

## THE TRANSFIGURATION

*Matthew 17:1-13*

In all classes begin by speaking of the twelve special disciples of the Lord and especially of the first four chosen: Peter, Andrew, James, and John. Even the youngest can learn these four familiar names. Be sure also that they know which three of these were closest to the Lord. Explain the meaning of the word *transfigure* and then go on to the story. A good plan is to read it verse by verse from the Word, explaining as you go.

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### Doctrinal Points

*Our life in this world is important only as it affects our souls.*

*The Lord keeps us from truths we are not ready to receive and use rightly.*

*To acknowledge a truth but then refuse to live according to it is profanation.*

*If we study the Lord's life and follow His example, we, too, can see Him in His true glory and beauty.*

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### Notes for Parents

The word *transfiguration* means literally a “change of face.” We can easily see why this name is given to the vision in our chapter.

The three disciples chosen to see this vision were the Lord's three closest followers. He could give them instruction and experiences for which the others were not prepared. But our lesson shows us how far even they were from understanding what He gave them. If you have read chapter 16 with the children, you know that Peter, at least, had expressed his belief that Jesus was “the Christ, the Son of the living God.” It was this belief which was the rock on which the Lord said His church was to be founded. And now Peter sees the Lord in the light of His divine glory, and yet, because Moses and Elijah were seen talking with Him, Peter's

first impulse is to worship all three—a tabernacle is the symbol of worship.

Peter's impulse was corrected immediately by the voice from heaven and the appearance of the Lord alone. Yet there was still a question in the minds of the three disciples. The vision of Elias—*Elias* is the Greek form of *Elijah*—made them think of the prophecy in Malachi 4:5. The Lord answered this question, too. John the Baptist was not, of course, a reincarnation of Elijah (read John 1:21), but he was nevertheless the fulfillment of the prophecy. Jesus had already told the disciples this (Matthew 11:7-15), but they had forgotten it.

To the disciples Moses stood for the Law and Elijah for the Prophets. It is for this reason that they were seen by the disciples talking with the Lord. After His resurrection the Lord was to show His disciples the things which were written of Him “in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms” (Luke 24:44), and we may well imagine that then the three disciples remembered the vision they had had on the high mountain and understood it better. But we must realize that there is a great deal in the Gospels that the disciples could never understand, for they were men like ourselves, limited by their education and background, and the Gospels were given by the Lord Himself by inspiration in words in which men and women for all time would find ever deeper meaning.

Today we know, for example, that the high mountain was a symbol of a very high level of thinking, that the Lord's face shone as the sun because He was inmosty God Himself, the “sun of our souls,” that His raiment “white as the light” pictured the pure truth in which His every word and act was clothed, that Moses and Elijah appeared talking with Him because it is He who really speaks to us in all the Law and the Prophets, that the bright cloud which overshadowed the disciples is this same letter of the Word when something of its divine meaning shines through to us, and that the voice from heaven is the Lord's voice speaking to us in the Word, telling us to look to Him alone for the way of life.



### Primary

This will not be a hard lesson to teach, although its meaning is beyond the reach of the little children. They will like the details of the story, and can be told that this is the way they may sometime see the Lord in heaven if they are good. Do something with the reason why only the Lord's closest disciples could see Him transfigured. Remind the children that the same voice from heaven saying almost the same words was heard at the time of the Lord's baptism. Tell them in a simple way why Moses and Elijah were seen with the Lord.

The Lord chose twelve men to be His special followers. He chose them because He saw that they wanted to learn what was really right so that they could be good, and He saw in each one of them some special quality which would be needed in His church. For these twelve men were to be sent out into the world, after the Lord went back to His place in the heavens, to start the Christian Church. In the Bible one who learned of the Lord is called a "disciple."

See if you can learn the names of the first four disciples the Lord chose. They were two pair of brothers: Peter and Andrew, James and John. Three of these four came to be closer to the Lord than all the others. They were with Him constantly, and He showed them and taught them things for which the others were not ready.

Who were they?

Once these three were allowed to see a wonderful vision.

Where did the Lord take them to see it?

On the mountain they saw Him transfigured.

*Transfigured* means "changed in appearance."

What did His face look like?

What was different about His garments?

Whom did they see talking with Him?

Do you remember who Moses was?

He was the one to whom the commandments were given at Mount Sinai, and the first five books of the Bible, which are called "the Law," were given through him.

*Elias* is the Greek word for *Elijah*. We have had lessons about both Moses and Elijah, and perhaps you remember that Moses was the man through whom the Lord gave the "Law" at Mount Sinai and that Elijah was a great prophet. The Jews all thought that Moses and Elijah were very great men. When Peter saw them with

the Lord in the vision, He thought at first that all three must be equal.

What happened then?

What did the voice say?

Do you remember another time when the same thing was said?

The disciples fell on their faces in fear.

But when the Lord told them not to be afraid, they looked up again.

Were Moses and Elias still there?

What did the Lord tell them about the vision?

We had another lesson not long ago in which the voice from heaven was heard saying of Jesus, “This is my beloved Son.” Do you remember what that other time was? While the Lord was in the world, He was often called the Son of God. When you are older, you will understand why.

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### Junior

The correspondence of going up into a high mountain apart is important for this class. They need to begin to see that their everyday thoughts and feelings are apt to be very worldly and that they must look at them and judge them. Show them that if we wish to see the Lord as He really is, we must study the Word and make ourselves obey the Lord’s commandments. Have the class look up the Scripture references given in their notes, and tie in the lesson with the story of John the Baptist and the Lord’s baptism.

Where were the commandments given?

Where were the Blessings given?

Do you remember what going up into a mountain means?

Today we have another famous story about a mountain.

What three disciples did the Lord take up into the mountain with Him?

There they saw the Lord transfigured, which means “changed in appearance.”

How was the Lord’s appearance changed?

Whom did they see with Him?

*Elias* is the Greek form of the name *Elijah*. For the ancient Hebrews Moses represented the Law and Elijah the Prophets. So this was a vision to teach the disciples that the Lord was really the Messiah promised in the Law and the Prophets. They saw this vision not with their physical but with their spiritual eyes. They were

seeing the Lord as He really is, as the angels see Him in heaven.

What did Peter want to do?

Peter and James and John had followed the Lord in all His journeys and had seen Him do many wonderful things. They had become convinced that He really was the Messiah. Peter had already declared this belief. Read verses 13 to 18 of chapter 16. We know that the “rock” mentioned in verse 18 did not mean Peter himself but the great truth he had just declared, that Jesus Christ is the Messiah, God with us. It is this truth upon which entrance to heaven depends and which we must accept if we are to see the Lord transfigured. We see the Lord with our minds. If we study His life and follow His example, we can be like the three chosen disciples and see Him in His true glory and beauty.

But Peter was confused by seeing Moses and Elijah with the Lord in the vision. You remember that the tabernacle was built for worship of the Lord. So Peter’s suggestion meant that just then he thought the vision was telling them that Moses and Elijah and the Lord should all be worshiped.

What happened while he was speaking to the Lord?

What did the voice out of the bright cloud say?

Afterward they saw the Lord only, and they realized that He alone was to be worshiped.

The Lord told them not to tell others of the vision, because the minds of most people were not prepared to believe that He was the Messiah.

What did the Lord tell the disciples about John the Baptist?

Look up Malachi 4:5-6. Elijah and John the Baptist were both sent to preach repentance and so to prepare people to receive the Lord. The Lord had told the disciples before that John the Baptist was the fulfillment of the prophecy of Malachi (Matthew 11:14), but they had forgotten it.

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### Intermediate

More can be done in this class with Peter’s declaration in chapter 16, as well

as with all the details of the correspondence. The reason why the three disciples were not to tell others of the vision should be explained. See also on this point John 14:22-23.

For three years the Lord went from place to place through the Holy Land, crossing occasionally into the country on the other side of the Jordan, preaching, teaching, and healing. He made His home at Capernaum and much of His ministry was carried on in Galilee. He went to Jerusalem for the feasts, passing to and fro through Samaria. In all these journeyings the twelve disciples followed Him. They saw Him turn water into wine, still the storm, multiply the loaves and fishes, open the eyes of the blind, cleanse the leper, raise the dead, cast out devils. They listened to His instruction. Gradually He ascended in their thoughts, and they became convinced that He was really the Messiah.

So when He asked the question (Matthew 16:15) “Whom say ye that I am?” Peter could declare, “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.” This truth is the “rock” on which the Christian Church is founded, acceptance of which opens heaven. Read chapter 16, verses 18 and 19. That Peter himself was not the rock and the gatekeeper we should realize from the fact that a few verses later the Lord calls him Satan, when his natural, worldly ideas came to the fore. The Lord taught His disciples very clearly that our life in this world is important only as it affects our souls, but it was hard for them, as it is hard for us, to keep this truth in mind in the face of danger and temptation.

It is important to note that the story of the transfiguration follows this declaration of Peter’s. It is the belief that Christ is God that opens the mind to see the inner beauty and glory of the Lord’s life and its relation to the Law and the Prophets. These things are symbolized by the details of the transfiguration story. Going up into a mountain is the picture of raising our minds to a high level of thinking, close to the Lord. The face represents the inner character; so the Lord’s face shining as the sun is the expression of divine love in His character. Garments in general are a picture of truths, which clothe our affections. The Lord’s raiment white as



the light pictures divine truth which clothed His every act and word. Moses and Elias—*Elias* is the Greek form of *Elijah*—represent the Law and the Prophets.

Peter was at first confused by the vision. A tabernacle or tent represents worship of a simple, childlike kind; so Peter's suggestion shows that he thought the vision must mean that Moses and Elijah and the Lord should all be worshiped. But he was immediately taught better. The bright cloud which overshadowed them pictures the letter of the Word with its internal meaning shining through. The voice speaking from it is its testimony to the Lord's divinity. And the fact that finally the three disciples "saw no man, save Jesus only" points to the final realization that "in him dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily," as Paul later said (Colossians 1:19).

The three disciples had been prepared for this vision by a long process of observation and instruction. Others had not been so prepared. So the three were commanded not to tell the vision until after the witness of the Lord's resurrection had made men ready to believe. This is something the Lord does for us, too. He often keeps from us truths which we are not prepared to receive and use rightly. To acknowledge a truth and refuse to try to live according to it is what Swedenborg calls "profanation," and profanation is one of the worst things we can do.

The real preparation for a true acknowledgment of the Lord begins with repentance. This is why John the Baptist had to be sent before the Lord. Both Elijah and John preached repentance. The prophecy referred to in the instruction the disciples had received from the scribes is found in Malachi 4:5, and in Matthew 11:14 we find that the Lord had already told them that John the Baptist was the fulfillment of this prophecy. John was not Elijah, but he came to do the same work.

The three disciples did not see this vision with their physical eyes. Their spiritual eyes were opened to see the Lord's inner nature. By the same process our minds can be opened to see Him truly both here and in heaven.

THE TRANSFIGURATION

*Basic Correspondences*

garments in general = the truths that clothe our affections

Moses = the historical Word

Elijah = the prophetic Word

clouds = the literal Word

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**Senior**

The real meaning of the transfiguration is the lesson for this class, the fact that the whole Word teaches that the Lord is the one object of our worship. The difference between seeing the Lord as a finite man like ourselves and recognizing Him as God, divine love and wisdom manifested in human form so that we can know Him, is clearly brought out in the internal sense of this story. Read with the class the quotation from Swedenborg at the end of the lesson and help them to understand it.

The Lord had been going about throughout all the Holy Land performing miracles which impressed all who saw them with the fact that some unusual power resided in Him. The scribes and Pharisees, wishing to reject His teaching, ascribed His power to Beelzebub. The multitudes who sat at His feet, prepared by John, were willing to believe that His power came from God, but they had various theories about Him, as we see from Matthew 16:14. Only a few believed with Peter that He was actually the Messiah promised in the Old Testament, Jehovah come into the world. That even all the Apostles did not believe this is evident from Philip's question in John 14:8. Yet this belief was the rock on which Christianity must be founded. Read Matthew 16, verses 16-19. It is from verses 18 and 19 that the Roman Catholic Church claims its authority, for it takes them literally and believes that the man Peter was the head of the church and was given power to admit people to heaven or to keep them out of it, and that he afterward went to Rome and handed his power down to his successors there. But read verse 23. If the Lord had meant that Peter was greater than others, He would hardly have called him Satan immediately afterward. And we also know that Peter thrice denied the Lord on the night before the crucifixion. The rock meant in verse 18 of



chapter 16 is not Peter himself but the great truth which he had just declared—that Jesus Christ is the Messiah promised throughout the Scriptures.

The question, “Whom do men say that I the Son of man am?” is just as pertinent today as when it was first spoken. If we read the religious periodicals of the Christian world today, we find that there are still many theories about Christ and that few seem actually to believe that He was Jehovah in the flesh. Yet this belief is the only one which harmonizes the Old and the New Testaments and opens our minds to understand the Scriptures.

The vision of the transfiguration which was granted to Peter, James, and John pictures the vision which is possible to all who believe that Jesus Christ is God and who seek Him in His Word. As a necessary preparation, the Lord took them up “into an high mountain apart.” To see the Lord in His Word we must raise our minds high above worldly considerations and separate our thoughts from their common associations. Like the three disciples we see at first Moses and Elijah, the Law and the Prophets, the literal sense of the Word as it treats of the Lord. But later we may be given to see the Lord alone as we read the letter of Scripture. What Moses and the Prophets themselves were and thought ceases to be important, and we hear only the voice of the Lord speaking to us in the Word.

Peter, James, and John indeed saw the Lord in His glory, saw Him with their spiritual eyes as they would see Him in heaven; but for us the meaning of the vision is the ability which we have, if we will make the necessary preparation, to see the Lord in the spiritual sense of the Word. This preparation is more than study. It begins with humility. The order of events in the text is significant. First the vision itself is given, with Moses and Elijah present with the Lord. Then the bright cloud and the voice from heaven prepare the disciples to see the Lord alone. The bright cloud is also a symbol of the letter of the Word, but with the spiritual sense shining through, and the voice from heaven is the power of the truth proclaimed in the Word. Then the disciples are told not to

tell others of the vision until after the resurrection. We cannot expect to convince others of the validity of our New Church teachings until they have had some experience which opens their minds.

Finally there follows the question in regard to the prophecy concerning the coming of Elias (Elijah) and the Lord's answer identifying John the Baptist as the fulfillment of this prophecy. The prophecy itself is found in Malachi 4:5. If you will read Matthew 11:7-15, you will see that the Lord had given them this teaching already, but they had forgotten it—as they forgot many other things He told them. One of the lessons we should draw from this is that our understanding of the Lord and His teachings must come from our own study of the Gospels and not from what the Apostles afterward said—in the Acts and Epistles—still less from any decisions of church councils or prominent theologians. If we wish to see the Lord as He really is, we must seek Him in the inspired Word.

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### Adult

Good discussion topics are: the reason why Peter, James, and John were chosen to witness the transfiguration, the reason why Moses and Elijah were seen with the Lord, and the meaning of Peter's suggestion of the three tabernacles or booths and the answer to it.

Again the Lord goes up into a mountain—this time a high mountain—taking with Him only Peter, James, and John. These three are favored above the other disciples and chosen to witness certain great scenes not only because of their close friendship with Jesus, but also because of their representative roles. The twelve disciples picture all the good and useful affections which build up the church in each one of us. In their capacity of receiving and transmitting the Lord's instructions they represent the church. Peter, James, and John picture the three great essentials: faith, charity, and the works of charity (AE 820), or devotion to the Lord in mind, heart, and act. So they were chosen as symbolic of the church in the individual and in the world. The possession of these three essentials is necessary to the attainment of high spiritual experiences. When

we are in high spiritual states—the high mountain—lesser affections are temporarily left behind, and our essential devotion to the Lord is taken by Him “apart” to be the recipient of such deep revelation as He sees to be needed for our future development. Note that this experience follows “after six days,” the period of labor and struggle, like the six days of creation which must precede any spiritual attainment.

What was it that the three disciples saw? It was the real Christ, the divine humanity which had been taking form within the material shell—the body they knew—as the Lord lived out the life of the Word, fulfilling the Law and the Prophets. Because the soul looks out through the face, the face in the Word represents “the interiors.” In the transfiguration the Lord’s face “did shine as the sun,” because the Lord’s inmost was the divine love which warms our hearts. We are told that in the spiritual world the Lord appears as a sun, and that His love and wisdom are the sun of that world. And the Lord’s garments picture the truth in which His love clothes itself; so they were seen to be white as the light.

The minds of the three disciples had been prepared by instruction and by struggles with temptation to see the Lord as the living Word. Only a few days previously Peter had declared Him to be the Christ, and after this declaration the Lord had begun to teach His disciples about His coming death and resurrection, the final means of His glorification. Swedenborg tells us that everyone sees the Lord differently, according to the preparation he has made in his mind. When we come into the other world, we cannot see spiritual and divine things for which we have laid no basis in this world. If we form our idea of God correctly by studying His Word and His life and attempting to bring our minds and lives into conformity with His truth, we shall sometime see Him as the three disciples saw Him on the mountain. Later we shall study also the vision of Him which John saw on Patmos (Revelation 1:12-16). In Revelation 22:4 it is said of the Lord’s servants that in the Holy City “they shall see his face.” The Psalmist says: “As for me, I will behold thy face in righteousness: I shall be satisfied, when I awake,

with thy likeness.” (Psalm 17:15) And we remember the blessing: “Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.” If we seek to cherish in our lives the three essentials for which Peter, James, and John stand, we shall see Jesus Christ transfigured in our minds even in this world and clearly with our eyes when we come into the world where the sight of the mind is likewise the sight of the spiritual body. Read the blessing which the Lord gave through Moses for the children of Israel, the people who were to preserve the written Word, in Numbers 6:22-27.

The Lord came into the world to live out the truth which was expressed in another form in the written Word. He was the Word made flesh. Swedenborg says of the transfiguration that “the Lord represented Divine truth, which is the Word, for the Lord, when He was in the world, made His Human Divine truth, and when He went out of the world, He made His Human Divine good by uniting it with the Divine Itself, that was in Him from conception” (AE 594<sup>2</sup>). In order that the disciples might identify the truth which they saw lived out in Jesus with the truth as they had learned it in the Scriptures, they were permitted to see Moses and Elijah talking with Jesus. *Elias* is the Greek form of *Elijah*. In the minds of the people of that day the Scriptures were divided into two great parts, the Law and the Prophets. Moses stood for the Law and Elijah for the Prophets. Later the Lord would show some of the disciples more specifically how the Law and the Prophets taught of Him: “And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself.” (Luke 24:27) The vision we are considering was a glimpse of the same truth.

This vision is intended for us also. There is a tendency in the Christian world today to pass by much of the Old Testament Scriptures, to think of them merely as showing the ancient Hebrew concept of God and as being superseded by the New Testament. The vision of Moses and Elijah talking with the Lord at the transfiguration teaches us that interiorly the Old Testament Scriptures are also “settled in heaven” (Psalm 119:89), that they are forever and

inseparably connected with the Lord and must always be read and studied if we are to know Him. This is one pertinent lesson which we should draw from our story, confirming the fact which we have already noted that through prophecy and quotation the Old and New Testaments are so inextricably bound together that it is impossible to understand one without studying the other. In the vision of the transfiguration we see that this external connection is the result of a living internal connection. And the further details of the story show us a still deeper reason.

Peter, recognizing that the vision taught the holiness of the Law and the Prophets, proposed to make three tabernacles or tents, one for the Lord, one for Moses, and one for Elijah. A tabernacle is a symbol of worship. In its internal meaning Peter's desire expressed the threefold character of true worship—worship in the heart, in the outward life, and in the thoughts—but in the letter it shows a confusion in Peter's mind. The Lord does not appear to answer Peter's proposal, but the rest of the vision is actually an answer. Read verse 5. The bright cloud is the letter of the Word illumined by divine truth within. The voice is divine love speaking, and the words are the seal of authority which divine love sets upon divine truth. "And when they had lifted up their eyes, they saw no man, save Jesus only." The lifting up of the eyes pictures the lifting up of the understanding. They were finally given to see that all they had seen in vision was in Jesus, in the familiar friend whom they knew and loved. And this is what we should come to see also. In Jesus Christ "dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily," says Paul (Colossians 2:9). Jesus is Jehovah our savior. Old and New Testament Scriptures alike treat of Him. He is the sole object of our worship.

As they came down from the mountain, the Lord told His disciples not to tell others of the vision until after His resurrection. The resurrection was to be the general "sign" for all the world. After it many would be ready to believe the report of the transfiguration who would not have believed it before. And as they came down, they were able to understand more clearly the mission



and work of John the Baptist. We cannot stay on the mount of vision, but as we come down again to practical everyday life, we can see our past experience in new light.



### **From the Writings of Swedenborg**

*Apocalypse Explained*, n. 594<sup>2</sup>: “In this transfiguration the Lord represented Divine truth, which is the Word; for the Lord, when He was in the world, made His Human Divine truth, and when He went out of the world He made His Human Divine good by uniting it with the Divine Itself, that was in Him from conception . . . Consequently the particular things that were seen when He was transfigured signify the proceeding of the Divine truth from the Lord’s Divine good. The Divine good of Divine love which was in Him, and from which He had Divine truth in His Human, was represented by ‘His face did shine as the sun’; for the ‘face’ represents the interiors, since these shine forth through the face; and the ‘sun’ signifies the Divine love. The Divine truth was represented by the ‘garments’ which became as the light; ‘garments’ in the Word signify truths, and ‘the Lord’s garments’ Divine truth; this is why they appeared ‘as the light’; for Divine truth makes the light of the angelic heaven, and is therefore signified by ‘light’ in the Word. . . . Because it was the Word, which is Divine truth, that was represented, therefore ‘there appeared Moses and Elijah speaking with Him’; ‘Moses and Elijah’ signifying the Word; ‘Moses’ the historical Word, and ‘Elijah’ the prophetic Word. The Word in the letter was represented by the ‘cloud that overshadowed the disciples, and into which they entered’; for the ‘disciples’ represented in the Word the church, which at that time and afterwards was only in truths from the sense of the letter; and because . . . revelations and responses are made by Divine truth in ultimates, and because this truth is such as is the truth of the sense of the letter of the Word, it came to pass that ‘a voice was heard out of the cloud, saying, This is my beloved Son, hear ye Him,’ meaning that He is Divine truth, or the Word.”



### **Suggested Questions on the Lesson**

- P. Who were the first four disciples the Lord chose? *Peter, Andrew, James, John*
- P. Who were the three who saw Him transfigured? *Peter, James, John*
- P. What does *transfigure* mean? *change of face*
- P. Where did they go with the Lord to see Him transfigured? *high mountain*
- P. Who were seen talking with Him? *Moses, Elijah*



- J. What did Peter want to do? *build three tents*
- J. What happened which frightened the disciples? *bright cloud, voice*
- P. Whom did they see afterward? *Jesus only*
- J. What did the Lord tell them about what they had seen? *Don't tell others*
- J. What question did they ask Him? *Why do scribes say, "Elijah must come first"?*
- J. What did He tell them? *John the Baptist fulfilled that prophecy*
- I. Why were Moses and Elijah seen with the Lord? *to show He embodies the Law and the Prophets*
- I. Why is John the Baptist brought into this story? *taught repentance (first step)*
- S. What is the great lesson of the transfiguration story? *it is possible for everyone who believes to see the Lord in His Word*