

ELIJAH THE TISHBITE

by

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CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

THE MOUNT OF TRANSFIGURATION

There is perhaps none of the sons of fallen Adam to whom such a superabundance of honor has been granted, as to that man upon whose eventful history we have for some time been dwelling with delight.

After having been received up of God in a singular manner, without passing through the gate of death and the grave, and this at the close of a career of incomparably splendid deeds and wonders, and after having shone for several ages in the firmament of sacred history, new luster is all at once thrown upon his character, some hundred years after his departure from the earth, by his being intermingled with the transporting scene of that great and joyful period, in the anticipation of which Abraham rejoiced, and which many prophets and kings had desired to see, and had not seen it.

But let us now approach the mount of transfiguration, and may the scene prove a blessing to our own souls. It will disclose blissful objects to our view.

“After six days Jesus taketh Peter, James, and John his brother, and bringeth them up into an high mountain apart, and was transfigured before them: and his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light” (Matthew 17:1, 3).

The evangelists Matthew, Mark, and Luke, all relate this wonderful event. It was not ideal, but real. The simplicity with which it is related is sufficient to show this. It affords us a glimpse of heavenly things, though very incomprehensible to us.

Let it rather rejoice us than excite impertinent curiosity, that we have here something more than the fiery sign on Carmel, more than the burning bush at Horeb, or the flames and voice on Mount Sinai. **“This is none other but the house of God and this is the gate of heaven.”**

Let us devoutly consider this sublime occurrence, and may the Holy Spirit enable us to learn something of its excellent instruction! We will notice for the present,

- I. The probable intention of this event
- II. The event itself.

I. The evangelists refer to the connection of this event with a conversation which almost immediately preceded it, and which occurred at Caesarea Philippi, when the Lord was on the point of commencing his last journey to Jerusalem

“Whom,” said he to his disciples, **“do men say that I the Son of man am?”** They replied, **“Some say thou art John the Baptist, some Elias, and others Jeremias, or one of the prophets.”** Jesus answered, **“But whom say ye that I am?”** Peter replied, **“Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.”** Jesus answered, **“Blessed, art thou, Simon Barjona; for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven. And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”**

Never had the disciples stood on such an elevation of faith as now. It was therefore a favorable season for introducing them deeper into the mystery of redemption, and for disclosing to them the solemn truth that Christ must suffer, a truth which they had hitherto been unable to bear.

“From that time forth began Jesus to show unto his disciples how that he must go unto Jerusalem, and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and be raised again the third day.”

But the astonished disciples knew not what to think of all this. They could not reconcile their minds to the notion of a suffering; and slain Messiah. Hence Simon Peter fell back for a moment from his exalted faith to the mere notions of a natural man; and, quite forgetting the humble relation wherein he stood to the Lord, he takes him with unbecoming haste aside, and says to him in a tone of advice, or rather of reproof, **“Be it far from thee, Lord; this shall not be unto thee.”** But the Lord, immediately perceiving from whence his expression, **“Spare thyself,”** originated, replied with holy severity, **“Get thee behind me, Satan; thou art an offence unto me; for thou savorest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men.”**

The manifestation, therefore, in the holy mount, appears to have been vouchsafed, partly on account of the disciples, in order afterwards to cast a ray of light upon the gloom of Golgotha, by showing their Master’s resignation to his sufferings; and further to show them who he really was whom they were soon to behold crowned with thorns and nailed to the cross.

They might here also learn that he would not fall a sacrifice to unfortunate accidents, and that he could not fulfill the mission upon which he came, unless he voluntarily gave himself up to death.

They might here also learn that the voluntary death of Christ was in harmony with the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God; the voice which they heard coming out of the cloud.

Put it beyond a doubt. Moreover, the transfiguration served to annihilate the suspicion that there was anything in the establishment of Christ’s kingdom at variance with Moses and the prophets, for the appearance of the heavenly envoys, and their converse with the Saviour, testified most unequivocally to the contrary.

Behold then what a fullness of divine light and information was contained in this one fact. It served to strengthen the faith| the disciples to such a degree, that they might refresh themselves by the recollection of it during the rest of their lives, as we find Peter does (II Peter, 1:16-18).

But let us not suppose that this manifestation was intended solely for the disciples. Not only earth, but heaven itself participated in it. It was a spectacle also to angels, and to the spirits of just men made perfect. Edifying and joyous must it have been even to them to behold the glory of their abased King thus breaking forth as the light. From this glory there proceeded new occasion for heavenly praise.

Nor can we suppose that the transfiguration did not take place partly on account of the Son of man himself. Indeed its most important intention appears to have had reference to him, and him alone. For though, even in the days of his flesh, the fulness of the Godhead dwelt in him; yet he, with equal truth and reality, led a human life likewise.

As man, he had to believe, conflict, and learn obedience, even as his own disciples. His way, like ours, lay through manifold temptations, spiritual desertion, and darkness; nay, seasons were not wanting to him, when like his people he really needed strengthening, comfort, and encouragement; neither did he despise even the sympathy of his disciples. Matthew 26:38.

God had prepared him for his temptation in the wilderness, partly by the testimony he gave from heaven, "**This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased;**" and as He was now approaching a still more portentous and awful conflict, the glory on the holy mount would serve to prepare him for it. Recollect the scene in John 12. Jesus had come to Jerusalem. The fire, which was to consume him as a sacrifice, was about to be kindled.

The night was at hand; its approaching horrors were foreseen by him. His sacred humanity trembles, and the cry breaks out, "**Now is my soul troubled, and what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour? But for this cause came I unto this hour.**"

He submits to the will of the Father; and now he desires something else; "**Father, glorify thy name.**" "Glorify thyself in me, and show that thou art my Father, and that I am thine Only Begotten."

He speaks, and immediately a voice is heard by the people about him, who thought it thundered. "**I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again!**" Vow the words, "**I have glorified it,**" might partly have reference to the event in the holy mount.

Thus, the transfiguration might have been intended as a means of invigorating the Son of man himself, in the prospect of his approaching hour of trial. For, sin only excepted, our good Shepherd was willing to pass through all the states and conditions of his sheep, and to labor like them, in faith and dependence on his Father, from one day to another. "**He wakeneth**" mine ear, saith he in Isaiah 50, "**Morning by morning; he wakeneth mine ear to hear as the learned. The Lord God has opened mine ear, and I was not rebellious, neither turned away back.**"

II. The consideration of the transfiguration itself will afford us further important instruction

“After six days,” relates the evangelist, “he took Peter, James, and John his brother, and bringeth them up to a high mountain apart.” These three disciples he repeatedly distinguished above the rest: he afterwards took them with him Gethsemane, as into the holy of holies, to behold there the priestly altar and sacrificial fire; but here it was to view his regal splendor and glory. It seems almost as if the Saviour in this respect felt and acted as a man; that he showed that special affection which the heart of one friend feels for another, and was nobly sensible of that lovely bond of tenderness which we call mutual sympathy; like that of Jacob, whose life was bound up in Benjamin’s life.

It is true, that his children were all equally dear to him; he loved them all, even as the Father loved him. But there were two or three who seem to have stood nearer to his natural human feelings; and the nearest of these was evidently the apostle John, who is emphatically called in Scripture, “**The disciple whom Jesus loved;**” and, the next to him were his brother James and Simon Peter. And how amiable does Simon Peter appear even in his well-meant mistakes, on account of his ardent zeal for his Master, and his frank and ingenuous disposition!

And who would not have been constrained to love James—the holy and warm-hearted man, who was ready to be, and actually was, the first amongst the twelve to drink the cup of martyrdom! And then John, that noble young branch in the heavenly Vine, that eagle spirit, who was named, with his brother just mentioned, a son of thunder, whose character nevertheless so beautifully resembled that of Jesus himself—a character full of tenderness and heavenly love, which seemed touched as with the live coal of the sanctuary; where has there ever existed, next to the “**fairest of the children of men,**” a more lovely character than this disciple? The innermost chords of his soul harmonized with those of the human soul of Jesus.

Yet was our Lord’s predilection for these three disciples no more than a subordinate reason for taking them with him to the holy mount. He had other reasons incomparably more important, which are to be sought for in the particular vocation of these three, and in their peculiar relation to the person of Jesus. For they undoubtedly appear as the Lord’s more intimate circle, even as they were afterwards selected to be the three principal pillars of the church. They were to be the first who should plant in the midst of storm and conflict the banner of the cross on the mountains of Israel; and, on this account, they peculiarly required such a signal preparation as they were now to receive.

The sacred narrative informs us that Jesus took these disciples with him to “**a high mountain.**”

From ancient times it had been the Lord’s custom to select the retired summits of hills, those quiet islands amidst the ocean of worldly confusion, for the places of some of his most remarkable revelations. The mount on which the transfiguration took place is not definitely pointed out to us in Scripture.

According to an ancient and not improbable tradition, it was Tabor, the most considerable and beautiful mountain in Galilee.

This eminence, which a modern traveler found entirely covered with green oaks, and other trees, shrubs, and odoriferous plants, stands elevated in the wide plain of Jezreel, at no great distance from Nazareth and Cana; and it is said of it, that if there is anything beautiful in nature, it is this green and rounded mountain pyramid of Palestine.

Its summit is three thousand paces in circumference, and presents one of the most extensive and charming prospects to be found in the world. To the right, the eye, after contemplating Mount Carmel, that ancient scene of the Lord's glory, looks over the vast expanse of the Mediterranean Sea. Northwards appears the glittering snowy cupola of Hermon, with the black ridge of Lebanon beneath it. Towards the south, the eye first rests upon the beautiful verdure of luxuriant vineyards and orange groves, and further on, upon the mountains of Samaria; whilst to the left gleams the sea of Tiberias, intersecting the waving cornfields of the plain of Esdraelon. But why do we cast our looks into the distance, when something nearer at hand, of a more transporting nature, calls for our attention?

The apostles subsequently called the mount of transfiguration, "**the holy mount.**" Yes, those are holy places, and must ever be so esteemed by us, where we once could say with Jacob, "**I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved.**"

There are our Bethels and Peniels, where he whispered to our souls, "**I have loved thee with an everlasting love!**" or where he wiped away our tears, and crowned our supplications with his Amen. Such places are consecrated in our esteem. They are lovely spots in this vale of tears; and he that has many of them is truly rich!

Jesus commences the journey to the mount, followed by his three disciple's. As the ascent required about a day, we may suppose the sun to have already set, and the evening twilight to have commenced by the time they arrived at the summit. Solemn silence reigns all around. The disciples, weary with the journey, and at the same time mentally exercised by the conversation on the way, and by their solemn situation with the Saviour alone, in the silence of night, on the solitary mount, recline themselves upon the ground and sink into slumber.

The Saviour prays to his eternal Father.

What was the particular subject of his prayer the history does not inform us; but it might be similar to that in John 12, "**Father, glorify thy name!**" or in John 17, "**And now, O Father, glorify thou me with the glory which I had with thee before the world was, that they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee!**" How sublime! How affecting! The Prince of Life on his knees before the face of the Almighty! The Son of the living God engaged in holy converse with the Eternal Father on the dark mountain height! Surely, if ever the words "stand at a distance" were appropriate, it was here. And what ensues when Immanuel prays? His prayer must attain its object. It is high as heaven in its ascent from the heart of the Son of man.

And yet he is ever willing to mingle your supplications with his own intercession, and thus to give them full effect. You know how he said to his disciples, "**Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, he will give it you.**"

Jesus prays, and what is the result? All at once it seems to the sleepers as if a bright light were playing about their eyelids, and as if the sound of a conversation penetrated down into the depths of their slumber. They stir—they awake; and well might they conjecture, in their sudden surprise, that the night was past, that the sun was in the highest blaze of noon.

They look about them with amazement. But, O! What an incomparable spectacle! Behold him! behold him! Is that shining one yonder indeed their Master? Is the majestic figure which appears arrayed in Divine glory, he! Whose company they ascended the mountain? The disciples are overcome with the sight. But it is no alarm or terror that they feel. This is not a Sinai, so as to cause them to say, “**I exceedingly fear and quake.**” The glory here breathes only peace and joy. The heart is enlarged by it—the soul would gladly be entirely absorbed in it. Let our souls then sink likewise into the contemplation of this glory. Let our spirits rejoice in its wondrous light, and receive health and salvation. “**This is my beloved, and this is my friend, O ye daughters of Jerusalem.**” O contemplate the King in his beauty!

“**And Jesus was transfigured before them;**” more literally, “*He transfigured himself.*” The expression implies, that the glory was not shed upon the Lord externally, but, as existing in him from the beginning, it only broke forth outwardly in the manifestation. Even then, whilst he still lay in the manger, as an infant, poor, and requiring assistance and whilst laboring as the carpenter’s son, the whole fullness of the Godhead dwelt in him bodily, though concealed and veiled behind the curtain of a servant’s form. Single rays of this hidden glory had occasionally emanated from him in deeds of omnipotent mercy, so that all who saw it were astonished, and said, “**What manner of man is this? From whence is he?**”

But such an expansion of the rose of Sharon as this on the mount, had none yet witnessed. Such a discovery of his hidden glory and majesty had hitherto not been made. But however unspeakable and beyond all earthly splendor this glory was, it was not the whole fullness of his beauty as the Son of God.

In comparison with that glory in which he will eventually meet us above, it was probably only as the early dawn compared with the perfect day. For he manifested his beauty, only as far as mortals could apprehend and bear it. But since the whole scene on this sacred mount was only a specimen of the glory which Jesus had in himself, therefore John, partly perhaps in allusion to this very event, speaks of the Word made flesh, tabernacling among us, as the Shekinah, “**full of grace and truth.**” The glory in which he there appeared to them was nothing borrowed, but his own most peculiar and real form; it was the visible reflection of the corporeal indwelling fullness of God, and consequently a manifestation full of truth.

But for what reason John calls this manifestation of the Son of God, a revelation “**full of grace,**” he himself must tell us, in order that we may completely comprehend it. The glory here manifested was a benign glory, a transporting reflection of pure kindness and love. Streams of peace flowed into the disciples’ hearts; sweet and sabbatic repose breathed around them, and every ray that fell from his countenance upon them, affected their souls as a new expression of the love of God.

No wonder that Peter exclaimed, “**Lord, it is good for us to be here!**” They would gladly have remained, forever remained, in this beatifying irradiation of Christ.

We leave the summit of the holy mount, in order soon to return thither with our meditation.

Keep firm hold in spirit of the glory which has there beamed upon you. It will be to your faith and your love that which the vernal sun is to the first buds of nature.

And what a blissful light does this scene reflect upon those great words of Jesus, “**Father, I will that they whom thou hast given me be with me where I am, that they may behold my glory which thou hast given me.**”

What a meaning does it supply to that other promise, “**The righteous shall shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father!**”

O let us now by faith build here a tabernacle for our souls! Let the summit of holy mount be our oratory and our watchtower!

~ end of chapter 29 ~

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