

# Transfiguration of Christ

Appearance of the Kingdom of God

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**Contents:** [The Event of Transfiguration of Our Lord.](#) [Nature of the Light of Tabor.](#) [Divine Service of the Feast of Transfiguration.](#) [Canon of Transfiguration.](#) [Tradition of Consecration of Grapes.](#) [Conclusion.](#)

**E**verybody instinctively longs for happiness. But often one does not know what happiness is, and searches in places where there is no happiness and where it cannot be. By His Transfiguration on Mount Tabor Lord Jesus Christ demonstrated that real happiness lies in union with God. In such union the entire essence of a human changes, or transfigures: unspeakable peace, harmony and joy settle in the soul; the intellect receives enlightenment, and all abilities of a person reach their utmost extent; the soul fills with Divine light and becomes godlike. Now the Kingdom of God enters the human.

Transfiguration of Our Saviour was a revelation of the highest grace of the Kingdom of God "coming with power." Not physical but spiritual light of Christ's Divine nature, by then hidden under the veil of His human flesh, shone on Mount Tabor. The miracle was that the scales, concealing the spiritual world, fell from the Apostles' physical eyes, and with their spiritual eyes they saw Christ in His Divine Power. Then their hearts were filled with the beatitude they had never experienced before.

Since the Holy Ghost came upon the Apostles and until today, many Christians, especially saints, have joined the Miracle of Tabor, being honored with seeing the gleams of the Divine Light. Those were always unforgettable and most happy moments of their lives. However, the Divine light is not the realm of the few chosen. First coming at the time of the Holy Baptism, it mysteriously resides in every Christian since then. It strengthens up in line with a Christian's improvement and approach to God, specifically after the Holy Communion.

For humans not to fall to laziness and pride, it is not given to them to feel the entire joy of communion with God, which shall be the reward in the world to come. Still the Divine light rests in zealous Christians, and at times Lord out of His Grace gives us to feel this special joy of communion with Him. Such communion is perceived as shining of a mysterious light inside a person. This shining brings forward the particular unforgettable bliss, inexplicable to those who has never experienced it. Compared to it, all worldly joys seem scanty and miserable. We believe that the eternal life will start after this temporary world, and *'Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father'* (Matt 13:43).

In this brochure we will discuss the event of Transfiguration of Our Saviour, read Saint Fathers' quotations on the nature of the light of Tabor and its meaning in a life of a Christian, and then tell in brief about the Divine Service on the Feast of Transfiguration, read the English language translation of the canon of mattins, and explain the meaning of consecration of grapes and apples on the Feast of transfiguration. In the conclusion we will speak on the strengthening of spiritual light in ourselves, that is, on the internal transfiguration.

## The Event of Transfiguration

**T**he Transfiguration of Lord Jesus Christ on Mount Tabor, where His appearance changed and became light-like, is described by Evangelists Matthew, Mark and Luke. The Transfiguration took place six days after the Saviour had told about His forthcoming Sufferings on the Cross. The Crucifixion followed in about forty days after Transfiguration. The evangelist Matthew described Our Saviour's Transfiguration as follows:

"And after six days Jesus taketh Peter, James, and John his brother, and bringeth them up into an high mountain apart, And was transfigured before them: and his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light. And, behold, there appeared unto them Moses and Elias talking with him. Then answered Peter, and said unto Jesus, Lord, it is good for us to be here: if thou wilt, let us make

here three tabernacles; one for thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elias. While he yet spake, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them: and behold a voice out of the cloud, which said, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him. And when the disciples heard it, they fell on their face, and were sore afraid. And Jesus came and touched them, and said, Arise, and be not afraid. And when they had lifted up their eyes, they saw no man, save Jesus only. And as they came down from the mountain, Jesus charged them, saying, Tell the vision to no man, until the Son of man be risen again from the dead. And his disciples asked him, saying, Why then say the scribes that Elias must first come? And Jesus answered and said unto them, Elias truly shall first come, and restore all things. But I say unto you, That Elias is come already, and they knew him not, but have done unto him whatsoever they listed. Likewise shall also the Son of man suffer of them" (Matt 17:1-12).

The place of Transfiguration is not named by any of the Evangelists, but the ancient tradition unanimously points at **Tabor**, a mountain in Galilee, six kilometers south-east of Nazareth. Jesus Christ spent His youth not far from this mountain and probably many times climbed it and prayed on its top. About one kilometer high, Mount Tabor stately rises above surrounding plains and attracts looks of wayfarers in every direction. From its top a view opens to the Sea of Galilee and the River Jordan lying in the east of it. The mountain is covered with magnificent oaks and pistachio trees from foot to middle.

The Saviour did not bring all His disciples up to the mountain, but only three of them (Peter, James and his brother John the Theologian), while the others stayed at the foot of the mountain. Going uphill was tiring, and the Apostles accompanying Christ lied down for rest and dozed off; the Saviour started praying. During the prayer, the looks of Our Saviour changed: His face shone as the sun, and His clothes became white as the light. The bright light woke up the Apostles and they saw Their Teacher in His heavenly glory of the Son of God. His Divinity shone through His flesh and clothing.

Looking at the Saviour in astonishment, the Apostles saw two unfamiliar figures who, as it turned up later, were ancient prophets Moses and Elias coming to Christ from the world invisible. The Evangelists do not explain why these two prophets came. Supposedly, the coming of the two most authoritative Old Testament righteous people was the evidence of Christ's Divinity for the Apostles and for all Jews. First of all, until that time the rumor had been widespread among common people that Jesus Christ was either Elias, or another ancient prophet risen. The appearance of Elias and Moses witnessed the absurdity of this opinion. The prophets were actually talking to Christ as Messiah and Son of God. Moreover, many of the Jews accused Christ of disregarding the Law and even blasphemously and wrongfully assuming the honor of the Son of God (John 9:16; 10:33), and the

appearance of these two most ardent champions of the glory of Jehovah had to convince everyone that Christ really was the promised Messiah and that all His statements were true. It was obvious that Moses who had written the Book of the Law, would not have tolerated any infringement of this Law and would not have stood before the infringer in reverence. And Elias, who had once burnt Jehovah's enemies with fire from heaven, would not have stood humbly before the One Who said He was equal to God Father if He had not been such (Jesus said, "*I and my Father are one*" (John 10:30). The reading on Elias can be found in 2 Kings 1:10).

The appearance of the ancient prophets who had gone to the better world must convince us the Christians that the life of a human does not end with the death, and that the souls of those who died are not sleeping, as some sectarians erroneously teach, but are awoken, living a full-scale spiritual life. Jesus Christ has power over life and death, as He says, "*I have the keys of hell and of death*" (Rev. 1:18).

The conversation of Moses and Elias with Christ was to **encourage the Apostles and strengthen their faith in Christ** when the Suffering on the Cross was close ahead. The Apostles indeed thought about their Teacher's suffering as humiliation and dishonor, but the prophets called it "glory" that He intended to manifest in Jerusalem. And right before the Crucifixion the Saviour viewed the impending suffering and dishonorable death as the beginning of glorification of His Father and Himself as the Saviour of the mankind; He said, "*Father, the hour is come; glorify thy Son, that thy Son also may glorify Thee*" (John 17:1).

The special graceful state of the Apostles during the Saviour's Transfiguration was expressed by Saint Peter who said, "*Lord, it is good for us to be here!*" Delighted by the glorious vision, Peter wished that it would last, and last forever, if possible. So Peter suggested to the Saviour to make three tabernacles, or pavilions, on the top of the mountain (Jews and other oriental people made 'tabernacles' by digging a pole in the ground, stretching ropes from its top to pegs driven at a certain distance around it, and covering up with fabric; sometimes skins or leaves and bark were used instead). The Apostle Peter did not want to come back to the insidious and malicious world where his Teacher was threatened by suffering and death.

As the Evangelists say, at that moment everyone on the mountain was overshadowed by a bright cloud, which indicated the presence of God the Father (a dark cloud is symbol and sign of God the Just Judge (Ex. 24:18; 19:18), while a bright cloud is the symbol and sign of the presence of God Merciful. A similar bright cloud, called shekina in the Bible, was at times seen above the Sanctuary, the main part of the Judean temple (1 Kings 8:10-11; Ezek 1:4; 10:4), and a mysterious voice was heard from the cloud like it was during Theophany, "*This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased,*" and also, "*Hear Him.*" These last words were to remind to the Apostles Moses' ancient prophesy of the Forthcoming Great Prophet Who would herald God's will to the Jews. "*Whosoever will not hearken unto my words which he shall speak in my name, I will require it of*

him," says God in Deuteronomy 18:19. So here on Tabor fifteen hundred years later God Father gave the evidence of Moses' prophesy about the Messiah as the Greatest of prophets.

Hearing the voice from the cloud, the disciples fell on the ground in fear. Everything was unusual for them here on the mountain: the seclusion and height of the place, the deep silence of nature, the appearance of the prophets of the past, the light of extreme brightness and finally the voice of God Father Himself.

When they were coming down, Jesus forbade the Apostles to tell anyone what had happened on the mountain until His rising from the dead. The Lord transfigured in order to affirm to His trusted disciples that He indeed was the Messiah. Still it was too early to tell about the Transfiguration to the Jewish public at large whose senses would anticipate the Messiah as a powerful king and conqueror. One of the eye witnesses of this event, Apostle Peter, later recalled it as unquestionably trustworthy and brought it forth as proof of Christ's divine nature (2 Peter 1:16-18).

## Nature of the Light of Tabor

**T**he Saviour's Transfiguration on Tabor was perceived by His disciples as light. It was not a flux of luminous physical particles, but something else similar to light. This light shone brighter than sun, it warmed but burned not. Its shining was accompanied with sensation of extraordinary peace and joy. It was the vision of the future bliss of heaven.

The word light in the Holy Scripture is often applied to God and things caused by God: truth, moral commandments and good deeds. In this case the word light might be understood as allegory for something kind and life-giving. Indeed, what sunlight is for the physical world, that God is for the world of spirit. Light enables us to see and cognize the world, to move, to develop, to create. Light gives warmth and life to all nature. Without the sun, our planet would turn into a lifeless, gloomy ice block.

In a like way God is the light for spiritual creatures: angels and humans. He enlightens our mind with His truth; He gives us the highest spiritual knowledge; He pours energy and inspiration into us; He warms our hearts with love; He guides our lives to the good goal. We receive all spiritual comforts from God. Moving away from God, our soul sinks in the darkness and perishes.

That is how people of spiritual life perceived their communion with God: "*With thee is the fountain of life: in thy light shall we see light*" (Ps. 36:9); "*Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path*" (Ps. 119:105). *Very often the coming*

*of the Messiah was apprehended as spiritual light: "The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined" (Is. 9:2). "I am the light of the world," said Jesus to the Jews, "he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life... Yet a little while is the light with you. Walk while ye have the light, lest darkness come upon you: for he that walketh in darkness knoweth not whither he goeth. While ye have light, believe in the light, that ye may be the children of light" (John 8:12; 12:35-36). In a similar way, St. John the Theologian says that love and good works are "walking in light" and "having light."*

In some places of the Holy Scripture the word light applies to God not allegorically but in expressions, which apparently describe His very nature, as in the following quotations. *"Who coverest thyself with light as with a garment" (Ps 104:2). The Apostle James calls God "the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning" (James 1:17). The Apostle John writes, "God is light, and in him is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5-7). The Apostle Paul says that God is "dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto; whom no man hath seen, nor can see" (1 Tim 6:16). The Book of Revelation reads, "And the city (New Jerusalem) had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it: for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof. And the nations of them which are saved shall walk in the light of it... And they shall see his face; and his name shall be in their foreheads. And there shall be no night there; and they need no candle, neither light of the sun; for the Lord God giveth them light" (Rev. 21:23-24; 22:4-5).*

The nature of the light on Mount Tabor was in great detail discussed by Saint Gregory Palama (1296-1356) who had to advocate the Orthodox teaching of spiritual light against learned monks Barlaam, Akindine and their followers. It was in the epoch of Renaissance when paganism was revitalized in arts, thinking and morals. Philosophers were returning to the heathen understanding of God as transcendent out-of-the-world incomprehensible and inaccessible Absolute. Based on this non-Christian concept of God, Barlaam and Akindine insisted that on Mount Tabor Apostles could not have seen God, but had seen normal physical light.

Gregory Palama opposed that the light on Tabor was only similar to physical light but was totally different by nature. That light shone brighter than sunlight and was whiter than snow, but still it did not cause blindness; it warmed without burning. Its shining was accompanied by the sensation of great felicity. Unlike regular light, the light of Tabor was called by St. Gregory Palama 'unmade divine energy.' The substance of this light was inseparable from the eternal substance of God because God is indivisible. God is not comprehensible in His substance, but still His actions and energy, being inseparable from His divine essence, are comprehensible for us created in His image, after His likeness. And the Son of God became a man in order to associate us into His Divine nature, to deify us. We sense God's presence

with our soul, not our fleshly eyes. St. Gregory Palama explains that the ability to see the Divine light is delivered to a human by the Holy Ghost who translates one from the state of flesh to the state of spirit (Homily 34 On Transfiguration). It is like a curtain falling down from the eyes of the seer at the moment of the vision, making him able to see the divine shining. Action of the spiritual light in this life touches the soul. But in the future life it will also extend to the renewed bodies of the righteous, as it is said, "*Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father.*"

The nature of the graceful light ("divine energy") is mysterious and inexplicable as well as the substance of the Creator. However it can be distinctly tangible when the Merciful God permits a human to see the divine light. Then the human feels the heavenly bliss, and all worldly joys compared to it are null.

St. Gregory Palama also writes that on Mount Tabor Christ half-opened His divinity before the Apostles and showed God dwelling in Him, because He is Light from eternity. The skin of Moses' face once shone when God was speaking with him on Mount Sinai. But what happened to him was the effect of God's power on him and thus this shining was, so say, passive, not being caused by internal power inherent to him (i.e. Moses was only reflecting God's light). But the Lord Jesus Christ's shining was inside Himself. On Mount Tabor He manifested to the Apostles the glory of His Divinity. He shone while during prayer, and thus taught us what would be for saints the prerequisite for receiving and the manner of seeing God's light (Discussions from Homilies 34 and 35).

Many righteous people were honored with seeing the light like that on Mount Tabor. In the Holy Scripture and writings of the Holy Fathers the graceful light is described mostly as an internal condition received through prayer, contemplation about God, and particularly Holy Communion. Experienced internally, it is at the same time as real as the visible physical light. External shining of this light is a rarer phenomenon. However, writings of saints contain descriptions of external manifestations of this immaterial Divine light when the zealot's very body and clothes become shining. Visible light was many times described in the Lives of Saints of 4th-6th centuries, *Lavsaik* and *Spiritual Meadow*. Here we will cite several cases described by eye witnesses. "Abba Pamvo's face was shining as lightning and he was as king sitting on his throne." Before death of Abba Sisoï, monks came to say good-bye to him and suddenly saw his face shining as the sun. Someone met Abba Siluan and prostrated himself because Abba's face and body were bright as an angel. A brother came to Abba Arsenius' cell in a secluded monastery, looked through the doorway and saw that the elder was all like fiery. Wonderful light that shone in Sergius of Radonezh attracted everyone who had seen him even once. At the time of singing prayer 'Here we sing to Thee' all the present saw fire, "as if it fell from heaven and moved over the Altar Table, shining all around the altar," and surrounded Sergius while he was doing the rite. During Eucharist, divine fire entered the chalice and reverend Sergius received it in

Communion. St. Seraphim's admirer Motovilov saw him in heavenly light and said, "I cannot look at you, father, because lightning is pouring from your eyes. Your face has become brighter than sun and my eyes ache."

Visitors of Elder Ambrosius in Optina also sometimes saw him shining. Bishop Theophan the Anchorite and St. Righteous Father John of Kronschtadt were seen with their faces shining. Father John stood before God like before the sun; feeling the inexpressible brilliance of divine light, he closed his eyes and clearly experienced sojourning in the beams of this light, sensed their warmth, joy, and proximity to Christ the Saviour. Out of God's grace, his face had splendor like angel's face, and people wanted to look at him (Note: Attention must be paid to stories of people who had died and then returned to life; after their death they arrived in a world of light and there experienced remarkable peace and joy. Many descriptions of this were collected by Raymond A. Moody, Jr., MD, in his book "Life after Life." Also see Iskul's brochure "Event Incredible for Many, but Still True." It might be that God permitted them to see His shining light in order that they stir up faith in the modern rationalistic society.).

The sensation of felicity from divine light can be so powerful that humans feel sad and abandoned after it had ended. St. Gregory the Theologian describes this state as follows, "I wish to stay all by myself and setting aside flesh and the world, not touching anything corporal without extreme need, talking to myself and God, live above all things visible, and always carry in myself clear divine images unmixed with earthly delusive impressions, be and permanently become an unshadowed mirror of God and divinity, acquire light to light, adding the brightest to the paler; and all this until we rise to the Source of illuminations and reach the blessed end. Beloved God pierces the mind with a beam of light and immediately escapes from fast-moving thought. The more we know Him, the greater grows the distance, because He slips from hands, calls and entails the soul."

St Simeon the New Theologian (949-1022) often received divine illuminations. After one of them he felt that "all feelings of my soul and mind were stuck to the only one inexplicable joy and gladness that had arose out of that solemn light. But when the unmeasurable light that had been shown to me slowly lessened and finally became absolutely invisible, then I came to sense and recognized the marvelous things, which the power of that light performed in me. This light brings joy when it is seen, and leaves sores and aches in heart after it vanishes" (Word 86).

Divine light is mysteriously given to every truly believing Orthodox Christian. However, the Holy Fathers warn against attempting to artificially invoke and see the spiritual shining because such attempts conceal the tremendous danger of falling to the devil's enchantment. A Christian must go the narrow way of repentance, meekness and self-correction. This life is the time of labor; the future life shall be the time of reward.