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PRINCETON SERMONS

CHIEFLY BY

THE PROFESSORS IN PRINCETON  
THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY



FLEMING H. REVELL COMPANY

NEW YORK

CHICAGO

30 Union Square East

148-150 Madison Street

*Publishers of Evangelical Literature*

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1893,  
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*The Carlton Press*  
171, 173 Macdougall Street, New York

## THE TRANSFIGURATION OF LIFE BY CHRIST.

BY PROF. JAMES O. MURRAY, D.D., LL.D.

*“And as he prayed, the fashion of his countenance was altered, and his raiment was white and glistening.”—LUKE 9:29.*

THERE are two ways of looking at the Transfiguration of our Lord, or rather two lights in which the wonderful incident may be viewed. One reflects it simply as related in its scope and meaning to the person of our Saviour, and to some teaching upon his character and work. In this view it has connection with Christian life only as that life is interested in any disclosure of our Lord's glory. The broader and deeper conception sees in it all this, and besides this, the truth that in Christ everything is transfigured for a Christian. As we are taught that the splendors of his transfiguration reached even to his garments, and while the fashion of his countenance was altered and did shine as the sun, his raiment became exceeding white as snow, so as no fuller on earth

could whiten it, so the transfiguration of Christ spreads over and touches with heavenly glories whatever he dwells in. For his name is Emmanuel—God with us. “The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.” The whole mount was transformed by the bright overshadowing cloud. Even the disciples caught some of the reflected glories, and longed to abide there. An adoring and simple Christian faith delights to see, therefore, in this scene a symbolic teaching as well as a transcendent historic fact in the life of Jesus. That teaching is, our Lord transfigures life for his disciples, sets their whole human earthly existence in new lights. The incarnate Saviour was *so* glorified, that we might understand that he has power to shed transfiguration-glories over that life in which he came down from heaven to take part. I shall try to show how he can do this, and actually does do this for many a Christian soul, by unfolding various human experiences as thus transfigured in Christ.

First, then, look at earthly cares in this new transfiguring light which may shine on them from Hermon. Subtracting at once from daily life all its *unnecessary* cares, those made by our artificial and foolish wants, by our pride or by our inordinate, racing ambitions, the actual burden of necessary cares is very great. Those belonging to man in

his sphere, and to woman in hers, household cares and business cares, sacred as the home can make them, severe and engrossing as business life exacts, all such absorb our time, tax our energies and our patience and our skill, and seemingly enter into life as its controlling element. Other burdens come into life as occasions. Their pressure is intermittent. These are constant. Their pressure is never lifted. I do not see that wealth seems to make much difference in the matter, for though apparently it has the power to purchase exemption from much that is wearisome, it has its own burdens to carry. The world is full of careworn faces among rich and poor, and where the face may be unwrinkled yet the heart is careworn. There is no social science that can rid us of these cares of life. They are in it by divine appointment for a discipline of character. The noblest type of life has them most characteristically in it. For civilized life differs from savage life; among many other things, prominently in this, that it sees and assumes the legitimate and real burdens of care which God has assigned to life, and only by seeing and assuming which our human life can advance to its completeness for the individual, for society, for the state, and for the Church.

Yet in a *worldly* or a *stoical*—that is, an unspir-

itual, unchristlike—way of looking at this feature of our existence, it resolves itself into so much *drudgery*. It makes up a large part of what are called the “*worries*” of life. The energies and the patience and the skill are gathered up to encounter them, because the livelihood or the bodily comfort, or at best the fortune or the competence which is to purchase exemption from them, lies at the end of the road dragging itself wearily and roughly through them. How welcome is sometimes the slumber at the close of a day full of such ceaseless drudgeries, in which for a few hours they are buried in a welcome oblivion! How cheerless, vexatious, harassing is the night season in which these drudgeries are laid on sleepless pillows, where they hold a witches’ dance before the unwilling but compelled imagination in distorted shapes!

It seems also to make little difference as to the relative dignity of these cares of life. If men high in stations of public life told all they knew of its drudgeries, something of its glamour would certainly vanish. It is simply nobler drudgery than what falls to the lot of the hodcarrier or the wash-erwoman. Now, if there is no way by which all such earthly drudgeries can be transfigured, brought into some new light, and made even to shine with some heavenly radiance, then for by far the greater

part of mankind and womankind the moil and toil of life are hard, dull, oppressive realities, from which there are occasional brief respites, yet which make the work, the daily occupation a stern, stubborn necessity, and that is all the account to give of it.

There is, however, a transfiguration for such cares. If they are viewed as part of a wise and gracious Christian discipline for character; if they are made the educators of Christian courage, Christian patience, Christian gentleness, Christian calmness, Christian submission, they are set in a new light as means of grace. As the attraction of gravitation is as much a law of God as the first commandment in the Decalogue, so this means of grace in the ordered discipline of life, through its cares, transfigures the cares from drudgeries into the ministers of Christ. All this will be missed, however, if instead of looking at them as means of grace they are thought of and treated as hindrances to grace. A mountain, unless you climb it, may shut out your view. Transfigure the cares of life into means of grace, surround them with that holy light which Christ sheds on them as daily discipline of character in us—of character according to his teaching and example—and you will find that if life has its Gethsemanes for us all it has

also its Hermons. Counting-rooms and nurseries may as well be Bethels of the soul as was the city of Luz to the patriarch. But before many men and women see them as such they will have to awake out of sleep, saying, "Surely the Lord *is* in these places, and we knew it not."

The transfiguration of life for us by Christ sweeps over a broader field, however, for, *secondly*, *the sorrows of life* can in the same way be transfigured through him.

"Perhaps," said Vinet, "to suffer is nothing else than to live more deeply. *Love* and *sorrow* are the two conditions of a profound life. Woe to him who should be without affliction here below—whom the divine Educator should have excluded from his mysterious school! We might well ask ourselves at sight of so alarming a felicity, 'What has he done to be thus overlooked? Is he too pure to be passed through the crucible, or too bad, too desperate, to be worth trying there?'"

Sorrow is, indeed, in one form or another, as inevitable as death itself. It is a poor life which has not known grief in some form. It is a cheap and superficial and vulgar conception of life which craves an existence untouched by suffering, whose best symbol would be a rocking-chair or a bed of down. For there come down to us from the



serene heights of inspiration these tender and sacred words applied to the *one spotless* human life: "Though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things that he suffered." Never was truer word spoken by mortal man than that word of Vinet, "Love and sorrow are the two conditions of a profound life." They find at once their mighty proof and their transcendent illustration in the life of the "Man of Sorrows." For surely it is the profound and awful meaning of Gethsemane, as the prelude to the divine Sacrifice, that there love and sorrow meet and mingle in an eternal consecrated mystery.

And yet there is a way of looking at human sorrows which denudes them of all dignity and depth of meaning. If I see in them only so much pain of wounded sensibilities shooting its fiery darts into the soul, only so much anguish to be hidden away from the sight of one's fellows, as the wounded animal leaves the herd to die; if the woes which come soon or late are so much inevitable grief put into my earthly lot by operation of laws or by the environments of the great system, and to be simply accepted and stoically borne; if the very best thing, the only wise and true thing to be said and done for a sorrowful spirit is to speak to it kindly in some warm and tender

human sympathy, and commit it to the healing tendencies of time—then this sorrowful side of human existence, which is so large a part of it, so dark a part of it, so painful and prolonged a part of it, becomes all that the pessimism of Schopenhauer or Hartmann has ever painted it, and what one had better do is just to keep his eyes from seeing it, until he has to see it and feel it for himself. If anything in life needs transfiguration it is surely human sorrow.

It finds such in Christ. It is not so much heart-ache, so much mental anguish, so much unmet longing, so shadowing and depressing gloom, “crushing us back and imprisoning ourselves” in our own dark forebodings; it is a discipline of character through which we can grow into choice Christian graces, and through which as its last and fullest achievement we can even grow into fellowship with Christ’s sufferings; by which on the one hand we are made humble, gentle, patient, unselfish, and on the other are brought in closer and tenderer relations with Christ Jesus—the Man of Sorrows, the divine Sufferer. “Always to suffer, yet always to love, would be paradise in comparison with always prospering and always hating.” Who cannot recall to memory some instance of that divinest thing in life—a sanctified sorrow, a

holy grief; some silver-haired parent who has passed through deep waters; some dear child whose young, fair life was early touched with the chastening influences of suffering? Placid, chastened, submissive, sympathetic, hopeful, radiant at times with the expectation of heaven, yet grateful for every sweetness yet spared in life, to which the sunniest childhood will in its frolics and mirth betake itself and nestle there, there is no spiritual beauty in life to compare with it. Yet what a transfiguration it is! Out of tears and pains and conflicts it has all come. Just as the light of Christ's transfiguration-glories, glancing on the rocks of Hermon, made them glow as if they were the walls of heaven, so the power of a heavenly, spiritual discipline through Christ and in Christ puts this transfiguration on sorrow. In that glorified form on Hermon Peter and James and John did not see the "Man of Sorrows." They saw a glorified Redeemer, into which he had been transfigured. Philosophy may stoically bear or proudly conceal grief; human sympathy may lightly assuage grief; time may dull grief; but only Christ can transfigure it; and when the sorrows of life have been transmuted into a sweet and gracious spiritual discipline of character, not Hermon itself ever saw a more veritable transfiguration.

Darker clouds than those either of care or sorrow gather above human life—clouds of temptation. Yet, *thirdly*, for this also there is in Christ a transfiguring power.

Most of us live on from day to day taking little note of the large part which temptation plays in our probation. The misjudging comes from not observing the real nature of temptation—that it can come from within as well as from without; that it may be seductively quiet as well as stormily oppressive. A constant strain is put on our supposed or real goodness from three sources. First from within. Every man is tempted when he is drawn away of his own *lust* and enticed. What can this word *lust* mean here but every sort of unlawful desire? It means the unlawful desire for lawful things as well as for the unlawful objects; for excessive praise as well as for unholy pleasures. It means an inordinate ambition for wealth, power, social distinction, just as much as a gluttony or drunkenness. The heart called “purest” by men has yet its lusts which draw it away and entice it from God. So, too, there are outward conditions in life out of which spring, as wild beasts from hidden lairs, so many solicitations to evil. Business, society, a humdrum life, as well as an absorbing and excited life, all may in turn become temptations, if not to

gross and repulsive forms of evil, to worldly, unspiritual lives, and they are as real as any that horrified the soul of St. Anthony in his cave. Of course the range of temptation in outward conditions of life takes a far wider range than the abuse of lawful things; men are tempted by other men, by the general drift of evil, by the success of wicked or doubtful courses, by the ingenious fascinations thrown around sin, and by the acute, ingenious, subtle excuse for it, which is a prominent feature of sinning nowadays.

And then, ah, then! in reserve, lying in wait behind all this inward and outward form of temptation, is solicitation to evil from the adversary of our souls. The devil, I fear, has by many been dismissed to the limbo of exploded fallacies. Nobody seems much afraid of him. It is an amazing and extreme reaction from the belief of those days when Luther flung his inkstand at him. But how solemnly ever the Bible speaks of his power as a tempter! The Bible treats him as no shadowy phantom. And quite possibly the Bible, dealing as it does with this question of human wickedness in its deep and searching way, has quite as much true philosophy on its side as those who, with some airs of enlightened superiority, remand the whole question to nursery tales of ghosts and goblins.

How little we may know *when* we are under his power! Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light. At the very moment when a Christian may be excusing himself for some questionable act, and so deftly that his conscience gives not a note of warning, he may be simply yielding to Satan transformed. He little knows what infernal power of evil lurks in that angel of light.

So compacted, so subtle, so effective is all this triple system of evil, they are a correlative and moral force of prodigious power in life. How shall it be regarded? As a dark and terrible evil host let loose upon man here? As such, is it to be viewed by thoughtful souls as casting a baleful and portentous shadow over every scene in life? Is a troubled and stealthy suspicion to haunt us forever, as we go about in the sweet sunshine and among the blessed companionships of life—a suspicion that every flower has under it the coiled adder? Must a mother feel when her son leaves the home which has so long and so carefully sheltered him that he goes out to live under so fearful a cloud of solicitation to evil, and that nothing is to be said save that it is the grim and obstinate necessity of existence; that it is a somber and fearful mystery of our condition, for which there is not only no explanation, but for which there is no sort of alleviation? Or

can this dark cloud turn forth its silver lining on the night?

Assuredly Jesus Christ has put a different face upon temptations. Vanquished in his strength, by the power of his grace they are transfigured. "Blessed is the man," is the voice of his gospel, "that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love him."—Seven times in the opening chapters of Revelation does the assurance ring out, "to him that overcometh" shall be given thrones and dominions, palms and scepters. A temptation overcome is thus a temptation transfigured. A solicitation to evil resisted has become a glory to the soul that resisted it. Its darkness has been changed for light; its fiery dart has become a spiritual scepter; its poison has become the hidden manna. Lose not the cheering view which such assurances give by any notion that it is true for great temptations but not for small; true for great conquerors of moral evil, but not for lowly souls struggling in obscurity against some evil habit, some petulant temper, some selfish hardness, some miserable pride, some evil lust. True for one, then true for all. True for Jesus in the desert, true for Jesus' followers in the home, in the street, in the stir of a mighty life, in the silence of an enforced

solitude. So Christ lights up for men this whole side of life. It may have its mysteries still, and at times seem an impenetrable cloud. Still light shines on the cloud. It becomes even radiant and golden. Christ transfigures temptation just as he does care and sorrow. He makes of it a discipline out of which come strength, glory, joy. At these solemn junctures of our life his grace comes in—sometimes a shield and buckler, sometimes a flaming sword—and by its might we are made strong to resist evil. Nay, more, at these spiritual crises he himself, tempted once as we are tempted, knowing its anguish, its suspense, its horrors perhaps, is a living Presence with us in the thick of conflict. And thus the transfiguration comes; comes as it came on Hermon of old. We see white-robed saints who have overcome, shining in transfiguration-glories and we hear the voice from the Mount, and can say even of temptation so transfigured by Jesus, “Lord, it is good to be here.”

There is yet a fourth transfiguration of life vouchsafed the believer in Christ, which as it comes last of all is mightiest of all. It comes at the close. It is the transfiguration of death into eternal life.

Surely even for manliest and holiest souls there is needed some such transfiguration-light for death. It is not simply the pains of death, though there



may be in store for us long and acute anguish. It is not simply the decay and chill of the grave, though every soul that ever heard or read them must have beat sympathetically with Claudio's when, as great Shakespeare voiced for all time and all men the instinctive shrinking, he said :

“Ay, but to die, and go we know not where ;  
 To lie in cold obstruction, and to rot ;  
 This sensible warm motion to become  
 A kneaded clod . . .  
 . . . 'tis too horrible !  
 The weariest and most loathed worldly life  
 That age, ache, penury, or imprisonment  
 Can lay on nature, is a paradise  
 To what we fear of death.”

It is not the violent wrench from a fond, familiar life where we are at home in the body, from the beautiful world we live in and love. It is not simply the entrance upon a state of being to all whose conditions we are the utterest strangers, of which we have heard so little from out the silences of inspiration on the great theme. It is not the moral idea in death, as the curse of sin, to which we all must bow. It is all this combined and united with the instinctive clinging to life, which it takes so terrible experiences of pain or misery or wildest manias to overcome, it is all of this put together which makes thoughtful souls in bondage all their

lives long through fear of death. I know there is a naturalistic philosophy which affects indifference to the subject, treating it simply as the wearing out of a machine, or the burning out of the fire. I know there is a fatalistic way of looking at the subject which affects to be unmoved by it since the hour is fixed, cannot be hastened, cannot be delayed. I know, on the other hand, that some Christian hymns are pitched in a key of sentimentalism on this great subject, which virtually treats death as if it were less than the amputation of a limb by the surgeon's knife. For myself, all I can say is I cannot quite get to this high pitch. I must modulate my thinking in a lower key, and in that low and deep refrain of an ancient psalmist say: "Make me to know mine end, and the measure of my days what it is; that I may know how frail I am."

Yet there is a transfiguration for death which comes through Christ. It comes first of all in that full clear revelation of immortality which the world had for the first time when Christ brought life and immortality to light through his Gospel. Nothing shows the advance of New upon Old Testament teaching like this. It is the advance of mid-noon upon twilight. Nothing shows the advance of New Testament revelation upon all philosophy more than

this. Here it is the advance of reality upon conjecture, or of certainty upon probability, or of personal knowledge upon hopes or expectations. For a clear, bright, blessed revelation of immortality instantly transfigures death. Then it is not the be-all and the end-all here. Then it is not annihilation, not decay and nothingness. There is beyond it the light of life, the life eternal. That light transfigures death.

We may not stop here. Christ's revelation is not merely general. He has had a few things to say about the great theme. Few as they are, they change the whole aspect of the subject. If we had only his words at the grave of Lazarus, it would be enough to make death luminous forever with strange, unearthly light. Jesus said to Martha, "I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. Believest thou this?" If you can say with Martha, "Yea, Lord, I believe," then is death transfigured into life.

But a more subduing because a more familiar and closer teaching of his is found in his words to the disciples: "In my Father's house are many mansions." And here, what gives these few simple words their marvelous power to light

up this great subject of the future existence is his added word of assurance, "If it were not so, I would have told you." There is an artless simplicity here which is unique in the teaching of Christ. What an appeal to the confidence of his followers! I could better part with any of his miracles than with these few words, on which Christ has staked his simple truthfulness. "If it were not so, I would have told you." If what were not so? Why, if his disciples were not to be in his Father's house, and if he were not to receive them to himself as one by one they passed from death into life.

And yet we do not enter into the fullness of Christ's transfiguration of death till his own resurrection from the dead has been thoroughly meditated. Not as the crowning proof of his divine ministry and sacrifice. It is an evidence of Christianity which has been the bulwark against which every wave of skepticism has dashed and broken. But it is vastly more than this. It is the holy certitude that his followers rise with him into the eternal glory. In his resurrection, that of believers is contained as pledge and prophecy. So St. Paul mainly teaches us in that sublime reach of inspired truth given us in the fifteenth chapter of First Corinthians, which comes to its climax of mean-

ing and of glorious joy in his outburst, "Death is swallowed up in victory." Nor, indeed, do we reach the completeness of meaning in the resurrection of Christ till we couple with it that posthumous ministry of forty days. The two are parts of one divine whole. How divinely that ministry teaches us that death has not sundered the old relations! Christ takes them up again. That soul-subduing interview with Thomas, that fruitful and tender dealing with Peter by the shore of the lake, how luminous with the blessed assurance that death has no power to uproot the affections and the warm, sweet relations of our human earthly life! Had Hermon a mightier and more sacred transfiguration than this? Nay, is it not the glory of Hermon's transfiguration that it proclaims forever the interest of departed saints in the scenes now enacting on earth? For Moses and Elias spake with him of the decease he should shortly accomplish at Jerusalem. What was death to Moses as then and there he spake with Christ? It was the memory, dim and distant, of a brief struggle. It was the shining gate through which he had passed in the solitude of Nebo to the society and blessedness of heaven. It was the transfiguration of a bitter disappointment in not seeing the earthly Canaan into the fulfillment of a more glorious hope—the bea-

tific vision of the heavenly Canaan. And so Christ transfigures death. The curse for sin—it is swallowed up in victory. The mortal pang—it becomes the everlasting felicity. The departure from this life—it is the entrance upon life eternal.

Yet most evidently such transfiguration of life's cares and sorrows have not come to all disciples. It lies among the unrealized possibilities of Christian experience. It has its own method. It is reached in one way, by one process of spiritual life. How, then, may life thus be transfigured for me in Christ, so that under all its burdens, and amid all its sorrows and temptations, and in full view of the grave which awaits me at its close, I may yet always be the glad disciple, my whole soul radiant with joy in the existence here? The text points out the secret of this marvelous result. How did Christ's own transfiguration come about? "As he prayed, the fashion of his countenance was altered." *As he prayed.* It seems to be implied in this that it was no sudden outburst of glory from the opened gates of heaven, but a gradual envelopment and transformation while he was praying. It was nightfall. Silence was in the heavens above and on the hills around. And in that silence and darkness Christ began his communion with God. The longing is irrepressible to know what this

prayer of Jesus covered, what petitions, what blessed fellowship with his Father. But all we know is that as he prayed and his soul was more and more rapt in his heavenly communion, the transcendent scene began, at first all unnoticed by his disciples; and then, as the strange, unearthly light began stealing over Jesus and the mountain-top, and the fashion of his countenance was altered, his garments glistening more and more, the fullness of transfiguration-glory is reached in the appearance of Moses and Elias with him on that Mount of a more splendid theophany than ever had gleamed from the Shekinah of old. The transfiguration came to Christ in prayer. So if life is ever transfigured from its hard, dull reality, its burdens and woes, its secret griefs or coming shadows, into any deep, glad, spiritual meaning, and the glory of Christ shines down into our very sorrows and temptations, it will be because we have learned how to pray in some deep devotion, in some holy altitude of spiritual retirement. Was not life transfigured for the Psalmist when tears had been his meat day and night, when all God's waves and billows had gone over him, yet when in the voice of holy psalm he could say, "Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted within me? Hope thou in God: for I shall yet praise him, who is

the health of my countenance, and my God." Was not life transfigured for Paul when, under the heavy burden of an unknown and tormenting agony, he besought the Lord thrice that it might depart from him, and came to say at length, "Most gladly, therefore, will I glory in my infirmities." Infirmity, anguish, changed into glory. The secret of the matter lies in this, prayer puts things for us in new light. We see through prayer what else were hidden from our sight. It is heavenly light. And then in us, as in the person of Christ, the change comes too. We see with new eyes—eyes of faith and love and submission and hope. So has Trench sung in a choice Christian sonnet :

"Lord, what a change within us one short hour  
Spent in thy presence will avail to make '  
What heavy burdens from our bosoms take !  
What parched fields refresh as with a shower !  
We kneel, and all around us seems to tower ;  
We rise, and all, the distant and the near,  
Stands forth in sunny outlines brave and clear.  
We kneel, how weak ; we rise, how full of power !"

O Christian, if thou wouldst have more of such transfigurations in life, seek them in prayer. Let Hermon take its place in your Christian experience. Without such a transfiguration, life, and life made the most and best of, will only prove fantastic mockery, as well as fearful mystery. It will be all



that pessimism paints it for delusion and woe. It will be what Macbeth said it was to him in his hour of crime and desolation :

“ . . . A tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing.”

But with such a transfiguration, life with all its cares and sorrows and temptations, its woes and aches and death, becomes an existence measureless in its possibilities of disciplined character, exalted service, exuberant gladness, immortal hopes, and finally eternal fruition.