

for ever in the abolition of the old and the establishment of the new dispensation. Three of them were immediately to see Him transfigured; all but one were to be witnesses of His resurrection; one at least—the beloved disciple—was to survive that capture of Jerusalem and destruction of the Temple which were to render impossible any literal fulfilment of the Mosaic law. And the prophecy may have deeper meanings yet than these—meanings still more real because they are still more wholly spiritual. “If we wish not to fear death,” says St. Ambrose, “let us stand where Christ is; Christ is your Life; He is the very Life which cannot die.”

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**LESSON NINETEEN**

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE TRANSFIGURATION.

NONE of the Evangelists tell us about the week which followed this memorable event. They tell us only that “after six days” He took with Him the three dearest and most enlightened of His disciples, and went with them—the expression implies a certain solemnity of expectation—up a lofty mountain, or, as St. Luke calls it, simply “*the mountain.*”

The supposition that the mountain intended was Mount Tabor has been engrained for centuries in the tradition of the Christian Church; and three churches and a monastery erected before the close of the sixth century attest the unhesitating acceptance of this belief. Yet it is almost certain that Tabor was not the scene of that great epiphany. The rounded summit of that picturesque and wood-crowned hill, which forms so fine a feature in the landscape, as the traveller approaches the northern limit of the plain of Esdraelon, had probably from time immemorial been a fortified and inhabited spot, and less than thirty years after this time, Josephus, on this very mountain, strengthened the existing fortress of Itaburion. This, therefore, was not a spot to which Jesus could have taken the three Apostles “apart by themselves.” Nor, again, is there the slightest intimation that the six intervening days had been spent in travelling southwards from Cæsarea Philippi, the place last mentioned; on the contrary, it is

distinctly intimated by St. Mark (ix. 30), that Jesus did not "pass through Galilee" (in which Mount Tabor is situated) till after the events here narrated. Nor again does the comparatively insignificant hill Pancum, which is close by Cæsarea Philippi, fulfil the requirements of the narrative. It is, therefore, much more natural to suppose that our Lord, anxious to traverse the Holy Land of His birth to its northern limit, journeyed slowly forward till He reached the lower slopes of that splendid snow-clad mountain, whose glittering mass, visible even as far southward as the Dead Sea, magnificently closes the northern frontier of Palestine—the Mount Hermon of Jewish poetry. Its very name means "the mountain," and the scene which it witnessed would well suffice to procure for it the distinction of being the only mountain to which in Scripture is attached the epithet "holy." On those dewy pasturages, cool and fresh with the breath of the snow-clad heights above them, and offering that noble solitude, among the grandest scenes of Nature, which He desired as the refreshment of His soul for the mighty struggle which was now so soon to come, Jesus would find many a spot where He could kneel with His disciples absorbed in silent prayer.

And the coolness and solitude would be still more delicious to the weariness of the Man of Sorrows after the burning heat of the Eastern day and the incessant publicity which, even in these remoter regions, thronged his steps. It was the evening hour when he ascended, and as He climbed the hill-slope with those three chosen witnesses—"the Sons of Thunder and the Man of Rock"—doubtless a solemn gladness dilated His whole soul; a sense not only of the heavenly calm which that solitary communion with His Heavenly Father would breathe upon the spirit, but still more than this, a sense that He would be supported for the coming hour by ministrations not of earth, and illuminated with a light which needed no aid from sun or moon or stars. He went up to be prepared for death, and He took His three Apostles with Him that, haply, having seen His glory—the glory of the only Begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth—their hearts might be fortified, their faith strengthened, to gaze unshaken on the shameful insults and unspeakable humiliation of the cross.

There, then, He knelt and prayed, and as He prayed He was elevated far above the toil and misery of the world which had rejected Him. He was transfigured before them, and His countenance shone as the sun, and His garments became white as the dazzling snow-fields above them. He was enwrapped in such an aureole of glistening

brilliance—His whole presence breathed so divine a radiance—that the light, the snow, the lightning are the only things to which the Evangelist can compare that celestial lustre. And, lo! two figures were by His side. “When, in the desert, He was girding Himself for the work of life, angels of life came and ministered unto Him; now, in the fair world, when He is girding Himself for the work of death, the ministrants come to Him from the grave—but from the grave conquered—one from that tomb under Abarim, which his own hand had sealed long ago; the other from the rest into which he had entered without seeing corruption. There stood by Him Moses and Elias, and spake of His decease. And when the prayer is ended, the task accepted, then first since the star paused over Him at Bethlehem, the full glory falls upon Him from heaven, and the testimony is borne to His everlasting sonship and power—‘Hear ye Him.’”

It is clear, from the fuller narrative of St. Luke, that the three Apostles did not witness the beginning of this marvellous transfiguration. An Oriental, when his prayers are over, wraps himself in his *abba*, and, lying down on the grass in the open air, sinks in a moment into profound sleep. And the Apostles, as afterwards they slept at Gethsemane, so now they slept on Hermon. They were heavy, “weighed down” with sleep, when suddenly starting into full wakefulness of spirit, they saw and heard.

In the darkness of the night, shedding an intense gleam over the mountain herbage, shone the glorified form of their Lord. Beside Him, in the same flood of golden glory, were two awful shapes, which they knew or heard to be Moses and Elijah. And the Three spake together, in the stillness, of that coming decease at Jerusalem, about which they had just been forewarned by Christ.

And as the splendid vision began to fade—as the majestic visitants were about to be separated from their Lord, as their Lord Himself passed with them into the overshadowing brightness—Peter, anxious to delay their presence, amazed, startled, transported, not knowing what he said—not knowing that Calvary would be a spectacle infinitely more transcendent than Hermon—not knowing that the Law and the Prophets were now fulfilled—not fully knowing that his Lord was unspeakably greater than the Prophet of Sinai and the Avenger of Carmel—exclaimed, “Rabbi, it is best for us to be here; and let us make three tabernacles, one for thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elias.” Jesus might have smiled at the naïve proposal of the eager Apostle, that they six should dwell for ever in little *succôth* of wattled

boughs on the slopes of Hermon. But it was not for Peter to construct the universe for his personal satisfaction. He had to learn the meaning of Calvary no less than that of Hermon. Not in cloud of glory or chariot of fire was Jesus to pass away from them, but with arms outstretched in agony upon the accursed tree; not between Moses and Elias, but between two brigands, who "were crucified with Him, on either side one."

No answer was vouchsafed to his wild and dreamy words; but, even as he spake, a cloud—not a cloud of thick darkness as at Sinai, but a cloud of light, a Shechînah of radiance—overshadowed them, and a voice from out of it uttered, "This is my beloved Son; hear Him." They fell prostrate, and hid their faces on the grass. And as—awaking from the overwhelming shock of that awful voice, of that enfolding Light—they raised their eyes and gazed suddenly all around them, they found that all was over. The bright cloud had vanished. The lightning-like gleams of shining countenances and dazzling robes had passed away; they were alone with Jesus, and only the stars rained their quiet lustre on the mountain slopes.

At first they were afraid to rise or stir, but Jesus, their Master—as they had seen Him before He knelt in prayer, came to them, touched them—said, "Arise, and be not afraid."

And so the day dawned on Hermon, and they descended the hill; and as they descended, He bade them tell no man until He had risen from the dead. The vision was for them; it was to be pondered over by them in the depths of their own hearts in self-denying reticence; to announce it to their fellow-disciples might only awake *their* jealousy and their own self-satisfaction; until the resurrection it would add nothing to the faith of others, and might only confuse their conceptions of what was to be His work on earth. They kept Christ's command, but they could not attach any meaning to this allusion. They could only ask each other, or muse in silence, what this resurrection from the dead could mean. And *another* serious question weighed upon their spirits. They had seen Elias. They now knew more fully than ever that their Lord was indeed the Christ. Yet "how say the Scribes"—and had not the Scribes the prophecy of Malachi in their favour?—"that Elias must first come and restore all things?" And then our Lord gently led them to see that Elias indeed had come, and had not been recognised, and had received at the hand of his nation the same fate which was soon to happen to Him whom he announced. Then understood they that He spake to them of John the Baptist.

## CHAPTER XXXVII.

## THE DEMONIAC BOY.

THE imagination of all readers of the Gospels has been struck by the contrast—a contrast seized and immortalised for ever in the great picture of Raphael—between the peace, the glory, the heavenly communion on the mountain heights, and the confusion, the rage, the unbelief, the agony which marked the first scene that met the eyes of Jesus and His Apostles on their descent to the low levels of human life.

For in their absence an event had occurred which filled the other disciples with agitation and alarm. They saw a crowd assembled and Scribes among them, who with disputes and victorious innuendoes were pressing hard upon the diminished band of Christ's chosen friends.

Suddenly at this crisis the multitude caught sight of Jesus. Something about His appearance, some unusual majesty, some lingering radiance, filled them with amazement, and they ran up to Him with salutations. "What is your dispute with them?" He sternly asked of the Scribes. But the Scribes were too much abashed, the disciples were too self-conscious of their faithlessness and failure, to venture on any reply. Then out of the crowd struggled a man, who, kneeling before Jesus, cried out, in a loud voice, that he was the father of an only son whose demoniac possession was shown by epilepsy, in its most raging symptoms, accompanied by dumbness, atrophy, and a suicidal mania. He had brought the miserable sufferer to the disciples to cast out the evil spirit, but their failure had occasioned the taunts of the Scribes.

The whole scene grieved Jesus to the heart. "O faithless and perverse generation," He exclaimed, "how long shall I be with you? how long shall I suffer you?" This cry of indignation seemed meant for all—for the merely curious multitude, for the malicious Scribes, for the half-believing and faltering disciples. "Bring him hither to me."

The poor boy was brought, and no sooner had his eye fallen on Jesus, than he was seized with another paroxysm of his malady. He fell on the ground in violent convulsions, and rolled there with foaming lips. It was the most deadly and intense form of epileptic lunacy on which our Lord had ever been called to take compassion.

He paused before He acted. He would impress the scene in all its horror on the thronging multitude, that they might understand that the failure was not of him. He would at the same time invoke, educe, confirm the wavering faith of the agonised suppliant.

“How long has this happened to him?”

“From childhood : and often hath it flung him both into fire and into water to destroy him ; but *if at all thou canst*, take pity on us and help us.”

“*If thou canst?*” answered Jesus—giving him back his own word—“all things are possible to him that believeth.”

And then the poor hapless father broke out into that cry, uttered by so many millions since, and so deeply applicable to an age which, like our own, has been described as “destitute of faith, yet terrified at scepticism”—“*Lord, I believe ; help thou mine unbelief.*”

Meanwhile, during this short colloquy, the crowd had been gathering more and more, and Jesus, turning to the sufferer, said, “Dumb and deaf spirit, I charge thee come out of him, and enter no more into him.” A yet wilder cry, a yet more fearful convulsion followed His words, and then the boy lay on the ground, no longer wallowing and foaming, but still as death. Some said, “He is dead.” But Jesus took him by the hand, and, amid the amazed exclamations of the multitude, restored him to his father, calm and cured.

Jesus had previously given to His disciples the power of casting out devils, and this power was even exercised in His name by some who were not among His professed disciples. Nor had they ever failed before. It was therefore natural that they should take the first private opportunity to ask Him the cause of their discomfiture. He told them frankly that it was because of their unbelief. It may be that the sense of His absence weakened them ; it may be that they felt less able to cope with difficulties while Peter and the sons of Zebedee were also away from them ; it may be, too, that the sad prophecy of His rejection and death had worked with sinister effect on the minds of the weakest of them. But at any rate, He took this opportunity to teach them two great lessons : the one, that there are forms of spiritual, physical, and moral evil so intense and so inveterate, that they can only be exorcised by prayer, united to that self-control and self-denial of which fasting is the most effectual and striking symbol ; the other, that to a perfect faith all things are possible. Faith, like a grain of mustard-seed, could even say to Hermon itself, “Be thou removed, and cast into the waves of the Great Sea and it should obey.”

Jesus had now wandered to the utmost northern limit of the Holy Land, and He began to turn His steps homewards. We see from St. Mark that His return was designedly secret and secluded, and possibly not along the high roads, but rather through the hills and valleys of Upper Galilee to the westward of the Jordan. His object was no longer to teach the multitudes who had been seduced into rejecting Him, and among whom He could hardly appear in safety, but to continue that other and even more essential part of His work, which consisted in the training of His Apostles. And now the constant subject of His teaching was His approaching betrayal, murder, and resurrection. But He spoke to dull hearts; in their deep-seated prejudice they ignored His clear warnings, in their faithless timidity they would not ask for further enlightenment. We cannot see more strikingly how vast was the change which the resurrection wrought in them than by observing with what simple truthfulness they record the extent and inveteracy of their own shortcomings, during those precious days while the Lord was yet among them.

The one thing which they *did* seem to realise was that some strange and memorable issue of Christ's life, accompanied by some great development of the Messianic kingdom, was at hand; and this unhappily produced the only effect in them which it should *not* have produced. Instead of stimulating their self-denial, it awoke their ambition; instead of confirming their love and humility, it stirred them up to jealousy and pride. On the road, remembering, perhaps, the preference which had been shown at Hermon to Peter and the sons of Zebedee—they disputed among themselves, “Which should be the greatest?”

At the time our Lord took no notice of the dispute. He left their own consciences to work. But when they reached Capernaum and were in the house, then he asked them, “What they had been disputing about on the way?” Deep shame kept them silent, and that silence was the most eloquent confession of their sinful ambitions. Then He sat down, and taught them again, as He had done so often, that he who would be first must be last of all, and servant of all, and that the road to honour is humility. And wishing to enforce this lesson by a symbol of exquisite tenderness and beauty, He called to Him a little child, and set it in the midst, and then folding it in His arms, warned them that unless they could become as humble as that little child, they could not enter into the kingdom of heaven. They were to be as children in the world; and he who should receive even

one such little child in Christ's name, should be receiving Him, and the Father who sent Him.

The expression "in my name" seems to have suggested to St. John a sudden question, which broke the thread of Christ's discourse. They had seen, he said, a man who was casting out devils in Christ's name; but since the man was not one of them, they had forbidden him. Had they done right?

"No," Jesus answered; "let the prohibition be removed." He who could do works of mercy in Christ's name could not lightly speak evil of that name. He who was not against them was with them. Sometimes indifference is opposition; sometimes neutrality is aid.

And then, gently resuming His discourse—the child yet nestling in His arms, and furnishing the text for His remarks—He warned them of the awful guilt and peril of offending, of tempting, of misleading, of seducing from the paths of innocence and righteousness, of teaching any wicked thing, or suggesting any wicked thought to one of those little ones, whose angels see the face of His Father in heaven. Such wicked men and seducers, such human performers of the devil's work—addressing them in words of more bitter, crushing import than any which He ever uttered—a worse fate, He said, awaited *them*, than to be flung with the heaviest millstone round their neck into the sea.

And He goes on to warn them that no sacrifice could be too great if it enabled them to escape any possible temptations to put such stumbling-blocks in the way of their own souls, or the souls of others. Better cut off the right hand, and enter heaven maimed—better hew off the right foot, and enter heaven halt—better tear out the right eye, and enter heaven blind—than suffer hand or foot or eye to be the ministers of sins which should feed the undying worm or kindle the quenchless flame. Better be drowned in this world with a millstone round the neck, than carry that moral and spiritual millstone of unresisted temptation which can drown the guilty soul in the fiery lake of alienation and despair. For just as salt is sprinkled over every sacrifice for its purification, so must every soul be purged by fire; by the fire, if need be, of the severest and most terrible self-sacrifice. Let this refining, purging, purifying fire of searching self-judgment and self-severity be theirs. Let not this salt lose its savour, nor this fire its purifying power. "Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another."



And thus, at once to confirm the duty of this mutual peace which they had violated, and to show them that, however deeply rooted be God's anger against those who lead others astray, *they* must never cherish hatred even against those who had most deeply injured them, He taught them how, first by private exhortation, then if necessary by public appeal, at once most gently and most effectually to deal with an offending brother. Peter, in the true spirit of Judaic formalism, wanted a specific limit to the number of times when forgiveness should be granted; but Jesus taught that the times of forgiveness should be practically unlimited. He illustrated that teaching by the beautiful parable of the servant, who, having been forgiven by his king a debt of ten thousand talents, immediately afterwards seized his fellow-servant by the throat, and would not forgive him a miserable little debt of one hundred pence, a sum 1,250,000 times smaller than that which he himself had been forgiven. The child whom Jesus had held in His arms might have understood that moral; yet how infinitely more deep must its meaning be to us—who have been trained from childhood in the knowledge of His atoning love—than it could have been, at the time when it was spoken, to even a Peter or a John.

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## CHAPTER XXXVIII.

### A BRIEF REST IN CAPERNAUM.

ONE more incident, related by St. Matthew only, marked his brief stay on this occasion in Capernaum.

From time immemorial there was a precedent for collecting, at least occasionally, on the recurrence of every census, a tax of "half a shekel, after the shekel of the sanctuary," of every Jew who had reached the age of twenty years, as a "ransom for his soul," unto the Lord. This money was devoted to the service of the Temple, and was expended on the purchase of the sacrifices, scapegoats, red heifers, incense, shewbread, and other expenses of the Temple service. After the return from the captivity, this *bekah*, or half-shekel, became a voluntary annual tax of a third of a shekel; but at some subsequent period it had again returned to its original amount. This tax was

paid by every Jew in every part of the world, whether rich or poor, and, as on the first occasion of its payment, to show that the souls of all alike are equal before God, "the rich paid no more, and the poor no less." It produced vast sums of money, which were conveyed to Jerusalem by honourable messengers.

This tax was only so far compulsory that when first demanded, on the 1st of Adar, the demand was made quietly and civilly; if, however, it had not been paid by the 25th, then it seems that the collectors of the contribution (*tobhîn shekalîm*) might take a security for it from the defaulter.

Accordingly, almost immediately upon our Lord's return to Capernaum, these *tobhîn shekalîm* came to St. Peter, and asked him, quite civilly, as the Rabbis had directed, "Does not your master pay the didrachmas?"

The question suggests two difficulties—viz., Why had our Lord not been asked for this contribution in previous years? and why was it now demanded in autumn, at the approach of the Feast of Tabernacles, instead of in the month Adar, some six months earlier? The answer seems to be that priests and eminent Rabbis were regarded as exempt from the tax; that our Lord's frequent absence from Capernaum caused some irregularity; and that it was permitted to pay arrears some time afterwards.

The fact that the collectors inquired of St. Peter instead of asking Jesus Himself, is another of the very numerous indications of the awe which He inspired even in the heart of His bitterest enemies; as in all probability the fact of the demand being made at all shows a growing desire to vex His life, and to ignore His dignity. But Peter, with his usual impetuous readiness, without waiting, as he should have done, to consult his Master, replied, "Yes."

If he had thought a moment longer—if he had known a little more—if he had even recalled his own great confession so recently given—his answer might not have come so glibly. This money was, at any rate in its original significance, a redemption money for the soul of each man; and how could the Redeemer, who redeemed all souls by the ransom of His life, pay this money-ransom for His own? And it was a tax for the Temple services. How, then, could it be due from Him whose own mortal body was the new spiritual Temple of the Living God? He was to enter the veil of the Holiest with the ransom of His own blood. But He paid what He did not owe, to save us from that which we owed, but could never pay.

Accordingly, when Peter entered the house, conscious, perhaps, by this time, that his answer had been premature—perhaps also conscious that at that moment there were no means of meeting even this small demand upon their scanty store—Jesus, without waiting for any expression of his embarrassment, at once said to him, “What thinkest thou, Simon? the kings of the earth, from whom do they take tolls and taxes? from their own sons, or from those who are not their children?”

There could be but one answer—“From those who are not their children.”

“Then,” said Jesus, “the sons are free.” I, the Son of the Great King, and even thou, who art also His son, though in a different way, are not bound to pay this tax. If we pay it, the payment must be a matter, not of positive obligation, as the Pharisees have lately decided, but of free and cheerful giving.

There is something beautiful and even playful in this gentle way of showing to the impetuous Apostle the dilemma in which his hasty answer had placed his Lord. We see in it, as Luther says, the fine, friendly, loving intercourse which must have existed between Christ and His disciples. It seems, at the same time, to establish the eternal principle that religious services should be maintained by spontaneous generosity and an innate sense of duty rather than in consequence of external compulsion. But yet, what is lawful is not always expedient, nor is there anything more thoroughly unchristian than the violent maintenance of the strict letter of our rights. The Christian will always love rather to recede from something of his privilege—to take less than is his due. And so He, in whose steps all ought to walk, calmly added, “Nevertheless, lest we should offend them” (put a difficulty or stumbling-block in their way), “go thou to the sea and cast a hook, and take the first fish that cometh up; and opening its mouth thou shalt find a stater: that take and give unto them for Me and for thee.” In the very act of submission, as Bengel finely says, “His majesty gleams forth.” He would pay the contribution to avoid hurting the feelings of any, and especially because His Apostle had promised it in His behalf: but He could not pay it in an ordinary way, because that would be to compromise a principle. In obeying the law of charity, and of self-surrender, He would also obey the laws of dignity and truth. “He pays the tribute, therefore,” says Clarius, “but taken from a fish’s mouth, that His majesty may be recognised.”

When Paulus, with somewhat vulgar jocosity, calls this “a miracle for half-a-crown,” he only shows his own entire misconception of the fine ethical lessons which are involved in the narrative, and which in this, as in every other instance, separate our Lord’s miracles from those of the Apocrypha. Yet I agree with the learned and thoughtful Olshausen in regarding this as the most difficult to comprehend of all the Gospel miracles—as being, in many respects, *sui generis*—as not falling under the same category as the other miracles of Christ. “It is remarkable,” says Archbishop Trench, “and is a solitary instance of the kind, that the issue of this bidding is not told us.” He goes on, indeed, to say that the narrative is evidently *intended* to be miraculous, and this is the impression which it has almost universally left on the minds of those who read it. Yet the literal translation of our Lord’s words may most certainly be, “on opening its mouth, thou shalt get, or obtain, a stater;” and although there is no difficulty whatever in supposing that a fish may have swallowed the glittering coin as it was accidentally dropped into the water, nor should I feel the slightest difficulty in believing—as I hope that this book, from its first page to its last, will show—that a miracle might have been wrought, yet the peculiarities both of the miracle itself and of the manner in which it is narrated, leave in my mind a doubt as to whether, in this instance, some essential particular may not have been either omitted or left unexplained.

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## CHAPTER XXXIX.

### JESUS AT THE FEAST OF TABERNACLES.

IT was not likely that Jesus should have been able to live at Capernaum without the fact of His visit being known to some of the inhabitants. But it is clear that His stay in the town was very brief, and that it was of a strictly private character. The discourse and the incident mentioned in the last chapter are the only records of it which are left.

But it was now autumn, and all Galilee was in the stir of preparation which preceded the starting of the annual caravan of pilgrims to one of the three great yearly feasts—the Feast of Tabernacles. That