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# 1

## MIRROR, MYSTERY, AND MIRACLE

For this is the marriage of heaven and earth:  
Perfect myth and perfect fact:  
Claiming not only our love and our obedience,  
but also our wonder and delight.

C. S. Lewis

What is the most important thing to do in life? If a person could accomplish only one goal, what should it be? A wise man once asked Christ that question, and He returned a swift and sure answer. He said that the greatest commandment is: "YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND, AND WITH ALL YOUR STRENGTH" (Mark 12:30).

It is doubtful if anyone will ever understand completely what this duty involves. But one can be certain that it necessitates at least two things. First, that God be known. For one cannot love someone he does not know. And second, that God be followed. For one cannot love someone he is not willing to follow.

A Christian realizes that so lofty a goal as loving God can be accomplished only through Christ. For through Christ, God is both known and followed.

Through Christ, God is known because Christ is the visible image of the invisible God (Col. 1:15; John 1:1, 14, 18). He is the eternal God who took upon Himself flesh and blood—not only to accomplish the most important

mission of all time, but also to reveal to us the Father (John 1:18; Phil. 2:5-11; Heb. 1:1-3; 2:14). Thus the Lord Jesus could truly say, "He who has seen Me has seen the Father" (John 14:9), and the apostle John could affirm that "Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father; the one who confesses the Son has the Father also" (1 John 2:23). So through Christ, God is known.

But also through Christ, God is followed. For Christ, through the Spirit, transforms a Christian and enables that one to follow Him. So through Christ, God is loved because through Christ, God is known and followed.

The apostle Paul affirmed this in an unforgettable way in his second letter to the Corinthian Christians. For in a portion of that letter he described Christ as the One beheld in a miraculous mirror, who reflects the invisible God and, through the Spirit, transforms those who behold Him (2 Cor. 3:18). The context of this passage unfolds the fulness of its meaning.

But thanks be to God, who always leads us in His triumph in Christ, and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place. <sup>15</sup>For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; <sup>16</sup>to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life. And who is adequate for these things? <sup>17</sup>For we are not like many, peddling the word of God, but as from sincerity, but as from God, we speak in Christ in the sight of God.

Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some, letters of commendation to you or from you? <sup>2</sup>You are our letter, written in our hearts, known and read by all men; <sup>3</sup>being manifested that you are a letter of Christ, cared for by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone, but on tablets of human hearts. <sup>4</sup>And such confidence we have through Christ toward God. <sup>5</sup>Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God, <sup>6</sup>who also made us adequate as servants of a

new covenant, not of the letter, but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. <sup>7</sup>But if the ministry of death, in letters engraved on stones, came with glory, so that the sons of Israel could not look intently at the face of Moses because of the glory of his face, fading as it was, <sup>8</sup>how shall the ministry of the Spirit fail to be even more with glory? <sup>9</sup>For if the ministry of condemnation has glory, much more does the ministry of righteousness abound in glory. <sup>10</sup>For indeed what had glory, in this case has no glory on account of the glory that surpasses it. <sup>11</sup>For if that which fades away was with glory, much more that which remains is in glory.

<sup>12</sup>Having therefore such a hope, we use great boldness in our speech, <sup>13</sup>and are not as Moses, who used to put a veil over his face that the sons of Israel might not look intently at the end of what was fading away. <sup>14</sup>But their minds were hardened; for until this very day at the reading of the old covenant the same veil remains unlifted, because it is removed in Christ. <sup>15</sup>But to this day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their heart; <sup>16</sup>BUT WHENEVER A MAN TURNS TO THE LORD, THE VEIL IS TAKEN AWAY. <sup>17</sup>Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. <sup>18</sup>But we all, with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit (2 Cor. 2:14—3:18).

Paul had begun to explain to his readers the unequalled importance of his message about Christ (2 Cor. 2:14-17). It was a matter of eternal life and eternal death for everyone who heard it (2 Cor. 2:15-16). Therefore, he faithfully proclaimed the message without compromise (2 Cor. 2:17).

Realizing that some might accuse him of bragging, Paul asked his Corinthian friends if they thought that he was commending himself or needed their recommendation to qualify him for so important a task (2 Cor. 3:1). He answered his own question very simply. Neither they nor he could so commend him that he would be qualified to proclaim so important a message.

But God could and did qualify Paul to speak with such confidence (2 Cor. 2:17; 3:4-5, 12, 17; 4:1). And the life-transforming work of God's Spirit in the Corinthians' lives confirmed this (2 Cor. 3:2-18). For through Christ, the Spirit of God transformed the lives of those who beheld God the Father in the miraculous mirror in which the Son is seen.

To this mirror, Paul referred by saying, "But we all, with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit" (2 Cor. 3:18).<sup>1</sup>

Christ, of course, is both the mirror and the image seen in it, for when the eternal Son took upon Himself flesh and blood, He became a mirror in which we saw the character of God. His incarnation produced the mirror, and His life gave us the image.

And the miraculous nature of the mirror shows why Christ is the One through whom God is loved. It is miraculous, first of all, because it reflects not the visible but the invisible. We see not our visible selves but the invisible God. For Christ is the visible image of the invisible God. And second, it is miraculous because it transforms us who gaze into the mirror into the image of the One we see. We become what we see in the mirror, and thus transformed, follow Christ and love the Father.

But this is not merely desirable; it is absolutely necessary. For as we stand before His genuine goodness, we learn of our true sinfulness.

#### THE TRANSFORMATION PROCESS

Therefore, the first look in the mirror, Paul affirmed, must be a special one that brings forgiveness and life. We must turn from gazing only at rules of life and look at the Giver of life (2 Cor. 3:4-11). Until then, the rules serve primarily

to condemn us because we cannot keep them. However, when we look at Christ in order to see God, the Spirit takes the veil of blindness from our eyes; we accept the forgiveness and life that He offers, and the rules of God's way of life become mysteriously written on our hearts. Then from deep within us, we desire to keep God's rules and to serve Him (2 Cor. 3:2-3, 16). But the initial look must begin the transformation.

Keeping our eyes on Him will continue it. This is not simply looking at a literal picture, of course. This is looking at Christ, as a woman may look continuously at her much-loved husband. And as she grows in her knowledge of him, so she grows in her love for him. Similarly, as we grow in our knowledge of Christ, so will we grow in our love for Him. And then, by the mysterious working of the Spirit of God, we will become progressively like Christ—"from glory to glory," Paul said—from one degree of glorious change to the next.

#### SWANS AND UGLY DUCKLINGS

The transformation is not without its ups and downs, we must admit. Perhaps many of us in the process shall, in fact, repeat the story of the Ugly Duckling. In the beginning, he had a very unfortunate time. He was more awkward and less attractive than the ducks he grew up beside, and they ridiculed his differences. Fleeing their abuse, he took shelter in a home whose pets were a chicken and a cat. He was rejected here, too, because he could not lay eggs like a hen or purr like a kitten. "You just do not understand me," he told them, but he was treated only with scorn.

Then one day he beheld the graceful and elegant swans, the most beautiful birds he had ever seen. A strange feeling came over him. "He turned somersaults in the water,

stretched his neck trying to follow their flight, and uttered a cry so loud that it quite frightened him. . . . When he finally lost sight of them, he dived right down to the very bottom of the water, and when he came up, he was quite beside himself. He had no idea what the birds were called or where they were going; he only knew that he loved them as he had never loved anything before."<sup>2</sup>

Another winter came with all its struggles. But, at last, spring melted the ice of the ponds. And as the Ugly Duckling was swimming, he saw again two of those beautiful birds. Soon they swam towards him. The closer they came, the more frightened he became. Then when such beauty was right in front of him, he bowed his head in humility and covered his face with his wing.

However, when he bowed his head, he saw his reflection in the water for the very first time. And in speechless amazement, he saw that he too was a swan. Slowly uncovering his wing from his face, he lifted his head from the pond. He did not raise it proudly and high, as an ostrich would, but humbly as a swan, slightly bent over in an expression of gratitude. Then he swam off with his fellow swans.

Perhaps our own experiences are similar to his. Our first look to Christ in faith may often be like the Ugly Duckling's first look at the swans—accompanied more by excitement than understanding. We, of course, know why the Ugly Duckling was so beside himself when he first saw the swans. He responded from his innermost being, because he was made to be a swan, too. But at that moment he did not understand all this.

Similarly, we may respond to Christ from so deep within ourselves that we cannot explain every reason for our belief. Nevertheless, we do respond, because God has created us to be like the Great One we see in the miraculous mirror. Then we, like the Ugly Duckling, learn more

of ourselves and more of the One we love, after we have already responded.

As we continue to behold Christ, the image of God, the transformation in our lives will be as lovely as that of the Ugly Duckling who became a swan. We, like the swan, will become what we were born to be. Then with humility in our walk and gratitude in our hearts, we will live our lives before God; then we may love the Lord our God with all our hearts, souls, minds, and strength. That is how we may fulfill the greatest commandment, the most important goal of life.

But, of course, this all presupposes we learn more of God's Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. And that is what the rest of this book is about, learning more of the Son, the miraculous mirror who transforms our lives. In five crucial episodes of His life, we shall see His character unfold.