**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**2 CORINTHIANS-005**. **TRANSFORMATION BY BEHOLDING by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"We all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image."*

*2 Corinthians 3:18*

This whole section of the Epistle in which our text occurs is a remarkable instance of the fervid richness of the Apostle's mind, which acquires force by motion, and, like a chariot-wheel, catches fire as it revolves. One of the most obvious peculiarities of his style is his habit of going off at a word. Each thought is, as it were, barbed all round, and catches and draws into sight a multitude of others, but slightly related to the main purpose in hand. And this characteristic gives at first sight an appearance of confusion to his writings. But it is not confusion, it is richness. The luxuriant underwood which this fertile soil bears, as some tropical forest, does not choke the great trees, though it drapes them.

Paul's immediate purpose seems to be to illustrate the frank openness which ought to mark the ministry of Christianity. He does this by reference to the veil which Moses wore when he came forth from talking with God. There, he says in effect, we have a picture of the Old Dispensation--a partial revelation, gleaming through a veil, flashing through symbols, expressed here in a rite, there in a type, there again in an obscure prophecy, but never or scarcely ever fronting the world with an unveiled face and the light of God shining clear from it. Christianity is, and Christian teachers ought to be, the opposite of all this. It has, and they are to have, no esoteric doctrines, no hints where plain speech is possible, no reserve, no use of symbols and ceremonies to overlay truth, but an intelligible revelation in words and deeds, to men's understandings. It and they are plentifully to declare the thing as it is.

But he gets far beyond this point in his uses of his illustration. It opens out into a series of contrasts between the two revelations. The veiled Moses represents the clouded revelation of old. The vanishing gleam on his face recalls the fading glories of that which was abolished; and then, by a quick turn of association, Paul thinks of the veiled readers in the synagogues, copies, as it were, of the lawgiver with the shrouded countenance; only too significant images of the souls obscured by prejudice and obstinate unbelief, with which Israel trifles over the uncomprehended letter of the old law.

The contrast to all this lies in our text. Judaism had the one lawgiver who beheld God, while the people tarried below. Christianity leads us all, to the mount of vision, and lets the lowliest pass through the fences, and go up where the blazing glory is seen. Moses veiled the face that shone with the irradiation of Deity. We with unveiled face are to shine among men. He had a momentary gleam, a transient brightness; we have a perpetual light. Moses face shone, but the lustre was but skin deep. But the light that we have is inward, and works transformation into its own likeness.

So there is here set forth the very loftiest conception of the Christian life as direct vision, universal, manifest to men, permanent, transforming.

**I. Note then, first, that the Christian life is a life of contemplating and reflecting Christ.**

It is a question whether the single word rendered in our version beholding as in a glass, means that, or reflecting as a glass does. The latter seems more in accordance with the requirements of the context, and with the truth of the matter in hand. Unless we bring in the notion of reflected lustre, we do not get any parallel with the case of Moses. Looking into a glass does not in the least correspond with the allusion, which gave occasion to the whole section, to the glory of God smiting him on the face, till the reflected lustre with which it glowed became dazzling, and needed to be hid. And again, if Paul is here describing Christian vision of God as only indirect, as in a mirror, then that would be a point of inferiority in us as compared with Moses, who saw Him face to face. But the whole tone of the context prepares us to expect a setting forth of the particulars in which the Christian attitude towards the manifested God is above the Jewish. So, on the whole, it seems better to suppose that Paul meant mirroring, than seeing in a mirror.

But, whatever be the exact force of the word, the thing intended includes both acts. There is no reflection of the light without a previous reception of the light. In bodily sight, the eye is a mirror, and there is no sight without an image of the thing perceived being formed in the perceiving eye. In spiritual sight, the soul which beholds is a mirror, and at once beholds and reflects. Thus, then, we may say that we have in our text the Christian life described as one of contemplation and manifestation of the light of God.

The great truth of a direct, unimpeded vision, as belonging to Christian men on earth, sounds strange to many of us. That cannot be, you say; does not Paul himself teach that we see through a glass darkly? Do we not walk by faith and not by sight? "No man hath seen God at any time, nor can see Him"; and besides that absolute impossibility, have we not veils of flesh and sense, to say nothing of the covering of sin "spread over the face of all nations," which hide from us even so much of the eternal light as His servants above behold, who see His face and bear His name on their foreheads?'

But these apparent difficulties drop away when we take into account two things--first, the object of vision, and second, the real nature of the vision itself.

As to the former, who is the Lord whose glory we receive on our unveiled faces? He is Jesus Christ. Here, as in the overwhelming majority of instances where Lord occurs in the New Testament, it is the name of the manifested God our brother. The glory which we behold and give back is not the incomprehensible, incommunicable lustre of the absolute divine perfectness, but that glory which, as John says, we beheld in Him who tabernacled with us, full of grace and truth; the glory which was manifested in loving, pitying words and loveliness of perfect deeds; the glory of the will resigned to God, and of God dwelling in and working through the will; the glory of faultless and complete manhood, and therein of the express image of God.

And as for the vision itself, that seeing which is denied to be possible is the bodily perception and the full comprehension of the Infinite God; that seeing which is affirmed to be possible, and actually bestowed in Christ, is the beholding of Him with the soul by faith; the immediate direct consciousness of His presence the perception of Him in His truth by the mind, the feeling of Him in His love by the heart, the contact with His gracious energy in our recipient and opening spirits. Faith is made the antithesis of sight. It is so, in certain respects. But faith is also paralleled with and exalted above the mere bodily perception. He who believing grasps the living Lord has a contact with Him as immediate and as real as that of the eyeball with light, and knows Him with a certitude as reliable as that which sight gives. Seeing is believing, says sense; Believing is seeing says the spirit which clings to the Lord, whom having not seen it loves. A bridge of perishable flesh, which is not myself but my tool, connects me with the outward world. It never touches myself at all, and I know it only by trust in my senses. But nothing intervenes between my Lord and me, when I love and trust. Then Spirit is joined to spirit, and of His presence I have the witness in myself. He is the light, which proves its own existence by revealing itself, which strikes with quickening impulse on the eye of the spirit that beholds by faith. Believing we see, and, seeing, we have that light in our souls to be the master light of all our seeing. We need not think that to know by the consciousness of our trusting souls is less than to know by the vision of our fallible eyes; and though flesh hides from us the spiritual world in which we float, yet the only veil which really dims God to us--the veil of sin, the one separating principle--is done away in Christ, for all who love Him; so as that he who has not seen and yet has believed, has but the perfecting of his present vision to expect, when flesh drops away and the apocalypse of the heaven comes. True, in one view, We see through a glass darkly; but also true, We all, with unveiled face, behold and reflect the glory of the Lord.

Then note still further Paul's emphasis on the universality of this prerogative--We all. This vision does not belong to any select handful; does not depend upon special powers or gifts, which in the nature of things can only belong to a few. The spiritual aristocracy of God's Church is not the distinction of the law-giver, the priest or the prophet. There is none of us so weak, so low, so ignorant, so compassed about with sin, but that upon our happy faces that light may rest, and into our darkened hearts that sunshine may steal.

In that Old Dispensation, the light that broke through clouds was but that of the rising morning. It touched the mountain tops of the loftiest spirits: a Moses, a David, an Elijah caught the early gleams; while all the valleys slept in the pale shadow, and the mist clung in white folds to the plains. But the noon has come, and, from its steadfast throne in the very zenith, the sun, which never sets, pours down its rays into the deep recesses of the narrowest gorge, and every little daisy and hidden flower catches its brightness, and there is nothing hid from the heat thereof. We have no privileged class or caste now; no fences to keep out the mob from the place of vision, while lawgiver and priest gaze upon God. Christ reveals Himself to all His servants in the measure of their desire after Him. Whatsoever special gifts may belong to a few in His Church, the greatest gift belongs to all. The servants and the handmaidens have the Spirit, the children prophesy, the youths see visions, the old men dream dreams. The mobs, the masses, the plebs, or whatever other contemptuous name the heathen aristocratic spirit has for the bulk of men, makes good its standing within the Church, as possessor of Christ's chiefest gifts. Redeemed by Him, it can behold His face and be glorified into His likeness. Not as Judaism with its ignorant mass, and its enlightened and inspired few--we all behold the glory of the Lord.

Again, this contemplation involves reflection, or giving forth the light which we behold.

They who behold Christ have Christ formed in them, as will appear in my subsequent remarks. But apart from such considerations, which belong rather to the next part of this sermon, I touch on this thought here for one purpose--to bring out this idea--that what we see we shall certainly show. That will be the inevitable result of all true possession of the glory of Christ. The necessary accompaniment of vision is reflecting the thing beheld. Why, if you look closely enough into a man's eye, you will see in it little pictures of what he beholds at the moment; and if our hearts are beholding Christ, Christ will be mirrored and manifested on our hearts. Our characters will show what we are looking at, and ought, in the case of Christian people, to bear His image so plainly, that men cannot but take knowledge of us that we have been with Jesus.

This ought to lead all of us who say that we have seen the Lord, to serious self-questioning. Do beholding and reflecting go together in our cases? Are our characters like those transparent clocks, where you can see not only the figures and hands, but the wheels and works? Remember that, consciously and unconsciously, by direct efforts and by insensible influences on our lives, the true secret of our being ought to come, and will come, forth to light. The convictions which we hold, the emotions that are dominant in our hearts, will mould and shape our lives. If we have any deep, living perception of Christ, bystanders looking into our faces will be able to tell what it is up yonder that is making them like the faces of the angels--even vision of the opened heavens and of the exalted Lord. These two things are inseparable--the one describes the attitude and action of the Christian man towards Christ; the other the very same attitude and action in relation to men. And you may be quite sure that, if little light comes from a Christian character, little light comes into it; and if it be swathed in thick veils from men, there must be no less thick veils between it and God.

Nor is it only that our fellowship with Christ will, as a matter of course, show itself in our characters, and beauty born of that communion shall pass into our face, but we are also called on, as Paul puts it here, to make direct conscious efforts for the communication of the light which we behold. As the context has it, God hath shined in our hearts, that we might give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ Jesus. Away with all veils! No reserve, no fear of the consequences of plain speaking, no diplomatic prudence regulating our frank utterance, no secret doctrines for the initiated! We are to renounce the hidden things of dishonesty. Our power and our duty lie in the full exhibition of the truth. We are only clear from the blood of men when we, for our parts, make sure that if any light be hid, it is hid not by reason of obscurity or silence on our parts, but only by reason of the blind eyes, before which the full-orbed radiance gleams in vain. All this is as true for every one possessing that universal prerogative of seeing the glory of Christ, as it is for an Apostle. The business of all such is to make known the name of Jesus, and if from idleness, or carelessness, or selfishness, they shirk that plain duty, they are counteracting God's very purpose in shining on their hearts, and going far to quench the light which they darken.

Take this, then, Christian men and women, as a plain practical lesson from this text. You are bound to manifest what you believe, and to make the secret of your lives, in so far as possible, an open secret. Not that you are to drag into light before men the sacred depths of your own soul's experience. Let these lie hid. The world will be none the better for your confessions, but it needs your Lord. Show Him forth, not your own emotions about Him. What does the Apostle say close by my text? We preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord. Self-respect and reverence for the sanctities of our deepest emotions forbid our proclaiming these from the house-tops. Let these be curtained, if you will, from all eyes but God's, but let no folds hang before the picture of your Saviour that is drawn on your heart. See to it that you have the unveiled face turned towards Christ to be irradiated by His brightness, and the unveiled face turned towards men, from which shall shine every beam of the light which you have caught from your Lord. Arise! shine, for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee!

**II. Notice, secondly, that this life of contemplation is therefore a life of gradual transformation.**

The brightness on the face of Moses was only skin-deep. It faded away, and left no trace. It effaced none of the marks of sorrow and care, and changed none of the lines of that strong, stern face. But, says Paul, the glory which we behold sinks inward, and changes us as we look, into its own image. Thus the superficial lustre, that had neither permanence nor transforming power, becomes an illustration of the powerlessness of law to change the moral character into the likeness of the fair ideal which it sets forth. And, in opposition to its weakness, the Apostle proclaims the great principle of Christian progress, that the beholding of Christ leads to the assimilation to Him.

The metaphor of a mirror does not wholly serve us here. When the sunbeams fall upon it, it flashes in the light, just because they do not enter its cold surface. It is a mirror, because it does not drink them up, but flings them back. The contrary is the case with these sentient mirrors of our spirits. In them the light must first sink in before it can ray out. They must first be filled with the glory, before the glory can stream forth. They are not so much like a reflecting surface as like a bar of iron, which needs to be heated right down to its obstinate black core, before its outer skin glows with the whiteness of a heat that is too hot to sparkle. The sunshine must fall on us, not as it does on some lonely hill-side, lighting up the grey stones with a passing gleam that changes nothing, and fades away, leaving the solitude to its sadness; but as it does on some cloud cradled near its setting, which it drenches and saturates with fire till its cold heart burns, and all its wreaths of vapour are brightness palpable, glorified by the light which lives amidst its mists. So must we have the glory sink into us before it can be reflected from us. In deep inward beholding we must have Christ in our hearts, that He may shine forth from our lives.

And this contemplation will be gradual transformation. There is the great principle of Christian morals. We all beholding ... are changed. The power to which is committed the perfecting of our characters lies in looking upon Jesus. It is not the mere beholding, but the gaze of love and trust that moulds us by silent sympathy into the likeness of His wondrous beauty, who is fairer than the children of men. It was a deep, true thought which the old painters had, when they drew John as likest to his Lord. Love makes us like. We learn that even in our earthly relationships, where habitual familiarity with parents and dear ones stamps some tone of voice or look, or little peculiarity of gesture, on a whole house. And when the infinite reverence and aspiration which the Christian soul cherishes to its Lord are superadded, the transforming power of loving contemplation of Him becomes mighty beyond all analogies in human friendship, though one in principle with these. What a marvellous thing that a block of rude sandstone, laid down before a perfect marble, should become a copy of its serene loveliness just by lying there! Lay your hearts down before Christ. Contemplate Him. Love Him. Think about Him. Let that pure face shine upon heart and spirit, and as the sun photographs itself on the sensitive plate exposed to its light, and you get a likeness of the sun by simply laying the thing in the sun, so He will be formed in, you. Iron near a magnet becomes magnetic. Spirits that dwell with Christ become Christ-like. The Roman Catholic legends put this truth in a coarse way, when they tell of saints who have gazed on some ghastly crucifix till they have received, in their tortured flesh, the copy of the wounds of Jesus, and have thus borne in their body the marks of the Lord. The story is hideous and gross, the idea beneath is ever true. Set your faces towards the Cross with loving, reverent gaze, and you will be conformed unto His death, that in due time you may be also in the likeness of His Resurrection.

Dear friends, surely this message--Behold and be like--ought to be very joyful and enlightening to many of us, who are wearied with painful struggles after isolated pieces of goodness, that elude our grasp. You have been trying, and trying, and trying half your lifetime to cure faults and make yourselves better and stronger. Try this other plan. Let love draw you, instead of duty driving you. Let fellowship with Christ elevate you, instead of seeking to struggle up the steeps on hands and knees. Live in sight of your Lord, and catch His Spirit. The man who travels with his face northwards has it grey and cold. Let him turn to the warm south, where the midday sun dwells, and his face will glow with the brightness that he sees. Looking unto Jesus is the sovereign cure for all our ills and sins. It is the one condition of running with patience the race that is set before us. Efforts after self-improvement which do not rest on it will not go deep enough, nor end in victory. But from that gaze will flow into our lives a power which will at once reveal the true goal, and brace every sinew for the struggle to reach it. Therefore, let us cease from self, and fix our eyes on our Saviour till His image imprints itself on our whole nature.

Such transformation, it must be remembered, comes gradually. The language of the text regards it as a lifelong process. We are changed; that is a continuous operation. From glory to glory; that is a course which has well-marked transitions and degrees. Be not impatient if it be slow. It will take a lifetime. Do not fancy that it is finished with you. Life is not long enough for it. Do not be complacent over the partial transformation which you have felt. There is but a fragment of the great image yet reproduced in your soul, a faint outline dimly traced, with many a feature wrongly drawn, with many a line still needed, before it can be called even approximately complete. See to it that you neither turn away your gaze, nor relax your efforts till all that you have beheld in Him is repeated in you.

Likeness to Christ is the aim of all religion. To it conversion is introductory; doctrines, devout emotion, worship and ceremonies, churches and organisations are valuable as auxiliary. Let that wondrous issue of God's mercy be the purpose of our lives, and the end as well as the test of all the things which we call our Christianity. Prize and use them as helps towards it, and remember that they are helps only in proportion as they show us that Saviour, the image of whom is our perfection, the beholding of whom is our transformation.

**III. Notice, lastly, that the life of contemplation finally becomes a life of complete assimilation.**

Changed into the same image, from glory to glory. The lustrous light which falls upon Christian hearts from the face of their Lord is permanent, and it is progressive. The likeness extends, becomes deeper, truer, every way perfecter, comprehends more and more of the faculties of the man; soaks into him, if I may say so, until he is saturated with the glory; and in all the extent of his being, and in all the depth possible to each part of that whole extent, is like his Lord. That is the hope for heaven, towards which we may indefinitely approximate here, and at which we shall absolutely arrive there. There we expect changes which are impossible here, while compassed with this body of sinful flesh. We look for the merciful exercise of His mighty working to change the body of our lowliness, that it may be fashioned like unto the body of His glory; and that physical change in the resurrection of the just rightly bulks very large in good men's expectations. But we are somewhat apt to think of the perfect likeness of Christ too much in connection with that transformation that begins only after death, and to forget that the main transformation must begin here. The glorious, corporeal life like our Lord's, which is promised for heaven, is great and wonderful, but it is only the issue and last result of the far greater change in the spiritual nature, which by faith and love begins here. It is good to be clothed with the immortal vesture of the resurrection, and in that to be like Christ. It is better to be like Him in our hearts. His true image is that we should feel as He does, should think as He does, should will as He does; that we should have the same sympathies, the same loves, the same attitude towards God, and the same attitude towards men. It is that His heart and ours should beat in full accord, as with one pulse, and possessing one life. Wherever there is the beginning of that oneness and likeness of spirit, all the rest will come in due time. As the spirit, so the body. The whole nature must be transformed and made like Christ's, and the process will not stop till that end be accomplished in all who love Him. But the beginning here is the main thing which draws all the rest after it as of course. If the Spirit of Him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, He that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies, by His Spirit that dwelleth in you.

And, while this complete assimilation in body and spirit to our Lord is the end of the process which begins here by love and faith, my text, carefully considered, adds a further very remarkable idea. We are all changed, says Paul, into the same image. Same as what? Possibly the same as we behold; but more probably the phrase, especially image in the singular, is employed to convey the thought of the blessed likeness of all who become perfectly like Him. As if he had said, Various as we are in disposition and character, unlike in the histories of our lives, and all the influences that these have had upon us, differing in everything but the common relation to Jesus Christ, we are all growing like the same image, and we shall come to be perfectly like it, and yet each retain his own distinct individuality. We being many are one, for we are all partakers of one.

Perhaps, too, we may connect with this another idea which occurs more than once in Paul's Epistles. In that to the Ephesians, for instance, he says that the Christian ministry is to continue, till a certain point of progress has been reached, which he describes as our all coming to a perfect man. The whole of us together make a perfect man--the whole make one image. That is to say, perhaps the Apostle's idea is, that it takes the aggregated perfectness of the whole Catholic Church, one throughout all ages, and containing a multitude that no man can number, to set worthily forth anything like a complete image of the fulness of Christ. No one man, even raised to the highest pitch of perfection, and though his nature be widened out to perfect development, can be the full image of that infinite sum of all beauty; but the whole of us taken together, with all the diversities of natural character retained and consecrated, being collectively His body which He vitalises, may, on the whole, be a not wholly inadequate representation of our perfect Lord. Just as we set round a central light sparkling prisms, each of which catches the glow at its own angle, and flashes it back of its own colour, while the sovereign completeness of the perfect white radiance comes from the blending of all their separate rays, so they who stand round about the starry throne receive each the light in his own measure and manner, and give forth each a true and perfect, and altogether a complete, image of Him who enlightens them all, and is above them all.

And whilst thus all bear the same image, there is no monotony; and while there is endless diversity, there is no discord. Like the serene choirs of angels in the old monk's pictures, each one with the same tongue of fire on the brow, with the same robe flowing in the same folds to the feet, with the same golden hair, yet each a separate self, with his own gladness, and a different instrument for praise in his hand, and his own part in that undisturbed song of pure content, we shall all be changed into the same image, and yet each heart shall grow great with its own blessedness, and each spirit bright with its own proper lustre of individual and characteristic perfection.

The law of the transformation is the same for earth and for heaven. Here we see Him in part, and beholding grow like. There we shall see Him as He is, and the likeness will be complete. That Transfiguration of our Lord (which is described by the same word as occurs in this text) may become for us the symbol and the prophecy of what we look for. As with Him, so with us; the indwelling glory shall come to the surface, and the countenance shall shine as the light, and the garments shall be white as no fuller on earth can white them. Nor shall that be a fading splendour, nor shall we fear as we enter into the cloud, nor, looking on Him, shall flesh bend beneath the burden, and the eyes become drowsy, but we shall be as the Lawgiver and the Prophet who stood by Him in the lambent lustre, and shone with a brightness above that which had once been veiled on Sinai. We shall never vanish from His side, but dwell with Him in the abiding temple which He has built, and there, looking upon Him for ever, our happy souls shall change as they gaze, and behold Him more perfectly as they change, for we know that when He shall appear we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.