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THE TRANSFIGURATION OF JESUS

THE full meaning of the transfiguration of our Lord has been but dimly understood by the Christian Church. Yet it is essential if we are to grasp the full significance of all that salvation means that we interpret this event aright.

The New Testament setting in which the transfiguration is placed is three times recorded. It was after the momentous conversation of Jesus with His disciples at Caesarea Philippi, when He had asked the question, "Whom do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?" followed by the more direct, "Whom do ye say that I am?" and Peter's representative reply, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." This confession of Peter's, endorsed by Jesus, is very significant. From the life, the power, the purity and the testimony of Jesus had this confession sprung. When the disciples first met the Lord they soon became conscious of being in the presence of an extraordinary Man. They early recognized Him as Messiah without having themselves grasped the full meaning of that word. Slowly they were beginning to realize who Jesus was; they now saw more in the title of Messiah than hitherto. "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." The truth of this had been borne home to their heart and conscience by the life that Jesus lived, of which they had been witnesses.

After the confession at Caesarea Philippi Jesus makes His first clear announcement of His forthcoming death and resurrection. Matthew states that it was "from that time forth" that He began to speak of His forthcoming death. It is clear that our Lord had reached a stage in His life when He felt entitled to speak of His future death for sin; up to the time of Caesarea Philippi He did not make a clear announcement even to His disciples, but now, both to them and in public, He declares His intentions.

We would suggest that the reason Jesus withheld the announcement until this stage lay in the fact that our Lord in His life must first establish His fitness to be the bearer of sin, before assuming that responsibility. It was essential that He who bore the sin of the world, must be Himself without sin. Hence our Lord could not announce His forthcoming death for sinners until His time of probation, or trial as man, was over and He had shown that He was indeed the Perfect Man. He had now done so to the satisfaction of those in whose sight He lived, men who knew Him intimately. Moreover, He was

doing marvellous works, and showed a great intimacy with God, whom He habitually referred to as His Father. The words of Peter were the testimony of man, before whom He lived daily, to His perfect life. "Thou art the Christ," was saying much, but to add "the Son of the living God" was nothing less than confessing Him to be the Perfect One.

After these things Jesus felt it right that He should announce His death and resurrection. He was now in a position to do so. His incarnation and His life were for the purpose that His death might be the fitting sacrifice for sin. He was yet to receive, upon the mount, further proof of His own acceptance with the Father and of His perfect life. Already He feels free to speak of His going up to Jerusalem, the rejection of His claims by the rulers and His subsequent death and resurrection. How the greatness of Jesus' love shines forth; He holds to His decision and purpose of fulfilling His Heavenly Father's will, He looks upon those whom, by reason of His forthcoming death, He can call His own and determines that He will walk the Jerusalem road.

Now in the light of His own decision He puts before His followers a great challenge: "If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; and whosoever will lose his life for My Name's sake, the same shall find it. For what is a man profited if he gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?" Never has any man set before others such a far-reaching demand. To make such a challenge justly Jesus had also to show His authority in making it, and His ability to give the promised reward which He offered. "For," He said, "the Son of Man shall come in the glory of His Father with His angels; and then He shall reward every man according to his works." This was nothing less than claiming to be the judge of all men, the giver of the final reward, in equality with God the Father.

Such claims as these need substantiating and Jesus must needs show that they have real authority behind them. He proceeds to state that there was going to be an early vindication of His claims. He did not look on until His resurrection from the dead only, when He would be "declared to be the Son of God with power" (Rom. i. 4). But He referred to an event which would shortly come to pass and be witnessed by some standing there. "Verily I say unto you, there be some standing

here that shall not taste of death till they see the Son of Man coming in His Kingdom." The three evangelists record the sequence of these events alike; then the three give the number of days until the transfiguration. It is evident that they saw in the transfiguration a fulfilment of Jesus' words. Then the Son of Man would come into His Kingdom.

"And after six days Jesus taketh Peter, James, and John his brother, and bringeth them up into a high mountain apart; and was transfigured before them; and His face did shine as the sun, and His raiment was white as the light. And, behold, there appeared unto them Moses and Elias talking with Him" (Matt. xvii. 1-9).

This was the amazing scene which the three disciples were privileged to witness. Some great change came over the Master and the wondering disciples beheld His face radiant as the sun and his raiment shining white as snow. From the whole person of Jesus there was a splendid radiation of some new glory which was now His. The change that had taken place was forward on to a higher plane of existence, a form in which closer communication with the spiritual world was possible; indeed it was entrance into the spiritual world itself. Our Lord had passed on to a higher form of existence than that which He had occupied hitherto. Moreover, He had passed on into this sphere by reason of His manhood. It was as the Son of Man that He had entered into this new form of living. It was not a change so much from manhood, as a change within manhood.

To understand this change let us consider the word the evangelists use to describe it. They say, "He was transfigured" (μετεμορφώθη). We have the same noun in English, "metamorphosis", which means a change of form, a change into a different form, particularly a change in the form of being, as of a chrysalis into a winged animal. Souter in his Greek lexicon explains the verb μεταμορφώω thus: "A change of form, involving a change of inmost nature." So it appears that our Lord had changed from one form of existence to another, a complete and radical change on to a higher plane of living. In this new life He had attributes which were not apparent in His natural manhood, in particular some new power and glory shone forth. Yet no violence had been done to His personality; His whole personality was in this new realm. The change appeared to have its basis in regard to His physical body—it was changed, it had properties now that had been absent

hitherto. It seems that the words of St. Paul sum up the change well. It was first "a natural body," now it was "a spiritual body".

Let us attempt to interpret the transfiguration in the light of Scripture.

At Caesarea Philippi Peter had expressed his conviction that the Son of Man was also the Son of God. It was the life that Jesus lived which drew forth this confession. He had been in the presence of One from whose life sin was manifestly absent, One who was in perfect harmony with God, the Perfect Man. We have already suggested that our Lord had come to the end of a distinct period of His life at this time, that His time of probation as man was over. He had qualified for a higher life and on the holy mount we get the seal of that qualification.

Our Lord's identity with manhood was full and complete. We may conclude that if it was necessary for the first man Adam to be placed on probation and tested, then Jesus must also undergo such a probationary period. In Eden we see a man under trial; in the recorded life of our Lord we also see a man under trial. The man in Eden failed, and in consequence of that failure, sin with all its tragic results entered the world. What would have been the glorious results of that first probationary period successfully accomplished we can only surmise from the life of Jesus and here I suggest we have the meaning of the transfiguration. He had met successfully the temptations of the devil and of the world; now He stood at the place of triumph able to say: "I have overcome the world." At Caesarea Philippi He received man's testimony to His perfect life. Upon the mount He was to enter into the reward, and receive the Divine approval.

We suggest that Peter, James and John, ascending the mount with the Perfect Man, were chosen to witness Him receive His reward, then to hear Him speak of His future work with Moses and Elias, and then to find that to accomplish this He had laid His glory by, and was again on the Jerusalem road. Ah, the glory of it! When He was in heaven upon the mount, He had the burden of human sin and need upon His heart and He must needs return to rescue fallen man. They could not stand the glory of the holy scene; such existence they were not yet fitted for, but out of His compassion a new hope was to come, for the glory passed; "they saw no man but Jesus only."

When upon the mount His countenance shone as the sun, and His raiment white as the light, Jesus had crossed the barrier

that separated man from the higher purposes of God. Had Adam lived the perfect life he too would have crossed that same barrier; now the last Adam has come and has stepped over into the life of the Ages. The result of sin had been death, the great effect of sin had been its limitation. Man had been cut off from fellowship with God and from the life of progress which that fellowship involved. Then were aeons of life from which man as the result of sin was cut off. This failure was manifest in every life by the fact of death. Man was face to face with an impasse, through which he could not break, and if it were not broken through, he was doomed to an eternal death, for this impasse stood on the path of life and barred the way.

“He was transformed before them.” Ah! what a glorious moment. Behold this Man step freely on to an aeon of a higher life. The “great impasse” does not exist for Him, it was only raised by sin and He knew no sin. So He was transfigured before them and entered into His reward.

To understand the transfiguration aright we must not look upon it so much as a supernatural event in the life of Christ but rather *as a natural event in the life of a perfect man*. The kind of life which we witness on the mount was intended for man had he pursued the allotted course and endured temptation. The intended course which has in Christ again become a glorious possibility is shown in Hebrews ii. 5-9: “For not unto angels did He subject the world to come, whereof we speak, but one hath testified somewhere, saying (Ps. viii. 5):

‘What is man that thou art mindful of him?
Or the son of man that thou visitest Him?
Thou madest him a little lower than the angels;
Thou crownest him with glory and honour,
And dost set him over the works of Thy hands;
Thou didst put all things in subjection under his feet.’

For in that He subjected all things to him, He left nothing that is not subject to him. But now we see not all things subjected to Him. But we see Jesus, crowned with glory and honour. . . .”

Here is the history of man’s heritage lost and restored. Yea, more than restored, for in Jesus our heritage has become far richer than ever it was in Adam.

In Him the tribes of Adam boast
More blessings than their father lost.

The writer to the Hebrews uses a significant word for Jesus; he calls Him the ἀρχηγός—translated “captain”, but better the

file-leader, of our salvation. He leads the way on to the great possibilities that have become ours in Him. He came down from the mount, but again at His resurrection takes up the life that He won by right. Now we see Him again crowned with glory and honour; we too shall shine in His life in its fulness. This is the theme of Paul's great resurrection chapter (1 Cor. xv).

There are two heavenly visitants upon the mount speaking with Jesus: Moses and Elias. They have come as the representatives of the Law and the Prophets. They have their testimony to bear as they converse with Him, who alone among men fulfilled the Law and the Prophets. Moses, in recording the Law, wrote: "Ye shall therefore keep my statutes, and my judgments, which if a man do he shall live in them" (Lev. xviii. 5). They conversed with the first Man who ever kept God's perfect law and saw Him enjoy the privilege of the "life" promised. He too fulfilled the prophetic picture of the Messianic Man, who was, in the Old Testament, called the "Son". His perfection showed Him as entitled to use that term; no one beside could use it. He passed the standards of the Law and the Prophets and by His life was entitled to the reward into which He now entered.

We are told in Luke's Gospel that the subject of the conversation between our Lord and Moses and Elias was not His death (although that was implied) but His "exodus" which He should accomplish at Jerusalem. They were on the mount witnesses of one exodus; He had passed on from "natural manhood" to a spiritual and higher state. At Bethlehem He has assumed manhood and stooped low, now He has risen above this realm. But once more He anticipates stooping lower; it was low in Bethlehem's manger, but the Son of God was going to stoop lower still. He was going on to be subject unto death, even the death of the cross. He was going to lay Himself out to be the victim of human sin, to allow sin to work out its tragic effects upon His own life. But they were discussing another "exodus", another rising up and breaking through into this higher life which He now occupied. He was looking on to His resurrection when He would once again rise, even from the lowest place where sin could lay a man—and again put on this glorious body which now shone in its radiant splendour.

We will venture the wrath of those who say that the transfiguration did not help Jesus Himself. As the Son of Man He needed help and succour, and it was as the Son of Man He

entered into this experience. Here upon the mount the Son of Man saw something of the "joy that was set before Him" and the glory to which He would bring many sons, and He was strengthened and encouraged for the ordeal which He should accomplish at Jerusalem.

This state of transfiguration upon the mount was, too, the entering into the state in which Christ would reign. When the Son of Man shall come in His glory and all the holy angels with Him and He shall sit upon the throne of His glory (Matt. xxv. 31), He will be seen again in the same splendour which radiated from Him upon the mount. If His friends were sore afraid in the light of that radiant form, how shall His enemies stand before Him? Indeed, they shall not stand. Here was His Kingdom-glory. The Son of Man here entered into the state in which He was to reign, in the presence of Peter, James and John. They beheld the Son of Man coming into His Kingdom (Matt. xvi. 28); they saw the Kingdom of God come with power (Mark ix. 1); they saw the Kingdom itself (Luke ix. 27). Thus the words of Jesus spoken a few days previously were fulfilled—fulfilled the first time but not the last, for at His resurrection others standing there saw again the Kingdom-glory. Jesus upon the mount had entered into that state in which He would reign, into the Kingdom state, the Kingdom power, and the Kingdom glory.

When our Lord and the apostles speak of His Second Advent and His coming for His saints at the end of this present age, they use the Greek word *parousia* to describe it. His coming in glory and power to resurrect His church and to translate His waiting people is spoken of as His *parousia*. It means His presence in the splendour of His Kingship and power. Once alone in the New Testament is that word applied to Jesus' first advent; it is Peter who uses it in his second Epistle: "For we have not followed cunningly devised fables, when we made known unto you the power and *parousia* of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty. For He received from God the Father honour and glory when there came such a voice to Him from the excellent glory, 'This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.' And this voice which came from heaven we heard, when we were with Him in the holy mount" (2 Peter i. 16-18).

Here Peter interprets the transfiguration. Jesus stood before them in the power and glory of His kingly majesty. They were

witnesses already of the *parousia* of Jesus. They had seen Him stand in that state of power which He now has at God's right hand and will manifest at His *parousia* when He comes again.

Upon the mount God set His seal upon the Lord Jesus Christ, upon His perfect acceptable life, approval upon His death for sin, and gave assurance that He is to reign and be the judge of all men.

Seeing that our Lord Jesus is such a pure One, such a glorious One, such a powerful One, and such a compassionate One; and that we must stand in His presence at His *parousia*, what manner of people ought we therefore to be?

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