

His face. Bethesda Meditation. 31 July 2011.

The New Testament records two separate occasions when our Lord's face shone as the sun. The first was witnessed on 'a high mountain' – the so-called Mount of Transfiguration – as recorded at the opening of Matthew 17: 'After six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, and led them up into a high mountain by themselves. And He was transfigured before them, and His face shone as the sun'.¹

The second occasion was witnessed, not on a high mountain, but on a rugged island – as recorded in chapter 1 of the book of Revelation. 'I saw, the writer says, 'seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the seven lampstands one like the Son of man and His face was as the sun shining in its strength'.²

Interestingly, if I have it right, on both of these occasions, our Lord's face was seen 'as the sun' by the same man ... by the apostle John.

But, as you know well, this morning we meet to proclaim another event – an all-important event – which took place between these two occasions – an event at which His face was seen *very* differently. I refer, of course, to our Lord's sufferings at Golgotha.

And I am interested again to note that John was the only apostle who stood by the cross – who stood sufficiently near to the cross for our Lord to speak directly to him³ – and from where John could see clearly what C. H. Spurgeon spoke of in one of his hymns as the Lord's 'marred but lovely face'.⁴

For there John saw the Saviour, not *brilliantly transfigured* (as he had seen Him on what Peter calls 'the holy mount'⁵) but *brutally disfigured* on what Peter calls 'the tree'.⁶

Last Lord's day, we concluded our studies in the four so-called 'Servant songs' of Isaiah. No doubt, we are all familiar with the statement made towards the beginning of the final song. Speaking of God's Servant, our Lord Jesus, the prophet wrote, 'His visage (appearance, looks) was marred more than any man, and His form more than the sons of men'.⁷ Rightly we sang, 'Thy form was scarred, Thy visage marred'.

The previous Servant song (which forms part of Isaiah 50) speaks of our Lord's face twice.

First, in verse 6, the Saviour declares, 'I gave my back to the smiters, and my cheeks to those who plucked out the hair; I hid not *my face* from shame and spitting'.⁸

In biblical times, there were many ways in which men could express ridicule and contempt for others. For example, one way to shame an enemy was to strip him of his clothes, either of some or all.⁹ Another way to humiliate somebody was to wag one's head at him. Again, another way to disgrace somebody was to damage his beard, cherished by men of those days as a symbol of their manly dignity.¹⁰

And as we know well, during His so-called 'Passion', our Lord endured each of these. But from what I have been able to discover probably the greatest insult which could be levelled at a man was to spit directly in his face.

You may remember how in chapter 30 of the book which bears his name, Job bemoans the fact that, although once when he had entered any gathering the old men rose to their feet, and even the princes and the nobles stopped talking,¹¹ now there were young men of very dubious background who – as he said – 'do not hesitate to *spit in my face*'.¹²

With this mind, I recall words spoken by our Lord just a few months before His crucifixion – recorded by Mark in chapter 10 of his gospel – 'we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of man will be betrayed ... and they will ... scourge Him, and *spit on Him*, and kill Him'.¹³ Did you notice that the reference to His being spat on sits between references to His being scourged and being killed? This must surely give us some idea of how seriously our Lord viewed being spat on.

We read in Matthew 26 of the occasion when our Lord appeared before Caiaphas the high priest and the supreme Jewish council. Matthew tells us that, when Caiaphas put Him on oath to tell them if He was 'the Christ, the Son of God', Jesus said to him, 'You have said so'. At which point, the high priest tore his robes, and said, 'He has uttered blasphemy. Why do we still need witnesses? You have now heard His blasphemy. What do you think?' They answered, 'He deserves to die'. Then, Matthew records, 'they *spat in His face*, and struck Him (with their fists)'.¹⁴

Matthew further tells us that, following our Lord's civil trial before Pilate the next morning – when the governor had 'delivered Him to be crucified', 'the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the Praetorium and ... when they had twisted a crown of thorns, they put it on His head, and a reed in His right hand. And they bowed the knee before Him and mocked Him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" Then they *spat on Him*, and took the reed and struck Him on the head'.¹⁵

Oh yes, make no mistake, our Lord felt most keenly the stinging insult of men's filthy spittle – both of the Jewish council and of the Gentile soldiers.

I said that the third Servant Song of Isaiah spoke twice of the Saviour's face.

And our Lord followed His prophetic words, 'I hid not *my face* from shame and spitting', by adding, 'the Lord God will help me ... therefore I have set *my face* like flint (or 'like a hard rock'¹⁶),¹⁷

And it would be difficult not to associate this prophecy of Isaiah 50 with the words spoken of the Lord Jesus by Luke towards the end of chapter 9 of his gospel ... that 'when the time had come for Him to be received up ... *He set His face* to go to Jerusalem'.¹⁸

And, for my part, I have long found it difficult not to contrast Luke's words with those spoken concerning Hazael, the king of Syria, in 2 Kings 12 ... namely, that he 'went up and fought against Gath (which had earlier been heavily fortified¹⁹), and took it. Then', we read, 'Hazael *set his face* to go up to Jerusalem'. But the inspired record then tells how Jehoshaphat king of Judah successfully bribed Hazael to withdraw. 'And he went away from Jerusalem', we read.²⁰

But there was no bribery or bullying which could deter or dissuade the Lord Jesus from resolutely pursuing His way to Jerusalem.

I quoted earlier John's description in the opening chapter of the book of Revelation of 'one like the Son of man' whose 'face was like the sun shining in its strength'. Interestingly, John makes two further references to our Lord's face in his closing three chapters ...

In chapter 20, John tells us, 'I saw a great white throne and Him who sat on it, *from whose face* the earth and the heaven fled away'.²¹ Nobody, but nobody, will venture to spit in His face then!

And then, in his final chapter, John speaks of the glorious prospect – of the happy hope – of God's people ... speaks both of that which they shall *do* and that which they shall see when they reach the eternal city ... 'His servants shall serve Him: and they shall see His face'.²² Happy hope indeed.

This past Thursday marked the 29th anniversary of the home call of Keith Green, the Christian musician, singer and songwriter, who died, together with two of his children, in an air crash in Texas at the age of just 28.²³

I want us now to sing the verse which Keith Green added to the two verses and chorus of a song written some time earlier by his wife Melody – a verse which Keith added just five months before his death.²⁴

*When I stand in glory,
I will see His face,
and there I'll serve my King forever,
In that Holy Place.*

Footnotes

¹ Matt. 17. 1-2.

² Rev. 1. 12-16.

³ 'Jesus saw His mother, and the disciple whom He loved standing by ... *He said to the disciple*, "Behold your mother!" John 19. 26-27.

⁴ 'Amidst us our Belovèd stands'. Note the reference in Spurgeon's verse to 'the holy mount'!

⁵ 2 Pet. 1. 18.

⁶ Acts 5. 30; 10. 39; 1 Pet. 2. 24. See also Acts 13. 29.

⁷ Isa. 52. 14.

⁸ Isa. 50. 6.

⁹ This is what Hanun, king of Ammon, did to humiliate David's servants in 2 Sam. 10. 4-5.

¹⁰ As was also done to David's servants in 2 Samuel 10.

¹¹ Job 29. 7-10.

¹² Job 30. 1-10. Most certainly, to spit in someone's face was considered to be one of the highest forms of insult and indignity. To spit *in another's presence* was regarded as an insult – much more to spit *on someone* – and most of all to spit *directly in his or her face*.

¹³ Mark 10. 33-34. In the context, the words 'spit on Him' refer particularly to the action of 'the Gentiles', v. 33; that is, they refer to Mark 15. 19 rather than Mark 14. 65.

¹⁴ Matt. 26. 63-68. John may well have been an eyewitness, John 18. 15.

¹⁵ Matt. 27. 27-30. Their filthy spittle took the place of the kiss of homage and allegiance which they knew the Emperor was accustomed to receive.

When Miriam was afflicted with leprosy, it was looked upon as a disgrace to her, like that of her father spitting in her face ... 'Moses cried to the Lord, "Heal her, O God, I beseech thee". But the Lord said to Moses, "If her father had but *spit in her face*, should she not be shamed seven days? Let her be shut up outside the camp seven days, and after that she may be brought in again"', Num. 12. 13-14.

He that refused to raise up seed to his brother, was to undergo this dishonour ... 'if the man does not wish to take his brother's wife, then his brother's wife shall go up to the gate to the elders, and say, "My husband's brother refuses to perpetuate his brother's name in Israel; he will not perform the duty of a husband's brother to me". Then the elders of his city shall call him, and speak to him: and if he persists, saying, "I do not wish to take her", then his brother's wife shall go up to him in the presence of the elders, and pull his sandal off his foot, and *spit in his face*; and she shall

¹⁶ See Deut. 8. 15.

¹⁷ Isa. 50. 7.

¹⁸ Luke 9. 51.

¹⁹ 2 Chron. 11. 8

²⁰ 2 Kings 12. 17-18.

²¹ 'And no place was found for them', Rev. 20. 11. Compare, 'Then was the iron, the clay, the brass, the silver, and the gold, broken to pieces together, and became like the chaff of the summer threshingfloors; and the wind carried them away, that *no place was found for them*: and the stone that smote the image became a great mountain, and filled the whole earth', Dan. 2. 35.

²² Rev. 22. 3-4.

²³ Keith Green was called home on 28 July 1982.

²⁴ See ... <http://escapetoreality.org/2010/07/28/keith-greens-grace-awakening/> . 'Songs for the Shepherd' was released on 12 April 1982.