

beholding... changed... transformed...

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon emphasizes the importance of the Holy Spirit's work in reproducing Christ in believers, making them more and more like Him through trials and adversities, and occupation with the Lord.

Scripture: Matthew 17:1

Topics: "The Role of the Holy Spirit", "Transformation"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the transformative power of beholding Christ, drawing parallels between Jesus' transfiguration and the believer's ongoing transformation into His image. He explains that this process is facilitated by the Holy Spirit, who works within us to reflect Christ's character and glory, especially through trials and adversities. Sparks highlights that true ministry arises from a life that is deeply connected to Christ, where one's character and actions are a natural outflow of their relationship with Him. The sermon challenges believers to fix their gaze on Jesus, as this is essential for spiritual growth and the manifestation of His glory in their lives.

Transcript

"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... and behold, a voice out of the cloud, saying, This is My beloved Son, in Whom I am well pleased; hear ye Him" (Matthew 17:1,2,5).

"We all, with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are transformed into the same image from glory to glory, even as from the Lord the Spirit" (or, "the Spirit which is the Lord") (II Corinthians 3:18).

The link between the two passages lies in one word, unfortunately slightly obscured in translation. In the King James' Version it is 'are changed into the same image'; in the Revised, 'are transformed into the same image'. The Revisers certainly have made a slight improvement on the other, and perhaps with a fine sensibility, or sense of fitness, they avoided putting the true translation, and made this slight change into 'transformed'. The fact remains that we have the same Greek word here as that which is used to describe what happened on that Mount - 'and He was TRANSFIGURED before them.' That is the same word exactly as is here translated alternatively 'changed' or 'transformed'. The exact rendering here would be 'are transfigured into the same image'. So that the children of God have a transfiguration, even as the Lord Jesus had. His was an event, an act; a thing, shall we say, as of a moment. We do not know how

long it lasted, but it was at a definite time point. Ours is a long process; indeed, right from the beginning of our Christian life to its climax, this is what is supposed to be going on with us: we are being 'transfigured into the same image, from glory to glory.

The Outshining Of The Glory Of A Perfect Man

That at once is very challenging to us, for Christian history, life, progress. There may be - and I am always conscious of being on very delicate ground in making any comparison between the Lord Jesus and ourselves - there may be something different about Him. It has been said that the transfiguration was the outshining of His Deity, and I have no quarrel with that; if that was so, all right; it does not affect the issue at all. But we have reason to believe that it was something other than that also - that it was the perfecting of His humanity, and the outshining of the glory of an absolutely Perfect Man. We do believe, and we feel we have ground for believing, that something like that was God's intention for all men, when He said, 'Let us make man in our own image'. And when there is so much in the Word about the glory and the glorifying which is the consummation of our pilgrimage, surely there is something in the transfiguration of the Lord Jesus which is not altogether isolated from what the Lord intends for us.

That is where I would put the emphasis in our present consideration; that is the point. Indeed, in an earlier meditation on this matter we said this very thing. We said that the glory which took hold of Him, and emanated from Him, filled Him, and transfigured Him, was the glory of His personality as utterly satisfying to God. For God's satisfaction is always the ground of glory wherever you look in the Bible. Whenever you find in any place that state of things with which God can be well pleased, you will find the glory there - the glory fills and breaks forth. That is supremely the case in the Lord Jesus, and that is why at this point the voice from Heaven attested Him, marked Him out, and said, '... in Whom I am well pleased'. The Father was completely satisfied.

I repeat, then, that it was the glory of His personality as the Son of Man; for, almost in association with that, He spoke of His coming again as being 'the coming of the Son of Man in the glory of the Father'. This, so far as His perfecting was concerned, was not something that took place on the Mount. The Mount was the mark of the CONSUMMATION of His perfecting. I do not mean in the matter of sin - sinfulness or sinlessness - but the perfecting of His character, the perfecting of that inner man which we call personality. Personality is a strange thing, an elusive thing, something that you cannot get hold of, but you cannot mistake; it is THE person within - the man inside. Now, He, in that inner life of His, had worked out this whole matter of God's pleasure, God's satisfaction, through His life. There was the Divine approval at His baptism in similar words, indicating, probably, that His thirty years were approved; certainly indicating that the step that He was now taking, right out into public, with the Cross accepted (for His baptism certainly implied that) was approved. That brought the word from Heaven: 'My Beloved Son, in Whom I am well pleased'.

But now this period, between the baptism and the Cross, is concluding, and what a period! One New Testament writer says that He was 'tempted in ALL points like as we'. And that was crowded into a short three years and a few months. Yes, hell tested Him; the world tested Him; in a sense Heaven tested Him. He was put through it in every detail, and won through. He, in that time, was 'made perfect through sufferings', 'learned obedience through the things which He suffered'. That time brought that inner life, that inner personality, to perfection. Now, you will see why I am saying this at the outset; it is not new, it is not fresh, but it is basic to everything else. That is the point.

'We ALL... Are Transfigured'

The apostle takes hold of that very word, and says: 'We all... are transfigured into the same image'. I am glad he uses that little word with its so comprehensive meaning - 'we all...'. He is not talking only about himself and his fellow-workers, brothers in the work; he is talking about the Corinthians and all believers. 'We all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are transfigured into the same image'. He takes hold of that same word, and brings it over to all saints; making of that which had been perfected and completed in the Lord Jesus a continuous process in the life of believers. He is but saying: What was completed and perfected in that One, has now to be reproduced in us progressively; that perfection, that character, that personality - the personality of the Lord Jesus - perfected, brought into us, developed in us, manifested through us. For 'personality', we could equally well substitute the word 'character'.

Now the first thing to note about this, which is, of course, so helpful and encouraging, is where the apostle finishes this statement, 'as by the Spirit Who is the Lord'. With all that we know about the coming of the Holy Spirit, the Person and the work of the Holy Spirit, all the effects of the Spirit's advent and indwelling, let us recognize this as supreme: The inclusive work of the Holy Spirit, in all His manifold activities, is one thing - to reproduce the Lord Jesus in a people. When you pray about the Holy Spirit, and you speak about the Holy Spirit, remember that. The Holy Spirit's supreme and comprehensive object is to reproduce the Lord Jesus, in His character, His personality, His perfected manhood or humanity, in a people.

This is very testing to you and to me. If we really contemplate it - and it has challenged my own heart to the point of making me very hesitant to speak freely - the test of the Holy Spirit having His way in your life and mine, the proof that He is there and that He is doing His work, is our transfiguration. In other words: Is what Christ is in His perfect humanity becoming more and more true of us, in our natures, in our hearts? The real test of a Spirit-governed life lies here: the progressive increase of the character of Christ. If we are going to meet one another as really Spirit-governed men and women, what we must meet in one another is the Lord Jesus; and that must be, not just today, not just in one time of our lives, but going on, going on all the time.

Transfigured Through The Liberation Of The Spirit

That is the test and the proof and the challenge of the Holy Spirit's presence, and of the Holy Spirit's liberty to work. You see, the apostle says that here, just in a sentence earlier: "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty" (II Cor. 3:17). He is, of course, making a comparison, or a contrast, with the old dispensation of the Law - Moses coming down with the Law. There it was all compulsion; there it was all 'you must' and 'you must not'; bondage, thralldom, limitation, suppression, repression, and anxious fretful striving. Now, all that has gone, and the Spirit comes and has His way. Moses, even, as representing that order of things, and that dispensation, had to put a veil over his face - not to hide the glory, but to hide the departure of the glory, and pretend, pretend - for you know it was a dispensation of pretending, on the outside. That was what the Lord Jesus was up against in His day, with the Scribes and Pharisees. He called them 'hypocrites', that is, pretending something that was not true; it was all put on, on the outside. The glory that had gone was not seen through this veil of pretense.

But with Christ, says the apostle, all that has gone; the Spirit has come, and come within; now we are set free from all that sort of thing. When the Spirit is Lord, it is liberty; everything is spontaneous, it is free, it just happens. You do not have to make believe, strive, fret, worry, and suppress: it happens if the Holy

Spirit is there. And what happens, what happens? The glory of the Lord - that is, the Perfection of His Manhood - begins, and continues, to express itself in us spontaneously. That is the 'life of the Spirit'. It is 'normal Christian life'; there is something subnormal if it is not up to that, and something abnormal if you are putting on to that. But the 'normal' is that the Holy Spirit, having His way, does this one thing: He makes Christ more and more manifest in our mortal bodies.

So that is the heart of this. Now, the point is that this is the work of the Holy Spirit. That helps us very much, that the Holy Spirit has taken the responsibility for this into His own hands. You and I have not to strive to be Christ-like. With all due respect for Thomas a Kempis, it is not an 'imitation' of Christ - something that we TRY to do. It is this: to a true child of God, who is not putting something definitely in the way of the Holy Spirit, it is as natural to become more Christ-like, as it is to breathe. Now, you do not stop to discuss the question of whether you are going to breathe, how many more breaths you are going to take; whether you are going to breathe now, or save it up till later on, and make a theory of it - you just do it without thinking. And it is as natural as that, because the Holy Spirit is our breath, our life. Set that over against the many difficulties that people find to be Christ-like!

Transfiguration Through Trials

Now what is said here is these two things: First of all, there is the Pattern, perfect, complete - Christ glorified. The Holy Spirit comes to work that pattern out progressively in the children of God. He has come for that purpose, to take it over, and to do it. We are not allowed to say how He shall do it; He chooses His own way. That will lead to this next thing. The apostle goes on: 'We have this treasure in vessels of fragile clay, that the exceeding greatness of the power may be of God, and not from ourselves' (II Cor. 4:7). Now, how is it going to be done? how are these vessels of fragile clay going to contain, and increasingly contain, and manifest, this glory of the character of Christ? Not in the way that we would think, perhaps, or choose: 'We are pressed on every side... we are perplexed... we are pursued... we are smitten down... we are always bearing about in the body the putting to death of Jesus... we which live are always delivered unto death for Jesus' sake... death worketh in us...' (verses 8-12).

That is rather a disconcerting, discouraging view of things, but that is how the Spirit does it. The fact remains, whether we like it or not just this: being pressed on every side means that we are pressed into something more of the Lord Jesus, and that something more of the Lord Jesus is pressed into us. It means that you and I would never come to this transfiguration, only through these trials and these adversities. These are the Holy Spirit's means of our perfecting, of our growth in Christ.

It is a pity that it has to be like that; a great pity that we cannot be Christ-like, without being put into difficulty and trouble and suffering, but that is how it is! Give people absolute exemption from all kinds of difficulties and troubles, and see what kind of people they are - self-centred; self-sufficient; self-assertive. People who are never ill have very great difficulty in being sympathetic and understanding with the sick. They have, at least, to make a great effort to be patient with them - that is why I like doctors to be ill sometimes! But sympathy, understanding, patience, come to us along this line of painful experience; it is a matter of character, is it not?

And so the apostle puts alongside of our transfiguration, all these difficulties and adversities, and in effect he says, This is the Holy Spirit's material; these are the Holy Spirit's instruments for working Christ into us. If we are not rebellious, if we do not allow bitterness to creep into our spirit, it works out that way. Under the government of the Holy Spirit, suffering and trial, difficulty and adversity, will effect this.

Occupation With The Lord

But then the apostle checks us here; he says: 'We all, with unveiled face, BEHOLDING as in a mirror...'. The revisers have had some difficulty here, as the translators of the Authorized Version had, and they have not settled their difficulty. Here is a matter in which they did not really know exactly what Paul meant, so they put it in these different ways - what we have in the text, and what we have in the margin. Did he mean that we are a mirror? that the image is thrown upon us as upon a mirror, and then rebounds - is that what he meant? Or did he mean that Christ is the mirror, and we are looking into Him, and He is reflecting the glory of God? I think that is what he meant. He spoke about the 'glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ' - I think the word 'face' there is really equivalent to 'mirror'. I know that it is not the same Greek word, but it is just another word in meaning; it is 'in the face of Jesus Christ'. 'And we BEHOLDING, as in the Face of Jesus Christ' - that is what the apostle is talking about here.

Now the word 'beholding' is a strong word; it is not just taking a look, it is 'fixing our gaze'. That is what the New Testament means by beholding, behold. We all, fixing our gaze upon Christ, as He mirrors in His own Person the glory of God, the satisfaction of God, the mind of God in perfection. The point is that you and I must contemplate the Lord Jesus in spirit, and be much occupied with Him. We must have our Holy of Holies where we retire with Him. We must have a secret place where we spend time with Him. And not only in certain special seasons, but we must seek, as we move about, ever to keep Him before us. Looking at the Lord Jesus, contemplating Him, we shall be changed into the same image. The Holy Spirit will operate upon our occupation.

You become like that which obsesses you, which occupies you. Is that not true? You see what people are occupied with, and you can see their character changing by their obsessions. They are becoming like the thing which is obsessing them; they are changing; they are becoming different. Something has got a grip on them; they can never think about anything else, talk about anything else; and it is changing their character. Now Paul said, 'For me to live is Christ - being occupied with Him'. It is the wrong word to use, but nevertheless it would be a good thing if He became our 'obsession', our continuous occupation. As we steadfastly fix our gaze upon Him, the Spirit changes us into the same image.

'This Ministry' Is For All: A Matter Of Character

Notice the context of these words in II Corinthians. The apostle here is mainly concerned with the effect of the life of believers in this world, on this earth. He calls the effect 'this ministry'. Perhaps that word needs transfiguring for us. Note that when he says, 'we ALL, beholding...', he includes all believers in that word 'ministry'. It is ALL believers he is speaking to about ministry. And herein lies a tremendous difference. Our technical, professional conceptions of 'the ministry' are mostly external: that is, you give a title; you, more or less, put on a uniform; and so you are 'the minister'. It is all put on the outside, therefore it can be artificial. But what the apostle is saying here, is, that the ministry is not something that you put on, but something that comes out from within. We ALL - and that includes you, my brothers and my sisters - are called to the ministry. Any special application of that word would only be permissible, in the New Testament, in MEASURE, and not in kind. That is, some have a special ministry, and they are God's ministers in that particular way, with that particular measure. It is not that they are a class called 'ministers', and other people are 'laity' - such ideas are altogether foreign to the New Testament. 'We ALL, beholding', have the ministry, resultant from the beholding. And so we are all called to the ministry; it is just the effect of our being here.

Now, what is the apostle saying about this? He is clearly saying that the personality and the ministry must be one. How searching that is, but how very meaningful. The ministry must not be some 'thing' - preaching, teaching, and all those things that are called 'ministry' - something just done, whilst the man himself is different, and the person is apart. What Paul is saying so emphatically here is this, that when you meet a truly Spirit-indwelt and Spirit-governed man or woman, what they say comes out of their life - is a very part of their life. Their teaching can be seen to have been wrought into their history and their experience. When that man or that woman seeks to teach, to 'minister', to say something to someone else of a Christian character, it is known that that has come out of some secret history with God, something that the Holy Spirit has done in them. Their ministry and their character are identical.

That is very important indeed; it is indispensable. That is why the Holy Spirit is so meticulous about character, so careful about the personality, about the inner man, the inner life. That is why, if we are under His government - and this does not apply to everyone who ministers, or is in Christian service - but if we are really under the government of the Holy Spirit, if we, in word, exceed what is true in our own lives, the Holy Spirit will soon take us up on that, and, in effect, will see to it that we are brought abreast of our teaching - that the thing is kept in correspondence and balance. Have you ever said something, and the Holy Spirit has checked you up, and said: Is that true of you? is that something you have said? It is very important, and, if we were honest, we would not really have it otherwise. We want it to be like that.

The Impact Of The Glory

But this is something that involves the glory - that is the point. There is such a thing as the POWER of the Holy Spirit in the glory. We spoke of it on a previous occasion as the 'impact' - the impact of the transfiguration upon those men; and the impact of a seeing of the Lord by anyone afterward - what it registered of power. Now, you and I perhaps covet and crave as much as anything that there should be impact in our lives, that there should be power, that our lives should register, that our presence should not just leave things as they were. We long that, as we go on, and when we have passed on, something may have been left of an impress, at least through our presence, and perhaps through our ministry - something that shall remain. Yes, impact is a very good word.

That is bound up with the glory - that IS the glory. It registers; it is something that remains. Things may come in, and for a time the glory may be veiled, but there is something there that will come up again. I confess that I have had difficulty in understanding - and yet there is some understanding, because we are all made alike - how three men, and one of them in particular, could be on the mount of transfiguration, yet in His hour of need they all could forsake Him and flee for their very lives; or how one amongst them, who by a revelation of the Father had declared that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the Living God - how that man could yet, when it came to it, deny Him with oaths and curses. And yet all this was only a veiling for the time being; the glory came up afterward. It came up with Peter at the end. Many years afterward he remembered: 'We were with Him in the holy mount'. It remained. There was a temporary eclipse, but it was something that they did not forget. God forbid that such an eclipse should ever be true of us; perhaps we shall never have to go quite the same way as they went. But there is a permanence about this matter - an abiding effect of really having Christ revealed in the heart; and, by that inward revelation of Him, there is a manifestation of His character, something that remains.

Now it is clear that we cannot say this of all that is called 'ministry'. It is a sermon, an address, something given, and it passes. And it goes on like that in a routine, week after week, week after week. But, of course, we do not want it like that; we really do not want that we should come and go, should be just

passing things, and not leave any abiding mark. No, there is an impact bound up with this. So, it is not a matter of what we call 'the ministry' - something external. The 'ministry' with Paul is nothing less than, nothing other than, what is true of Christ coming out of the life of His servants, of His people; being there, and coming out.

"Therefore seeing we have this ministry, even as we obtained mercy... we have renounced the hidden things of shame, not walking in craftiness, nor handling the word of God deceitfully; but by the manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God" (II Cor. 4:1-2).

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