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# The Evangelical Quarterly

OCTOBER 15th, 1947

## THE RADIANT FACE

IN THE fifth verse of the thirty-fourth Psalm we have these arresting words, "They looked unto Him and were lightened".

The Psalmist is thinking, no doubt, of some of the great men in the past history of his nation. There is Abraham, that valiant pioneer of the Kingdom of God, who, with the light of an overmastering purpose irradiating his whole life, left home and kindred and went out, not knowing whither he went. There is Isaac, who went out into the field to meditate at eventide and who oftentimes bore back on his face to his tent lingering rays of the light that had shone on him during his lonely communion with God. There is Moses, who carried through to a triumphant issue one of the hardest tasks ever given to mortal man to do, and who endured as seeing Him who is invisible. There is Gideon, who shrank back from the exacting enterprise to which God was calling him, whereupon, as we read, "The LORD *looked upon* him, and said, 'Go in this thy might, and thou shalt save Israel from the hand of the Midianities: have not I sent thee?'" (Judges vi. 14.) Many other great men of God, no doubt, passed in procession before the Psalmist's mind, but he does not name one single individual in the great army of the Lord. He simply says that the experience of every one of them can be summed up after this fashion, "They looked unto Him and were lightened."

We have here a wonderful fact which calls for some kind of explanation, and we are also given here the only possible explanation that can be given for it.

## I

The wonderful fact is the fact, the mystery, of the shining face. In a world like ours, where, to use the language of this Psalm, there are so many "fears", so many "troubles", so many "afflictions", and where so many men and women go about with gloomy faces, we meet those who, wherever they go, radiate optimism and good cheer. Of Archibald Orr Ewing, who did so great a work for Christ in China, his biographer says that "he was blessed with an open and beaming countenance, which was a fine commentary on the Psalmist's words, according to the American Revised Version: 'They looked unto Him, and were radiant';" and the Chinese gave Ewing a name which means "Glory Face". We have met people like that, who had about them a radiance which seemed to light up any room into which they entered. Somewhere or other I have read this about Phillips Brooks. It was a dull, dismal, very rainy day in the city of Boston, when there was everywhere an atmosphere of gloom, "but Phillips Brooks walked down the street, and everything was bright".

In the Bible there are two outstanding examples of the shining face, one in the Old Testament and one in the New. The Old Testament example, of course, is that of Moses. When he came down from Sinai, after his long, solitary communion with God, he "wist not that the skin of his face shone". The New Testament example is that of the man who was accused of being the enemy of Moses, an iconoclast who was plotting to shatter in pieces everything that Moses had accomplished. As Stephen's fanatical accusers gazed upon him, they "saw his face as it had been the face of an angel". Was there not in that council chamber in Jerusalem, on the face of Stephen, the same mysterious radiance that had lingered on the face of Moses, as he came down from amid the bleak crags of Sinai?

Going outside the Bible, and exploring the rich field of Christian biography, we find many examples of the shining face. In his *Autobiography*, John G. Paton describes his childhood home in Dumfriesshire; he paints a beautiful picture of his devout old father, and speaks of "that happy light as of a newborn smile that always was dawning on my father's face". Is that not the shining face again? Robert Murray McCheyne

preached his last sermon on a Sabbath evening in Broughty Ferry. He rode home to his manse in Dundee and fell ill of the fever of which he died within less than three weeks. As he lay on his death bed, a letter came from a total stranger, to thank him for the sermon. The letter contained these words : " I heard you preach last Sabbath evening, and it pleased God to bless that sermon to my soul. It was not so much what you said, as your manner of speaking, that struck me. I saw in you a beauty in holiness that I never saw before." It was with McCheyne, says Dr. Alexander Smellie, " as with young Sir Pelleas ; they who met him wondered after him,

' . . . because his face  
Shone like the countenance of a priest of old  
Against the flame about a sacrifice  
Kindled by fire from heaven '."

The Psalmist's words are indefinite: "*they* looked unto Him and were lightened." Many of them are quite unknown to fame, " never heard of half a mile from home". But, we have been able to identify a few of them; we have been able to give names to one or two of them. And, they all present a problem, which may well inspire people of an enquiring turn of mind to ask them the question, " What is your secret?" They also present to sceptics, if such would only realise it, an unanswerable argument in favour of the reality of religious experience.

## II

There is only one feasible explanation, that of the Psalmist. " **THEY** looked unto **HIM**." They have learned the secret of turning their eyes away from life's fears and life's troubles and life's afflictions, the secret of avoiding the morbid gazing into their own hearts that is always so saddening, and they have turned their faces towards the Light of the world. A drab and very unattractive house is sometimes seen with all its windows shining with a sudden blaze of glory, because the sun has looked upon it. Weary eyes will gleam with the light of a new joy and a new peace when they turn to the Sun of Righteousness. The actual image used by the Psalmist is, possibly, that of a sheet of water which lies dull and sluggish under a dark sky, until there is a sudden rift in the clouds and the sun peeps out and we see that sheet of water running and

rippling now in the sunlight. This light which runs and ripples across the face comes from beyond the ramparts of the world.

“ Sometimes a light surprises  
The Christian when he sings ;  
It is the Lord that rises  
With healing in His wings.”

The explanation of the shining face of Moses is not far to seek. He had been for forty days and forty nights in lonely communion with God, with the world far away, and Jehovah had proclaimed to him His Name, “ Jehovah, a God merciful and gracious, long-suffering and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin ”. This is how Moffatt translates Exodus xxxiv. 29, “ Moses did not know, as he went down the mountain, that his face was in a glow after speaking to God ”. Speaking to God, and waiting in stillness of spirit until He speaks to us—that is what makes the face to shine.

“ Lord, what a difference one short hour,  
Spent in Thy presence, will avail to make,  
What heavy burdens from our spirit take,  
What parched ground refresh, as with a shower ;  
We kneel how weak, we rise how full of power.”

Garments in which has been laid rosemary or lavender will smell fragrantly; members of a closely-knit family often exhibit some tiny gesture or some other peculiarity which reveals their kinship; it has often been observed how, on the faces of an aged couple, who have lived long years together, there comes out sometimes a strange resemblance, so that each reflects the other. And so, those who dwell much with God are certain to become godlike.

Of Stephen we are told that, as the stones were being rained down upon him, he “ looked steadfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God ”.

“ He heeded not reviling tones,  
Nor sold his heart to idle moans,  
Though cursed and scorned, and bruised with stones :

“ But looking upward, full of grace,  
He prayed, and from a happy place  
God’s glory smote him on the face.”

The text of McCheyne's last sermon was the first verse of the sixtieth chapter of Isaiah, "Arise, shine, for thy light is come, and the glory of the LORD is risen upon thee". McCheyne had looked to Jesus as his Star, his Sun, and, when he preached that last sermon of his, his "travelling days" were nearly done: he was within three weeks' journey of the land where the Lord would be his everlasting Light and the days of his mourning would be ended.

John G. Paton gives his beautiful description of his old home with its "but" and its "ben" and the little chamber in between, into which his father would sometimes retire, to be alone with God. "We occasionally heard", he writes, "the pathetic echoes of a trembling voice pleading as if for life, and we learned to slip out and in past that door on tiptoe, not to disturb the holy colloquy. The outside world might not know, but we knew, whence came that happy light as of a new-born smile that always was dawning on my father's face: it was a reflection from the Divine Presence, in the consciousness of which he lived. Never, in temple or cathedral, on mountain or in glen, can I hope to feel that the Lord God is more near, more visibly walking and talking with men, than under that humble cottage roof of thatch and oaken wattles. Though everything else in religion were by some unthinkable catastrophe to be swept out of memory, or blotted from my understanding, my soul would wander back to those early scenes, and shut itself up once again in that Sanctuary Closet, and, hearing still the echoes of those cries to God, would hurl back all doubt with the victorious appeal, 'He walked with God, why may not I?'"

In 2 Cor. iii. 18, Paul says that all believers in Christ enjoy, by the grace of God, the privilege of belonging to the company of the men and women of radiant face, and he says also that, in their case, the glory which has irradiated their lives is not a fading glory, like the glory which was seen on the face of Moses: on the contrary, they are being transformed into the image of Christ, "from glory to glory", or, as Weymouth translates, "from one degree of radiant holiness to another". "We all", Paul writes, "we all"—not a Moses or some specially favoured individuals here and there—"we all, reflecting as a mirror the glory of the Lord, are transformed into the same image, from glory to glory, even as from the Lord the Spirit" (2 Cor. iii. 18, R.V.).

In these days, when the future of the world is so dark and so uncertain, we shall walk about with gloomy faces and thus intensify the pessimism which paralyses so many, unless we abide in Christ and make time for seasons of closer and closer communion with Him.

“ What can we do, o'er whom the unbeholden  
Hangs in a night with which we cannot cope ?  
What but look sunward, and with faces golden  
Speak to each other softly of a hope ”—

the hope of the day which the Seer of Patmos beheld from afar, the day when this triumphant song shall be heard echoing through the universe, “ The kingdom of the world is become the kingdom of our Lord, and of His Christ ” (Rev. xi. 15, R.V.).

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