

The Mirrors of the Lord

by George MacDonald

The sermon explores the idea that the glory of the Lord is reflected in the hearts of believers, transforming them into his likeness through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, John 1:4, John 8:32, John 8:36, John 10:10, John 14:6, John 14:23, 2 Corinthians 3:16, 2 Corinthians 3:18, 1 John 3:2

Topics: "Spiritual Transformation", "Christian Obedience"

Description

George MacDonald preaches about the transformative power of beholding the glory of the Lord, emphasizing the importance of mirroring Christ in our hearts to be changed into His likeness by the spirit of the Lord. He delves into the practicality of Paul's writing, highlighting the need for obedience over intellectual understanding, and the significance of seeking the kingdom of God and His righteousness. MacDonald challenges the audience to open their hearts to Jesus, the only likeness of the living Father, and allow His presence to bring liberty and transformation, leading to a life of truth, purity, and heavenly childhood.

Transcript

But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the spirit of the Lord.--II Corinthians iii. 18.

We may see from this passage how the apostle Paul received the Lord, and how he understands his life to be the light of men, and so their life also.

Of all writers I know, Paul seems to me the most plainly, the most determinedly practical in his writing. What has been called his mysticism is at one time the exercise of a power of seeing, as by spiritual refraction, truths that had not, perhaps have not yet, risen above the human horizon; at another, the result of a wide-eyed habit of noting the analogies and correspondences between the concentric regions of creation; it is the working of a poetic imagination divinely alive, whose part is to foresee and welcome approaching truth; to discover the same principle in things that look unlike; to embody things discovered, in forms and symbols heretofore unused, and so present to other minds the deeper truths to which those forms and symbols owe their being.

I find in Paul's writing the same artistic fault, with the same resulting difficulty, that I find in Shakspeare's--a fault that, in each case, springs from the admirable fact that the man is much more than the artist--the fault

of trying to say too much at once, of pouring out stintless the plethora of a soul swelling with life and its thought, through the too narrow neck of human utterance. Thence it comes that we are at times bewildered between two or more meanings, equally good in themselves, but perplexing as to the right deduction, as to the line of the thinker's reasoning. The uncertainty, however, lies always in the intellectual region, never in the practical. What Paul cares about is plain enough to the true heart, however far from plain to the man whose desire to understand goes ahead of his obedience, who starts with the notion that Paul's design was to teach a system, to explain instead of help to see God, a God that can be revealed only to childlike insight, never to keenest intellect. The energy of the apostle, like that of his master, went forth to rouse men to seek the kingdom of God over them, his righteousness in them; to dismiss the lust of possession and passing pleasure; to look upon the glory of the God and Father, and turn to him from all that he hates; to recognize the brotherhood of men, and the hideousness of what is unfair, unloving, and self-exalting. His design was not to teach any plan of salvation other than obedience to the Lord of Life. He knew nothing of the so-called Christian systems that change the glory of the perfect God into the likeness of the low intellects and dull consciences of men--a worse corruption than the representing of him in human shape. What kind of soul is it that would not choose the Apollo of light, the high-walking Hyperion, to the notion of the dull, self-cherishing monarch, the law-dispensing magistrate, or the cruel martinet, generated in the pagan arrogance of Rome, and accepted by the world in the church as the portrait of its God! Jesus Christ is the only likeness of the living Father.

Let us see then what Paul teaches us in this passage about the life which is the light of men. It is his form of bringing to bear upon men the truth announced by John.

When Moses came out from speaking with God, his face was radiant; its shining was a wonder to the people, and a power upon them. But the radiance began at once to diminish and die away, as was natural, for it was not indigenous in Moses. Therefore Moses put a veil upon his face that they might not see it fade. As to whether this was right or wise, opinion may differ: it is not my business to discuss the question. When he went again into the tabernacle, he took off his veil, talked with God with open face, and again put on the veil when he came out. Paul says that the veil which obscured the face of Moses lies now upon the hearts of the Jews, so that they cannot understand him, but that when they turn to the Lord, go into the tabernacle with Moses, the veil shall be taken away, and they shall see God. Then will they understand that the glory is indeed faded upon the face of Moses, but by reason of the glory that excelleth, the glory of Jesus that overshines it. Here, after all, I can hardly help asking--Would not Moses have done better to let them see that the glory of their leader was altogether dependent on the glory within the veil, whither they were not worthy to enter? Did that veil hide Moses's face only? Did he not, however unintentionally, lay it on their hearts? Did it not cling there, and help to hide God from them, so that they could not perceive that the greater than Moses was come, and stormed at the idea that the glory of their prophet must yield? Might not the absence of that veil from his face have left them a little more able to realize that his glory was a glory that must pass, a glory whose glory was that it prepared the way for a glory that must extinguish it? Moses had put the veil for ever from his face, but they clutched it to their hearts, and it blinded them--admirable symbol of the wilful blindness of old Mosaic or modern Wesleyan, admitting no light that his Moses or his Wesley did not see, and thus losing what of the light he saw and reflected.

Paul says that the sight of the Lord will take that veil from their hearts. His light will burn it away. His presence gives liberty. Where he is, there is no more heaviness, no more bondage, no more wilderness or Mount Sinai. The Son makes free with sonship.

And now comes the passage whose import I desire to make more clear:

'But we all,' having this presence and this liberty, 'with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image,' that of the Lord, 'from glory to glory, even as of the Lord, the spirit.'

'We need no Moses, no earthly mediator, to come between us and the light, and bring out for us a little of the glory. We go into the presence of the Son revealing the Father--into the presence of the Light of men. Our mediator is the Lord himself, the spirit of light, a mediator not sent by us to God to bring back his will, but come from God to bring us himself. We enter, like Moses, into the presence of the visible, radiant God--only how much more visible, more radiant! As Moses stood with uncovered face receiving the glory of God full upon it, so with open, with uncovered face, full in the light of the glory of God, in the place of his presence, stand we--you and I, Corinthians. It is no reflected light we see, but the glory of God shining in, shining out of, shining in and from the face of Christ, the glory of the Father, one with the Son. Israel saw but the fading reflection of the glory of God on the face of Moses; we see the glory itself in the face of Jesus.'

But in what follows, it seems to me that the revised version misses the meaning almost as much as the authorized, when, instead of 'beholding as in a glass,' it gives 'reflecting as a mirror.' The former is wrong; the latter is far from right. The idea, with the figure, is that of a poet, not a man of science. The poet deals with the outer show of things, which outer show is infinitely deeper in its relation to truth, as well as more practically useful, than the analysis of the man of science. Paul never thought of the mirror as reflecting, as throwing back the rays of light from its surface; he thought of it as receiving, taking into itself, the things presented to it--here, as filling its bosom with the glory it looks upon. When I see the face of my friend in a mirror, the mirror seems to hold it in itself, to surround the visage with its liquid embrace. The countenance is there--down there in the depth of the mirror. True, it shines radiant out of it, but it is not the shining out of it that Paul has in his thought; it is the fact--the visual fact, which, according to Wordsworth, the poet always seizes--of the mirror holding in it the face.

That this is the way poet or prophet--Paul was both--would think of the thing, especially in the age of the apostle, I shall be able to make appear even more probable by directing your notice to the following passage from Dante--whose time, though so much farther from that of the apostle than our time from Dante's, was in many respects much liker Paul's than ours.

The passage is this:--Dante's Inferno: Canto xxiii. 25-27:

E quei: ' S' io fossi d' impiombato vetro,

L' immagine di fuor tua non trarrei

Piu tosto a me, che quella dentro impetro.'

Here Virgil, with reference to the power he had of reading the thoughts of his companion, says to Dante:

'If I were of leaded glass,'--meaning, 'If I were glass covered at the back with lead, so that I was a mirror,'--'I should not draw thy outward image to me more readily than I gain thy inner one,'--meaning, 'than now I know your thoughts.'

It seems, then, to me, that the true simple word to represent the Greek, and the most literal as well by which to translate it, is the verb mirror--when the sentence, so far, would run thus: 'But we all, with unveiled face, mirroring the glory of the Lord,--'

I must now go on to unfold the idea at work in the heart of the apostle. For the mere correctness of a translation is nothing, except it bring us something deeper, or at least some fresher insight: with him who cares for the words apart from what the writer meant them to convey, I have nothing to do: he must cease to 'pass for a man' and begin to be a man indeed, on the way to be a live soul, before I can desire his intercourse. The prophet-apostle seems to me, then, to say, 'We all, with clear vision of the Lord, mirroring in our hearts his glory, even as a mirror would take into itself his face, are thereby changed into his likeness, his glory working our glory, by the present power, in our inmost being, of the Lord, the spirit.' Our mirroring of Christ, then, is one with the presence of his spirit in us. The idea, you see, is not the reflection, the radiating of the light of Christ on others, though that were a figure lawful enough; but the taking into, and having in us, him working to the changing of us.

That the thing signified transcends the sign, outreaches the figure, is no discovery; the thing figured always belongs to a higher stratum, to which the simile serves but as a ladder; when the climber has reached it, 'he then unto the ladder turns his back.' It is but according to the law of symbol, that the thing symbolized by the mirror should have properties far beyond those of leaded glass or polished metal, seeing it is a live soul understanding that which it takes into its deeps--holding it, and conscious of what it holds. It mirrors by its will to hold in its mirror. Unlike its symbol, it can hold not merely the outward visual resemblance, but the inward likeness of the person revealed by it; it is open to the influences of that which it embraces, and is capable of active co-operation with them: the mirror and the thing mirrored are of one origin and nature, and in closest relation to each other. Paul's idea is, that when we take into our understanding, our heart, our conscience, our being, the glory of God, namely Jesus Christ as he shows himself to our eyes, our hearts, our consciences, he works upon us, and will keep working, till we are changed to the very likeness we have thus mirrored in us; for with his likeness he comes himself, and dwells in us. He will work until the same likeness is wrought out and perfected in us, the image, namely, of the humanity of God, in which image we were made at first, but which could never be developed in us except by the indwelling of the perfect likeness. By the power of Christ thus received and at home in us, we are changed--the glory in him becoming glory in us, his glory changing us to glory.

But we must beware of receiving this or any symbol after the flesh, beware of interpreting it in any fashion that partakes of the character of the mere physical, psychical, or spirituo-mechanical. The symbol deals with things far beyond the deepest region whence symbols can be drawn. The indwelling of Jesus in the soul of man, who shall declare! But let us note this, that the dwelling of Jesus in us is the power of the spirit of God upon us; for 'the Lord is that spirit,' and that Lord dwelling in us, we are changed 'even as from the Lord the spirit.' When we think Christ, Christ comes; when we receive his image into our spiritual mirror, he enters with it. Our thought is not cut off from his. Our open receiving thought is his door to come in. When our hearts turn to him, that is opening the door to him, that is holding up our mirror to him; then he comes in, not by our thought only, not in our idea only, but he comes himself, and of his own will--comes in as we could not take him, but as he can come and we receive him--enabled to receive by his very coming the one welcome guest of the whole universe. Thus the Lord, the spirit, becomes the soul of our souls, becomes spiritually what he always was creatively; and as our spirit informs, gives shape to our bodies, in like manner his soul informs, gives shape to our souls. In this there is nothing unnatural, nothing at conflict with our being. It is but that the deeper soul that willed and wills our souls, rises up, the infinite Life, into the Self we call I and me, but which lives immediately from him, and is his very own property and nature--unspeakably more his than ours: this deeper creative soul, working on and with his creation upon higher levels, makes the I and me more and more his, and himself more and more ours; until at length the glory of our existence flashes upon us, we face full to the sun that enlightens what it sent

forth, and know ourselves alive with an infinite life, even the life of the Father; know that our existence is not the moonlight of a mere consciousness of being, but the sun-glory of a life justified by having become one with its origin, thinking and feeling with the primal Sun of life, from whom it was dropped away that it might know and bethink itself, and return to circle for ever in exultant harmony around him. Then indeed we are; then indeed we have life; the life of Jesus has, through light, become life in us; the glory of God in the face of Jesus, mirrored in our hearts, has made us alive; we are one with God for ever and ever.

What less than such a splendour of hope would be worthy the revelation of Jesus? Filled with the soul of their Father, men shall inherit the glory of their Father; filled with themselves, they cast him out, and rot. The company of the Lord, soul to soul, is that which saves with life, his life of God-devotion, the souls of his brethren. No other saving can save them. They must receive the Son, and through the Son the Father. What it cost the Son to get so near to us that we could say Come in, is the story of his life. He stands at the door and knocks, and when we open to him he comes in, and dwells with us, and we are transformed to the same image of truth and purity and heavenly childhood. Where power dwells, there is no force; where the spirit-Lord is, there is liberty. The Lord Jesus, by free, potent communion with their inmost being, will change his obedient brethren till in every thought and impulse they are good like him, unselfish, neighbourly, brotherly like him, loving the Father perfectly like him, ready to die for the truth like him, caring like him for nothing in the universe but the will of God, which is love, harmony, liberty, beauty, and joy.

I do not know if we may call this having life in ourselves; but it is the waking up, the perfecting in us of the divine life inherited from our Father in heaven, who made us in his own image, whose nature remains in us, and makes it the deepest reproach to a man that he has neither heard his voice at any time, nor seen his shape. He who would thus live must, as a mirror draws into its bosom an outward glory, receive into his 'heart of heart' the inward glory of Jesus Christ, the Truth.

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