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

**LUKE-037**. **PRAYER AND TRANSFIGURATION by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"And as He prayed, the fashion of His countenance was altered."*

*Luke 9:29*

This Evangelist is especially careful to record the instances of our Lord's prayers. That is in accordance with the emphasis which he places on Christ's manhood. In this narrative of the Transfiguration it is to Luke that we owe our knowledge of the connection between our Lord's prayer and the radiance of His face. It may be a question how far such transfiguration was the constant accompaniment of our Lord's devotion. It is to be remembered that this is the only time at which others were present while He prayed, and perhaps it may be that whensoever, on the mountain top or in the solitude of the wilderness, He entered into closer communion with His heavenly Father, that radiance shone from His face, though no eye beheld and no tongue has recorded the glory.

But that is a mere supposition. However that may be, it would seem that the light on Christ's face was not merely a reflection caught from above, but it was also a rising up from within of what always abode there, though it did not always shine through the veil of flesh. And in so far it presents no parallel with anything in our experience, nor any lesson for us. But to regard our Lord's Transfiguration as only the result of the indwelling divinity manifested is to construe only one half of the fact that we have to deal with, and the other half does afford for us a precious lesson. As He prayed the fashion of His countenance was altered; and as we pray, and in the measure in which we truly and habitually do hold communion, shall we, too, partake of His Transfiguration.

The old story of the light that flashed upon the face of the Lawgiver, caught by reflection from the light of God in which He walked, is a partial parallel to Christ's Transfiguration, and both the one and the other incident, amongst their other lessons, do also point to some mysterious and occult relation between the indwelling soul and the envious veil of flesh which, under certain circumstances, might become radiant with the manifestation of that indwelling power.

**I. The one great lesson which I seek now to enforce from this incident is, that communion with God transfigures.**

Prayer is more than petitions. It is not necessarily cast into words at all. In its widest, which is its truest sense, it is the attitude and exercise of devout contemplation of God and intercourse in heart, mind, and will with Him, a communion which unites aspiration and attainment, longing and fruition, asking and receiving, seeking and finding, a communion which often finds itself beggared for words, and sometimes even seems to transcend thought. How different is such an hour of rapt communion with the living God from the miserable notions which so many professing Christians have of prayer, as if it were but spoken requests, more or less fervent and sincere, for things that they want! The noblest communion of a soul with God can never be free from the consciousness of need and dependence. Petition must ever be an element in it, but supplication is only a corner of prayer. Such conscious converse with God is the very atmosphere in which the Christian soul should always live, and if it be an experience altogether strange to us we had better ask ourselves whether we yet know the realities of the Christian life, or have any claim to the name. Truly, our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ, and if we have no share in that fellowship we do not belong to the class of whom it is the mark and possession.

Of course, such communion is not to be attained or maintained without effort. Sense wars against it. Tasks which are duties interrupt the enjoyment of it in its more conscious forms. The hard-working man may well say, How can I, with my business cares calling--for my undivided attention all day long, keep up such communion?The toiling mother may well say, How can I, in my little house, with my children round me, and never a quiet minute to myself, get such?True, it is hard, and the highest and sweetest forms of communion cannot be reached by us while so engaged, and therefore we all need seasons of solitude and repose, in which, being left alone, we may see the Great Vision, and, the clank of the engines being silenced, we may hear the Great Voice saying, Come up hither. Such seasons the busiest have on one day in every week, and such seasons we shall contrive to secure for ourselves daily, if we really want to be intimate with our heavenly Friend.

And for the rest it is not impossible to have real communion with God in the midst of anxious cares and absorbing duties; it is possible to be like the nightingales, that sing loudest in the trees by the dusty roadsides, possible to be in the very midst of anxiety and worldly work, and yet to keep our hearts in heaven and in touch with God. We do not need many words for communion, but we do need to make efforts to keep ourselves near Him in desire and aspiration, and we need jealous and constant watchfulness over our motives for work, and our temper and aim in it, that neither the work nor our way of doing it may draw us away. There will be breaches in the continuity of our conscious communion, but there need not be any in the reality of our touch with God. For He can be with us, like some sweet, beguiling melody, so sweet we know not we are listening to it. There may be a real contact of the spirit with Him, though it would be hard at the moment to put it into words.

As He prayed, the fashion of His countenance was altered. Such communion changes and glorifies a man. The very secret of the Gospel way of making men better is--transfiguration by the vision of God. Yes! to be much with God is the true way to mend our characters, and to make them like His. I do not under-value the need of effort in order to correct faults and acquire virtues. We do not receive sanctification as we receive justification, by simple faith. For the latter the condition is Only believe, for the former it is Work out your own salvation. No man is cured of his evil tendencies without a great deal of hard work conscientiously directed to curbing them.

But all the hard work, and all the honest purpose in the world, will not do it without this other thing, the close communion with God, and incomparably the surest way to change what in us is wrong, and to raise what in us is low, and to illumine what in us is dark, is to live in habitual beholding of Him who is righteousness without flaw, and holiness supreme, and light without any darkness at all. That will cure faults. That will pull the poison fangs out of passions. That will do for the evil in us what the snake-charmers do by subtle touches, turn the serpent into a rigid rod that does not move nor sting. That will lift us up high above the trifles of life, and dwarf all here that imposes upon us with the lie that it is great, and precious, and permanent; and that will bring us into loving contact with the living Beauty of holiness, which will change us into its own fair likeness.

We see illustrations of this transforming power of loving communion in daily life. People that love each other, and live beside each other, and are often thinking about one another, get to drop into each other's ways of looking at things; and even sometimes you will catch strange imitations and echoes of the face and voice, in two persons thus knit together. And if you and I are bound to God by a love which lasts, even when it does not speak, and which is with us even when our hands are busy with other things, then be sure of this, we shall get like Him whom we love. We shall be like Him even here, for even here we shall see Him. Partial assimilation is the condition of vision; and the vision is the condition of growing assimilation. The eye would not see the sun unless there were a little sun imaged on the retina. And a man that sees God gets like the God he sees; for we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a glass (or, rather, mirroring as a glass does) the glory of God, are changed into the same image. The image on the mirror is only on the surface; but if my heart is mirroring God He sinks in, and abides there, and changes me from glory to glory. So it is when we keep near Christ, who is manifest in the flesh, that we get liker Him day by day, and the fashion of our countenances will be altered.

Now there is a test for our Christianity. Does my religion alter me? If it does not, what right or reason have I to believe that it is genuine at all? Is there a process of purifying going on in my inward nature? Am I getting any more like Jesus Christ than I was ten years ago? I say I live with Him and by Him. If I do I shall become like Him. Do not work at the hopeless task of purifying yourselves without His help, but go and stay in the sun if you want to get warm. Lo as the bleachers do, spread the foul cloth on the green grass, below the blazing sunshine, and that will take all the dirt out. Believing and loving, and holding fast by Jesus Christ in true communion, we, too, become like Him we love.

**II. Another thought is suggested by these words--namely, that this transfiguring will become very visible in the life if it be really in our inmost selves.**

Even in the most literal sense of the words it will be so. Did you never see anybody whose face was changed by holier and nobler purposes coming into their lives? I have seen more than one or two whose features became as the face of an angel as they grew more and more unselfish, and more and more full of that which, in the most literal sense of the words, was in them the beauty of holiness. The devil writes his mark upon people's faces. The world and the flesh do so. Go into the streets and look at the people that you meet. Care, envy, grasping griping avarice, discontent, unrest, blotches of animalism, and many other prints of black fingers are plain enough on many a face. And on the other hand, if a man or a woman get into their hearts the refining influences of God's grace and love by living near the Master, very soon the beauty of expression which is born of consecration and unselfishness, the irradiation of lofty emotions, the tenderness caught from Him, will not be lacking, and some eyes that look upon them will recognise the family likeness.

But that may be said to be mere fancy. Perhaps it is, or perhaps there is truth in it deeper and more far-reaching than we know. Perhaps the life fashions the body, and the body of our glorymay be moulded in immortal loveliness by the perfect Christ-derived life within it. But be that as it may, the main point to be observed here is rather this. If we have the real, transforming influence of communion with Jesus Christ in our hearts, it will certainly rise to the surface, and show itself in our lives. As oil poured into water will come to the top, so that inward transforming will not continue hidden within, The king's daughter is all-glorious within, but also her clothing is of wrought gold. The inward life, beautiful because knit to Him, will have corresponding with it and flowing from it an outward life of manifest holy beauty.

His name shall be in their foreheads, stamped there, where everybody can see it. Is that where you and I carry Christ's name? It is well that it should be in our hearts, it is hypocrisy that it should be in our foreheads unless it is in our hearts first. But if it be in the latter it will surely be in the former.

Now, dear friends, there is a simple and sure touchstone for us all. Do not talk about communion with Christ being the life of your religion, unless the people that have to do with you, your brothers and sisters, or fathers and mothers, your wives and children, your servants or your masters, would endorse it and say Yes! I take knowledge of him, he has been with Jesus. Do you think that it is easier for anybody to believe in, and to love God, whom he hath not seenbecause of you, his brother whom he hath seen? The Christ in the heart will be the Christ in the face and in the life.

Alas! why is it that so little of this radiance caught from heaven shines from us? There is but one answer. It is because our communion with God in Christ is so infrequent, hurried, and superficial. We should be like those luminous boxes which we sometimes see, shining in the dark with light absorbed from the day; but, like them, we need to be exposed to the light and to lie in it if we are to be light. Now are ye light in the Lord, and only as we abide in Him by continuous communion shall we resemble Him or reflect Him.

**III. The perfection of communion will be the perfection of visible transformation.**

Possibly the Transfiguration of Jesus Christ had an element of prophecy in it, and pointed onwards to the order of things when His glorified humanity should be enthroned on the throne of the universe, and have left the limitations of flesh with the folded grave-clothes in the empty sepulchre. As the two majestic forms of the Lawgiver and the Prophet shared His glory on Hermon, and held converse with Him there, so we may see in that mysterious group wrapped in the bright cloud the hint of a hope which was destined to grow to clearness and certainty. Christ's glorified bodily humanity is the type to which all His followers will be conformed. Gazing on Him they shall be like Him, and will grow liker as they gaze. Through eternal ages the double process will go on, and they shall become ever more assimilated, and therefore capable of truer, completer vision, and ever seeing Him more fully as He is, and therefore progressively changed into more perfect resemblance. Nor will that blessed change into advancing glory be shut up in their hearts nor lack beholders. For in that realm of truth and reality all that is within will be visible, our life will no longer fall beneath our aspirations, nor practice be at variance with the longings and convictions of our best selves. Then the Christlike spirit will possess a body which is its glad and perfect servant, and through which its beauty will shine undimmed. When Christ, who is our life, shall be manifested, then shall we also be manifested with Him in glory.