountain which deserves the name in Palestine, and one of whose ancient titles was derived from this circumstance, and not be struck with its appropriateness to the scene. The fact of its rising high above all the other hills of Palestine, and of its setting the last limit to the wanderings of Him who was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, falls in with the supposition which the words inevitably force upon us. The sacredness of Hermon in the eyes of the surrounding tribes may well have fitted it for the purpose, even if it did not give it the name, of "the Holy Mountain." High up on its southern slopes there must be many a point where the disciples could be taken "apart by themselves." Even the transient comparison of the celestial splendour with the snow, where alone it could be seen in Palestine, should not, perhaps, be wholly overlooked. At any rate, the remote heights above the sources of the Jordan witnessed the moment when, His work in His own peculiar sphere being ended, He set His face for the last time "to go up to Jerusalem."¹

¶ A strong Christian tradition dating from the fourth century makes Tabor the scene of our Lord's Transfiguration. It was probably natural that this event should become connected with the most conspicuous mountain of Galilee, and as early as the sixth century three churches had been built to commemorate the three tabernacles which Peter proposed to erect. But at this particular period Tabor was covered with houses, and therefore could not correctly be described as "apart" (Matt. 17:1). Then again, just before His Transfiguration, Jesus was far away from Tabor, in the neighbourhood of Hermon.²

4. We are told by St. Luke that they went up "to pray." It seems most natural to accept this statement not only as correct, but as a sufficient statement of the object our Saviour had in view. The thought of transfiguration may not have been in His mind at all. Here, as always, He was guided by the will of His Father in heaven; and it is not necessary to suppose that to His human mind that will was made known earlier than the occasion required. We are not told that He went up to be transfigured: we are told that He went up to pray. It seems probable that the idea was to spend the night in prayer. We know that this was a not infrequent custom with Him; and if ever there seemed a call for it, it must have been now, when about to begin that sorrowful journey which led to Calvary. With this thought agree all the indications which suggest that it was evening when they ascended, night while they remained on the top, and morning when they came down. This, too, will account in the most natural manner for the drowsiness of the Apostles; and the fact that their Lord felt none of it only proved how much more vivid was His realization of the awfulness of the crisis than theirs was. We are to think of the four, then, as slowly and thoughtfully climbing the hill at eventide, carrying their abbas, or rugs, on which they would kneel for prayer, and which, if they needed rest, they would wrap round them, as is the Oriental custom. By the time they

reached the top, night would have cast its veil of mystery on the grandeur of the mountains round about them, while snowy Hermon in the gloom would rise like a mighty giant to heaven, its summit "visited all night by troops of stars." Never before or since has there been such a prayer meeting on this earth of ours.

Having gone up to pray, they would doubtless all kneel down together. As the night wore on, the three disciples, being exhausted, would wrap themselves in their rugs and go to sleep; while the Master, to whom sleep at such a time was unnatural, if not impossible, would continue in prayer. Can we suppose that that time of pleading was free from agony? His soul had been stirred within Him when Peter tempted Him to turn aside from the path of the cross; and may we not with reverence suppose that on that lonely hill-top, as later in the Garden, there might be in His heart the cry, "Father, if it be possible"? If only the way upward were open now! Has not the Kingdom of God been preached in Judæa, in Samaria, in Galilee, away to the very borderlands? and has not the Church been founded? and has not authority been given to the Apostles? Is it, then, absolutely necessary to go back, back to Jerusalem, not to gain a triumph, but to accept the last humiliation and defeat? There cannot but have been a great conflict of feeling; and with all the determination to be obedient even unto death, there must have been a shrinking from the way of the cross, and a great longing for heaven and home and the Father's welcome. The longing cannot be gratified; it is not possible for the cup to pass from Him; but just as later in Gethsemane there came an angel from heaven strengthening Him, so now His longing for heaven and home and the smile of His Father is gratified in the gladdening and strengthening experience which followed His prayer—a foretaste of the heavenly glory, so vivid, so satisfying, that He will thenceforth be strong, for the joy that is set before Him, to endure the cross, despising the shame. For behold, as He prays, His face becomes radiant, the glory within shining through the veil of His mortal flesh. We all know that this flesh of ours is more or less transparent, and that in moments of exaltation the faces of even ordinary men will shine as with a heavenly lustre. We need not wonder, then, that it should have been so with our Lord, only in an immeasurably higher degree: that His face should have shone even "as the sun"; and that, though He could not yet ascend to heaven, heaven's brightness should have descended on Him and wrapped Him round, so that even "his garments became white as the light."

¶ "And while he was praying, the appearance of his face underwent a change," says Luke; he alone preserving for us this vital fact of "prayer," of profound and deliberate absorption in the Divine Life, as the immediate cause of the transfigured bodily state. This change, this radiance, seemed to the astonished onlookers to spread to the whole personality; conferring upon it an enhancement and a splendour which the limited brains of those who saw could only translate into terms of light—"His clothing became white, and like the flashing lightning"—whiter, says Mark, with a touch of convincing realism, than any fuller can bleach it. Bound together by a community of expectation and personal devotion, and now in that state upon the verge of sleep in which the mind is peculiarly open to suggestion, it is not marvellous that this, to them conclusive and almost terrible, testimony of Messiahship should produce strange effects upon those who were looking on. In an atmosphere so highly charged with wonder and enthusiasm, the human brain is at a hopeless disadvantage. Such concepts as it is able to manufacture from the amazing material poured in on it will take of necessity a symbolic form. In minds dominated by the influence of a personality of unique spiritual greatness, and full of images of those Old Testament prophecies which seemed to be in course of actual fulfilment before their eyes, all the conditions were present for the production of a collective vision in which such images played a prominent part; bodying forth the ideas evoked in them by the spectacle of their Master's ecstasy. That Master, whose deep humanity had never failed them yet, whose strangest powers had always been evoked in response to the necessities of men, was now seen removed from them by a vast distance. Unconscious of their very existence, His whole being appeared to be absorbed in communion with another order, by them unseen.¹

¶ There is a height in prayer above communion. What shall I call it? It may be named the prayer of surrender. Very few ever utter that prayer to its utmost syllable. Few ever really lay themselves, spirit and soul and body, on God's altar. We are always withholding something, keeping back from God some dear and cherished possession, some gift or talent or power, some love or pleasure or passion. We will not yield up some one dear and tightly held joy. Yet when we do pray this prayer we pass on to an experience which seals us with a seal that cannot be broken, to the service of God for ever. Then on the transparent mirror of the face the light leaps and flashes, and some of it abides. That is the secret of that heavenly and almost intolerable radiance on the face of Moses which men feared to look upon. He had come out of that most holy place and offered up his prayer of surrender in these solemn words, "But if not, blot out my name from thy book." That is why Stephen's face shone in the council. His clear and discerning mind saw his martyr death before him, and he yielded himself up to God's will. Could we have seen Paul's face when he heard God's words, "My grace is sufficient for thee," and meekly accepted God's will, we would have seen the sheen of the transfiguring light also upon it. He did not know whether he was "in the body" or "out of it." That is why Christ's face shone as He prayed. And that is how our faces also shall be transfigured.²

5. With what overwhelming awe must these men have looked upon their Master! They had become familiar with Him as with a man sharing their nature, His face lined with the furrows of care, His visage sorrowfully marred, beautiful, yea, passing beautiful, and yet always overshadowed with the signs of sorrow. As they looked up from their bewildered sleep in the darkness of the night, they beheld Him white as the light, His raiment glistening as with the radiance of the snow-capped peaks behind Him, His whole Person standing out in clear relief against the dark background, the lightning flashing upon the bosom of the night. Long years after, Peter,

writing of the vision, said, "We were eyewitnesses of his majesty." The word there translated "majesty" occurs only three times in Scripture. Once it is translated "mighty power," once "magnificence," and once "majesty." The thought it suggests is that of splendour, of overwhelming beauty and glory, and that which arrests and subdues the mind to the point of adoration and worship; and Peter, looking back to the splendours of that night scene, wrote, "We were eyewitnesses of his majesty."

¶ The Transfiguration is the key-word of the Incarnation. Jesus Christ went up into a mountain to reveal to the chosen three the secret of the Kingdom. Before they ever tasted death they were to see the Kingdom come on earth. A moment was to sweep over them when the hidden workings were to be laid bare to them of that action which should hereafter perpetuate the tabernacling of God among men. Alas! their eyes were heavy at the time, and their wits were clouded, and they were dazed by the excess of glory! They wist not what they saw or said. But yet one swift glance they won before the cloud enveloped them, and in that glance they caught sight of Jesus transfigured. Transfigured! It was the Jesus whom they knew, the same, and not another. Everything that constituted His identity in face and form was there, unobliterated—only, it was raised to a new power, it was possessed by unanticipated capacities. A Higher Force had smitten into it, had released itself through it, so that it shone and glowed. It was uplifted, changed, yet the same, burning, yet never consumed. The body showed itself, not as unnaturalized, but as the true and proper organ of the forces which should reveal themselves through it. It was made clear that its natural construction adapted it to become the vehicle of the invading Spirit: it finds its own life in becoming transfigured.¹

¶ The Transfiguration had a purpose also in relation to the disciples. It was designed to reconcile them to the incredible and repulsive idea of Messiah's sufferings by revealing to them the glories that should follow. What did they hear as they listened to the converse betwixt those two glorified saints who bore the greatest names on Israel's roll of honour? They heard them talking of "the decease," or, as it is in Greek, "the exodus, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem." In the judgment of Moses and Elijah that issue, which seemed to the disciples an intolerable ignominy and a crushing disaster, was a splendid triumph, like the mighty deliverance which God had wrought for Israel when He brought her by the hand of Moses out of the land of bondage and made her a free nation. It is very significant that in the copies of St. Luke's Gospel which were in use in St. Chrysostom's day, this sentence ran: "They spake of the glory which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem." And such was the conception of her Lord's sufferings which was by and by revealed to the Church. "We behold Jesus," it is written in the Epistle to the Hebrews, "by reason of the suffering of death crowned with glory and honour."¹

He taketh us
On a high mountain, nor forsaketh us,
But turneth round upon us, glistening
In face and raiment, as He were a King.
In converse we discover at His side
Moses, Elias.... He is glorified,
The Son of God: and Peter would abide
Forever with these three, and prays to rear
Three tabernacles. And the light grows drear.
Some sin is on us that no wise we wist;
We are closed up as in God's very fist;
We cannot see: only there floats above,
Rumbling and murmuring as an angry love,
Some element in havoc that doth press
Against the idle word that Peter said.
I know not by what stroke,
Beneath that awful cloak,
Elias and the Law-giver are brought
To nothingness in the Eternal Thought:
For presently we are allowed,
Through adumbrations of the cloud,
To hear the Father's Voice in its caress,
As if from Chaos sped
Toward that belovèd Head—
Jealous and watered as of rain-drop tears
That Voice appears
In majesty on the cloud's breaking rim:
"Lo, this is my belovèd Son; hear Him!"
The Lord is glorified; we see
His Body as in glory it will be—

Nothing it lacks
Save of His Wounds the lovely tracks.
I, John, who lay upon His bosom, I
Must testify
I never saw Him—now
I see Him in the Father and rejoice:
He standeth meek amid His snows,
Flushed as a rose,
For we have heard that Voice.
How maiden in humility His brow!
Almost He whispereth “No word of this!
It is our secret: I should take amiss
That of this hour one word be said,
Peter, till I am risen from the dead.”
And, having spoken, He looks back on me,
And in an instant my theology
Is given; and I know the Word is God.¹

II THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TRANSFIGURATION

“He was transfigured before them.” It was Tindale who first used this word to describe the change that took place, and we have adhered to it ever since. It is the best English word we have to explain the original but not the most exact. “Transformed” is more literal, while “metamorphosed” is simply the Greek word anglicized, but it is too foreign and cumbrous. The word “changed,” which is the equivalent for the same word in Corinthians, is too weak. We do not have a word that is exactly suitable and sufficient. Moreover, it is clear that the evangelists felt themselves at a loss adequately to describe the glory that covered their Lord at that supreme hour. One evangelist says, “The fashion of his countenance was altered”—“became other” as the word may be literally translated; while another says “it did shine as the sun,” and we understand that the face shone with a radiance exquisitely bright. And not the face only; the whole body apparently became radiant with light, so that it shone through the garments, making them appear “white as the light.” St. Mark finds his illustration on the spot, “exceeding white as snow.” St. Luke goes further and finds his semblance in the lightning.

¶ It is possible that this radiance may be related to the so-called aura, which the abnormally extended vision of many “psychics” perceives as a luminous cloud of greater or less brilliance surrounding the human body; which varies in extent and intensity with the vitality of the individual, and which they often report as shining with a white or golden glory about those who live an exceptionally holy life. This phenomenon, once dismissed as a patent absurdity by all “rational” persons, is now receiving the serious attention of physicians and psychologists; and it is well within the range of possibilities that the next generation of scholars will find it no more “supernatural” than radio-activity or the wireless telegraph. It is one of the best attested of the abnormal phenomena connected with the mystic type: the lives of the saints providing us with examples of it which range from the great and luminous glory to a slight enhancement of personality under the stress of spiritual joy.¹

1. If we imagine that the sun-like splendour of our Lord’s countenance and the snow-like whiteness of His raiment were but a reflection of the glory of heaven, we shall miss the significance of the Transfiguration. There was a manifestation of heavenly glory—the bright cloud overshadowed them—but that was not till after the glory so graphically described in the narrative had shown itself in our Lord’s face and raiment. What the disciples saw was the bright shining of Christ’s own spirit, which, asserting itself over flesh and raiment, made the one to shine as the sun and the other to glisten like the driven snow. It was His glory the disciples saw; the glory which belonged to His pure and perfect character, and which belongs in a greater or less degree to every one who is changed into the same image. For “we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord,” may be “changed into the same image from glory to glory.”

¶ We are told that Francis of Assisi, when absorbed in prayer, “became changed almost into another man”; and once at least was “beheld praying by night, his hands stretched out after the manner of a cross, his whole body uplifted from the earth and wrapt in a shining cloud as though the wondrous illumination of the body were a witness to the wondrous enlightenment of his mind.” The sympathetic vision of her closest companions saw Teresa’s personality, when she was writing her great mystical works, so changed and exalted that it seemed to them that her countenance shone with a supernatural light. Again, St. Catherine of Bologna, always pale on account of her chronic ill-health, was seen by her sisters in choir with a “shining, rosy countenance radiant like light”: and we are told of St. Catherine of Genoa, that when she came forth from her hiding-place after ecstasy “her face was rosy as it might be a cherub’s: and it seemed as if she might have said, Who shall separate me from the love of God?” In such reports we seem to see the germ of that experience which lies at the root of the story of the Transfiguration of Christ. As Moses came down with shining face from the mountain, so these turn towards the temporal order a countenance that is irradiated by the reflection of the Uncreated

2. The Transfiguration of Jesus was the natural consummation of His human life, the natural issue of all that had preceded it. Born into the world by the Holy Spirit, He had lived a life linked to, and yet separated from, humanity; linked to it in all the essential facts of its nature, separate from it in its sin, both as a principle and as an activity, He had taken His way from His first outlook upon life as a human being, a babe in His mother's arms, through the years of childhood and growth, through all the temptation and testing of manhood, and through the severer temptation of public ministry, and here, at last, that humanity, perfect in creation, perfect through probation, was perfected in glory. The life of Jesus was bound to reach this point of transfiguration. It could do no other. In Jesus of Nazareth there was the perfect unfolding before Heaven and before men of the Divine intention as to the process of human life. Beginning in weakness and limitation, passing through difficulties and temptation, gaining perpetual victory over temptation by abiding only, at all times and under all circumstances, in the will of God. At last, all the testing being ended, the life passed into the presence of God Himself, and into the light of heaven, not through the gate of death, but through the painless and glorious process of transfiguration. The Transfiguration of Jesus was the outcome of His unceasing victory in every hour of temptation. The garrison of His life had been kept against every attack of the foe; no room had been found in any avenue of His being, or in all the circle of His manhood, for anything contrary to the will of God. His life was a perfect harmony, and the unceasing burden of its music was the goodness, the perfectness, and acceptableness of the will of God.

¶ Reverently take a flower as an illustration of the process, watching it in its progress from seedling to perfect blossoming. The blossom rested in the seed in potentiality and possibility. Take a seed and hold it in the hand—strange little seed, without beauty, the very embodiment of weakness. But lying within that husk in which the human eye detects no line of beauty or grace, no gleam or flash of glory, there lie the gorgeous colours and magnificent flower itself. From that seed through processes of law, plant and bud proceed, until at last the perfect blossom is formed. God's humanity has blossomed once in the course of the ages, and that transfigured man upon the holy mount, flashing in the splendour of a light like the sun, glistening with the glory of a whiteness like that of the snow, and flaming with the magnificent beauty of the lightning that flashes its radiance upon the darkness, that was God's perfect man. That was the realization of the thought that was in the mind of God when He said, "Let us make man in our image." 1

3. The Transfiguration marked Christ's triumph over temptation. On the mount He was again tempted to refuse the cross, to escape His death and His shame, and to pass with Moses and Elijah into that glory which He had with the Father before the world was. But in that high hour He renounced the glory; He accepted the cup, and turned His face to Calvary.

It is the renunciation of that glory on the hill-top that is the moral wonder of this great incident. Conceive of the wonderful position which our Lord occupied at the time of this Transfiguration. He had risen to the climax; He had transmuted the innocence of childhood into the holiness of manhood. He had uniformly resisted sin, its nearest approaches to His Spirit, and He rose to the completeness of manhood at the age of thirty-three, shall we say, absolutely unstained by sin. If ever there was a case in which the old law, "Do this and thou shalt live," should come into play, it was now. He had kept the law of God. It was His right to enter into the glory and blessedness of immortality without death, its pains and its humiliations. And as He offered Himself with the completeness of His life to God, offered Himself there on the Mount of Transfiguration, the choice appears to have been given to Him. The glory of the higher mode of existence budded upon His person, but, had He entered heaven then, He must have entered it alone, and the golden gates must have closed upon Him. And so, as a French writer says, He turned His back on the arch of triumph, and resolutely decided upon the pathway of shadows and of grief that led to glory through the grave.

And why? Because He loved men, and could not even go to heaven alone. Love, says the Song of Solomon, is stronger than death; but the Transfiguration proves that it is stronger than something which is stronger than death itself—stronger than heaven and the attractions of heaven for a heavenly mind. That was the renunciation of the Christ.

¶ I read a wonderful story about Buddha, which is a strange adumbration of this experience of our Lord. It is said that when Buddha, before he was styled the enlightened one, was sitting at the base of the tree of meditation, there passed before him in procession temptations of various sorts. First temptations of the flesh, and Gautama Buddha put these aside. Then temptations of the mind, and Buddha put these aside. Then various temptations of the spirit, and Buddha put these aside. And then came a subtle temptation. A temptress whispered in his ear, "Thou hast now overcome all the temptations; enter into Nirvana now"—Nirvana being the Buddhist heaven. And Buddha very nearly gave way, the legend says. But lo! as he sat at the base of the tree, he heard a rustling in the leaves of the tree above him. And the rustling of the leaves was caused by the agitation of those little creatures of God that crept amongst the leaves, who were looking forward, says the legend, to being saved through Buddha; but if he escaped now into Nirvana by himself they would be left unsaved; and the tree rustled with the agitation of the little creatures; and Buddha was recalled, and he refused the temptation to enter Nirvana then. 1

¶ Among the many ways in which we miss the help and hold of Scripture, none is more subtle than our habit of supposing that, even as man, Christ was free from the Fear of Death. How could He then have been tempted as we are? since among all the trials of the earth, none spring from the dust more terrible than that Fear. It had to be borne by Him, indeed, in a unity, which we can never

comprehend, with the foreknowledge of victory,—as His sorrow for Lazarus, with the consciousness of the power to restore him; but it had to be borne, and that in its full earthly terror; and the presence of it is surely marked for us enough by the rising of those two at His side. When, in the desert, He was girding Himself for the work of life, angels of life came and ministered unto Him; now in the fair world, when He is girding Himself for the work of death, the ministrants come to Him from the grave. But from the grave conquered. One, from that tomb under Abarim, which His own hand had sealed so long ago; the other, from the rest into which he had entered, without seeing corruption. There stood by Him Moses and Elias, and spake of His decease. Then, when the prayer is ended, the task accepted, first, since the star paused over Him at Bethlehem, the full glory falls upon Him from heaven, and the testimony is borne to His everlasting Sonship and power. “Hear ye him.”¹

4. The Transfiguration was the preparation for the cross; it was the vision of the crown before the fight. The cross was set up on the holy mount because it was the Divine purpose from the first to cover the cross with glory. Only eight days have passed since first it was announced to men that the Son of God should be crucified. Already it is seen from the attitude of the disciples in general and Peter in particular that the cross will be an offence unto men. Without delay this mistaken notion, so far as these disciples are concerned, must be corrected. It must not be allowed to continue unchecked. It is necessary that those who are being trained to be the first preachers of the cross should not remain long or altogether under a misapprehension as to its significance. They must be given to understand that it is not without a high purpose, and though they may not yet understand much, their mind must be opened to perceive that somehow there is a hidden glory in what seems only a shame and a curse. Jesus too, in this hour of final acquiescence in His destiny, must, for the sake of His faith and courage, see something of the honour as well as feel somewhat of the sorrow of His cross. And so Calvary is anticipated and transfigured on the holy mount. We see it all as they speak of His decease. Jesus is in the midst bearing His cross. But the visage which will afterwards be “marred more than any man” now shines with the splendour of the sun; the raiment that will be gambled for glistens like the snow. The malefactors are displaced, and instead we find Moses and Elijah who, themselves covered with glory, adorn the cross. Instead of the darkness and the cry of desertion, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” there is the bright cloud and the approving voice of the Heavenly Father, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” It is a marvellous and striking situation; the cross, while only eight days old in its earthly history, set up and surrounded by a wealth of highest glory.

¶ The Transfiguration was designed, in the first instance, to strengthen Jesus and nerve Him for the dread ordeal which awaited Him. It was as though the veil had been drawn aside and the eternal world for a little space disclosed to His view. It was like a vision of home to the exile, like a foretaste of rest to the weary traveller. He was granted a glimpse of the glory which He had resigned that He might tabernacle among the children of men, winning redemption for them, and an earnest likewise of the joy that was set before Him. From the vantage-ground of the Mount of Transfiguration He descried the consummation which awaited Him beyond the Hill of Calvary. Nor was that the only consolation which was vouchsafed to Him. His heart had been grieved by the dulness of the twelve, the folly of the multitude, and the hostility of the rulers, and in that transcendent hour it was revealed to Him how His work was viewed by God and the glorified saints. Though He stood alone on earth, misunderstood, forsaken, and persecuted, He had Heaven’s sympathy and approval.¹

¶ A great artist has represented the crown of life which Christ holds out to men as a circlet of gold with another circlet of thorns intertwined. The idea symbolized is true to fact. Jesus Himself experienced it. Here on the mount He is being crowned with glory; it is a moment of honour and joy, a season to be prolonged and enjoyed without anything intervening, but He still stands upon the earth, and within the gold there is the thorn which yet will tear and bruise His holy brow. “They spake of his decease.”²

III THE PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS OF THE TRANSFIGURATION

In one sense the Transfiguration of Christ rises into a plane of thought and feeling beyond our power to enter. No other son of man was, or ever shall be, transfigured as was the Lord. No other ever reached manhood without a sting of memory or a qualm of regret. No other ever kept the faith with a clear vision and an unbroken victory. No other ever lived under the sure and constant sense that this world was but his Father’s footstool, and the world unseen his Father’s house. Yet we must not forget that the Transfiguration was a wholly human experience. It was as human as His hunger, or His weariness, or the accents of His voice in prayer, or His trembling under temptation. Because it is so entirely human it is possible for us to understand its significance, to pass through it each in his own measure, and to enter into its felicity and reward.

¶ The Transfiguration is not an impressive spectacle arranged for the Apostles, but a peep into the awful background behind life. Let me use a simple parable: imagine a man who had a friend whom he greatly admired and loved, and suppose him to be talking with his friend, who suddenly excuses himself on the plea of an engagement, and goes out; and the other follows him, out of curiosity, and sees him meet another man and talk intently with him, not deferentially or humbly, but as a man talks with an equal. And then drawing nearer he might suddenly see that the man his friend has gone out to meet, and with whom he is talking so intently, is some high minister of State, or even the King himself! That is a simple comparison, to make clear what the Apostles might have felt. They had gone into the mountain expecting to hear their Master speak quietly to them or betake Himself to silent prayer; and then they find Him robed in light and holding converse with the spirits of the air, telling His plans, so to speak, to two great prophets of the

ancient world. If this had been but a pageant enacted for their benefit to dazzle and bewilder them, it would have been a poor and self-conscious affair; but it becomes a scene of portentous mystery if one thinks of them as being permitted to have a glimpse of the high, urgent, and terrifying things that were going on all the time in the unseen background of the Saviour's mind. The essence of the greatness of the scene is that it was overheard. And thus I think that wonder and beauty, those two mighty forces, take on a very different value for us when we can come to realize that they are small hints given us, tiny glimpses conceded to us, of some very great and mysterious thing that is pressingly and speedily proceeding, every day and every hour, in the vast background of life; and we ought to realize that it is not only human life as we see it which is the active, busy, forceful thing; that the world with all its noisy cities, its movements and its bustle, is not a burning point hung in darkness and silence, but that it is just a little fretful affair with infinitely larger, louder, fiercer, stronger powers, working, moving, pressing onwards, thundering in the background; and that the huge forces, laws, activities, behind the world, are not perceived by us any more than we perceive the vast motion of great winds, except in so far as we see the face of the waters rippled by them, or the trees bowed all one way in their passage.¹

1. The soul may be transfigured.—In those hours of absorbing emotion, in desire and communion and surrender, God's Spirit works in upon the soul. By a spiritual law the whole inner core of our being is reacted upon, and mind and heart and will are transformed. This subjective blessing of prayer—the cleansing and renewing of the soul while we pray—is not the only, not the supreme, answer to prayer; but it is the first, the immediate, and the most enduring answer we can receive; it is the answer which is never denied.

¶ What possibilities of glory there are in human nature! Scientists perceive in us undeveloped senses, and anticipate a period when man will possess qualities, perceptions, and powers far exceeding any attributes of the present. It is in Christ Jesus that the latent glory of our nature stands most fully and conspicuously declared. In Him we see what man is in the Divine ideal. He has shown of what our moral nature is capable; in Him we behold the transfigured conscience, will, affections, character. He has shown of what this physical vesture is capable in exaltation, refinement, and splendour.²

2. The face may be transfigured.—The face is the involuntary and, at the last, the accurate index of the soul. A man may “smile, and smile, and be a villain” through a few years of his life. But in the end, let him pose and posture and dissemble as he will, what he has become in his soul is seen on his face. As surely as the sap wells up in the stem, and bursts out into leaf and blossom, and as certainly as the acid in a man's blood will be seen in the scab upon his skin, the passion of his soul renewed in hours of consecration will become the light and the line which all men's eyes can see.

¶ There were two faces which the great artists of the Middle Ages held it to be their just ambition to represent. One was the face of Christ. But that face was as a rule the artist's despair. The other face was that of the Madonna Mary, the Virgin of Nazareth. These mediæval artists sought far and near for faces of perfect beauty as models for their portraits. They looked into every young face in the hope that the ideal in line and form and colour would be found. One can see in all the galleries of the Continent those pictures of radiant youth and dazzling bloom. But the nobler minds soon passed beyond the thrall of those faultless faces with their dimpled beauty and their earthly charm. They began to search after something more lovely and more significant than skin-deep loveliness. They began to discern that the face of some simple peasant girl, marked by no unusual grace of contour or of colouring, could wear a glory which earth could not give. They marked that her daily prayer before the cross had schooled her soul to God's discipline and enriched it with God's grace. So Raphael painted as his Madonnas a simple peasant girl, with motherhood's human yearning in her eyes, and the pale austerity of consecration matching her white stole, and the mark of her rapt and adoring humility manifest in the grace and sweetness of her air. They realized that when the soul had become transfigured the light in the temple of God shone through.¹

3. The life may be transfigured.—“His raiment was white and glistening.” We read these words with a little wonder and more doubt. We are tempted to think that they are a note of exaggeration in the report. We wonder if the white snow of the Hermon Hill above them had not dazzled their eyes. But quite apart from the fact that the radiance of the face would steal down and illumine Christ's white robe, this statement is a hint and a prophecy of a vital truth. The transfiguration of the soul within is not only seen in the shining of the face; it begins to transform and to ennoble the very habit of the life. It is nothing marvellous to us that after years of devotion and long continuing in hours of prayer and the renewing of the mind from day to day, the clothes a man wears proclaim the transfiguring power of the Spirit of God. Although not suddenly and in a moment, yet surely and with increasing beauty, all life is transfigured. A man's look, his courtesies of speech and of gesture, his walk and poise, his ways and customs, his gifts and services, the very furnishing of his home and all the habits of his life, become beautiful.

¶ Astronomers tell us that dead, cold matter falls from all corners of the system into the sun, drawn by its magic magnetism from farthest space, and, plunging into that great reservoir of fire, the deadest and coldest matter glows with fervid heat and dazzling light. So you and I, dead, cold, dull, opaque, heavy fragments, drawn into mysterious oneness with Christ, the Sun of our Souls, shall be transformed into His own image, and like Him be light and heat which shall radiate through the universe.¹

¶ Many old faces have hard lines, grim angles, cold and cruel aspects. They reflect what the man has become in soul. They are the faces of men who are self-centered, unloving, and unhelpful. They reveal to every eye the fact that the man lives without prayer. But when life is increasingly and more deeply prayer, when, in desire for things good and true and beautiful, in communion with the God

of our life, in surrender after surrender, the soul is transfigured, then we see not only the shining face but the raiment white and glistening. Newman has told this story in three impressive verses—

I saw thee once, and nought discern'd
For stranger to admire;
A serious aspect, but it burn'd
With no unearthly fire.

Again I saw, and I confess'd
Thy speech was rare and high;
And yet it vex'd my burden'd breast,
And scared, I knew not why.

I saw once more, and awe-struck gazed
On face, and form, and air;
God's living glory round thee blazed—
A Saint—a Saint was there!²

¶ No outline of his personality can be at all adequate without the attempt being made to describe an exceedingly elusive, but at the same time distinguishing, characteristic, which the word charm does not entirely cover; it was this, that the Seer in him, or, if it must be called by the more modern name, the transcendental Self, was always visible. Intensely human as he was, understanding all in the lives of those about him—the most trifling difficulties and the most profound, entering gaily into the merriest mood or the manliest sport—the presence of this transcendental Self was always apparent. Everything about him seemed an expression of this, and if touched by some thought of specially wide reach from a friend or from a book, the contact with his imaginative Self sent a sort of transfigured look into his face, as if a flame had been lighted.¹

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