

The New Name

by George MacDonald

The sermon explores the profound significance of the new name given by God to those who overcome, emphasizing individuality and personal relationship with the Divine.

Scripture: Psalm 139:1, Isaiah 62:2, Matthew 10:30, John 10:3, Romans 2:6, 1 Corinthians 13:12, Philippians 2:9, 1 John 3:2, Revelation 2:17, Revelation 3:12

Topics: "Divine Judgment", "Personal Revelation"

Description

George MacDonald delves into the mysticism found in the Book of Revelation, exploring the symbolism of the white stone and the new name written on it, which signifies the divine judgment and communication of what God thinks about the individual who overcomes. He emphasizes the importance of understanding the true essence of a name as a symbol of one's character and being, given by God alone. MacDonald highlights the individual and unique relationship each person has with God, where God reveals a secret new name to each individual, signifying their distinctiveness and personal connection with Him.

Transcript

To him that overcometh, I will give a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth it.--Rev. ii. 17.

Whether the Book of the Revelation be written by the same man who wrote the Gospel according to St John or not, there is, at least, one element common to the two--the mysticism.

I use the word mysticism as representing a certain mode of embodying truth, common, in various degrees, to almost all, if not all, the writers of the New Testament. The attempt to define it thoroughly would require an essay. I will hazard but one suggestion towards it: A mystical mind is one which, having perceived that the highest expression of which the truth admits, lies in the symbolism of nature and the human customs that result from human necessities, prosecutes thought about truth so embodied by dealing with the symbols themselves after logical forms. This is the highest mode of conveying the deepest truth; and the Lord himself often employed it, as, for instance, in the whole passage ending with the words, "If therefore the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is the darkness!"

The mysticism in the Gospel of St John is of the simplest, and, therefore, noblest nature. No dweller in this planet can imagine a method of embodying truth that shall be purer, loftier, truer to the truth embodied. There may be higher modes in other worlds, or there may not--I cannot tell; but of all our modes these

forms are best illustrations of the highest. Apparently the mysticism of St John's own nature enabled him to remember and report with sufficient accuracy the words of our Lord, always, it seems to me, of a recognizably different kind from those of any of the writers of the New Testament--chiefly, perhaps, in the simplicity of their poetical mysticism.

But the mysticism in the Book of the Revelation is more complicated, more gorgeous, less poetic, and occasionally, I think, perhaps arbitrary, or approaching the arbitrary; reminding one, in a word, of the mysticism of Swedenborg. Putting aside both historical and literary criticism, in neither of which with regard to the authorship of these two books have I a right even to an opinion, I would venture to suggest that possibly their difference in tone is just what one might expect when the historian of a mystical teacher and the recorder of his mystical sayings, proceeds to embody his own thoughts, feelings, and inspirations; that is, when the revelation flows no longer from the lips of the Master, but through the disciple's own heart, soul, and brain. For surely not the most idolatrous of our Bible-worshipping brothers and sisters will venture to assert that the Spirit of God could speak as freely by the lips of the wind-swayed, reed-like, rebukable Peter, or of the Thomas who could believe his own eyes, but neither the word of his brethren, nor the nature of his Master, as by the lips of Him who was blind and deaf to everything but the will of him that sent him.

Truth is truth, whether from the lips of Jesus or Balaam. But, in its deepest sense, the truth is a condition of heart, soul, mind, and strength towards God and towards our fellow--not an utterance, not even a right form of words; and therefore such truth coming forth in words is, in a sense, the person that speaks. And many of the utterances of truth in the Revelation, commonly called of St John, are not merely lofty in form, but carry with them the conviction that the writer was no mere "trumpet of a prophecy," but spoke that he did know, and testified that he had seen.

In this passage about the gift of the white stone, I think we find the essence of religion.

What the notion in the mind of the writer with regard to the white stone was, is, I think, of comparatively little moment. I take the stone to belong more to the arbitrary and fanciful than to the true mystical imagery, although for the bringing out of the mystical thought in which it is concerned, it is of high and honourable dignity. For fancy itself will subserve the true imagination of the mystic, and so be glorified. I doubt if the writer himself associated any essential meaning with it. Certainly I will not allow that he had such a poor notion in it as that of a voting pebble--white, because the man who receives it is accepted or chosen. The word is used likewise for a precious stone set as a jewel. And the writer thought of it mystically, a mode far more likely to involve a reference to nature than to a political custom. What his mystic meaning may be, must be taken differently by different minds. I think he sees in its whiteness purity, and in its substance indestructibility. But I care chiefly to regard the stone as the vehicle of the name,--as the form whereby the name is represented as passing from God to the man, and what is involved in this communication is what I wish to show. If my reader will not acknowledge my representation as St John's meaning, I yet hope so to set it forth that he shall see the representation to be true in itself, and then I shall willingly leave the interpretation to its fate.

I say, in brief, the giving of the white stone with the new name is the communication of what God thinks about the man to the man. It is the divine judgment, the solemn holy doom of the righteous man, the "Come, thou blessed," spoken to the individual.

In order to see this, we must first understand what is the idea of a name,--that is, what is the perfect notion of a name. For, seeing the mystical energy of a holy mind here speaks of God as giving something, we must understand that the essential thing, and not any of its accidents or imitations, is intended.

A name of the ordinary kind in this world, has nothing essential in it. It is but a label by which one man and a scrap of his external history may be known from another man and a scrap of his history. The only names which have significance are those which the popular judgment or prejudice or humour bestows, either for ridicule or honour, upon a few out of the many. Each of these is founded upon some external characteristic of the man, upon some predominant peculiarity of temper, some excellence or the reverse of character, or something which he does or has done well or ill enough, or at least, singularly enough, to render him, in the eyes of the people, worthy of such distinction from other men. As far as they go, these are real names, for, in some poor measure, they express individuality.

The true name is one which expresses the character, the nature, the being, the meaning of the person who bears it. It is the man's own symbol,--his soul's picture, in a word,--the sign which belongs to him and to no one else. Who can give a man this, his own name? God alone. For no one but God sees what the man is, or even, seeing what he is, could express in a name-word the sum and harmony of what he sees. To whom is this name given? To him that overcometh. When is it given? When he has overcome. Does God then not know what a man is going to become? As surely as he sees the oak which he put there lying in the heart of the acorn. Why then does he wait till the man has become by overcoming ere he settles what his name shall be? He does not wait; he knows his name from the first. But as--although repentance comes because God pardons--yet the man becomes aware of the pardon only in the repentance; so it is only when the man has become his name that God gives him the stone with the name upon it, for then first can he understand what his name signifies. It is the blossom, the perfection, the completion, that determines the name; and God foresees that from the first, because he made it so; but the tree of the soul, before its blossom comes, cannot understand what blossom it is to bear, and could not know what the word meant, which, in representing its own unarrived completeness, named itself. Such a name cannot be given until the man is the name.

God's name for a man must then be the expression in a mystical word--a word of that language which all who have overcome understand--of his own idea of the man, that being whom he had in his thought when he began to make the child, and whom he kept in his thought through the long process of creation that went to realize the idea. To tell the name is to seal the success--to say, "In thee also I am well pleased."

But we are still in the region of symbol. For supposing that such a form were actually observed between God and him that overcometh, it would be no less a symbol--only an acted one. We must therefore look deeper still for the fulness of its meaning. Up to this point little has been said to justify our expectations of discovery in the text. Let us, I say, look deeper. We shall not look long before we find that the mystical symbol has for its centre of significance the fact of the personal individual relation of every man to his God. That every man has affairs, and those his first affairs, with God, stands to the reason of every man who associates any meaning or feeling with the words, Maker, Father, God. Were we but children of a day, with the understanding that some one had given us that one holiday, there would be something to be thought, to be felt, to be done, because we knew it. For then our nature would be according to our fate, and we could worship and die. But it would be only the praise of the dead, not the praise of the living, for death would be the deepest, the lasting, the overcoming. We should have come out of nothingness, not out of God. He could only be our Maker, not our Father, our Origin. But now we know that God cannot be the God of the dead--must be the God of the living; inasmuch as to know that we died, would freeze the

heart of worship, and we could not say Our God, or feel him worthy of such worth-ship as we could render. To him who offers unto this God of the living his own self of sacrifice, to him that overcometh, him who has brought his individual life back to its source, who knows that he is one of God's children, this one of the Father's making, he giveth the white stone. To him who climbs on the stair of all his God-born efforts and God-given victories up to the height of his being--that of looking face to face upon his ideal self in the bosom of the Father--God's him, realized in him through the Father's love in the Elder Brother's devotion--to him God gives the new name written.

But I leave this, because that which follows embraces and intensifies this individuality of relation in a fuller development of the truth. For the name is one "which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth it." Not only then has each man his individual relation to God, but each man has his peculiar relation to God. He is to God a peculiar being, made after his own fashion, and that of no one else; for when he is perfected he shall receive the new name which no one else can understand. Hence he can worship God as no man else can worship him,--can understand God as no man else can understand him. This or that man may understand God more, may understand God better than he, but no other man can understand God as he understands him. God give me grace to be humble before thee, my brother, that I drag not my simulacrum of thee before the judgment-seat of the unjust judge, but look up to thyself for what revelation of God thou and no one else canst give. As the fir-tree lifts up itself with a far different need from the need of the palm-tree, so does each man stand before God, and lift up a different humanity to the common Father. And for each God has a different response. With every man he has a secret--the secret of the new name. In every man there is a loneliness, an inner chamber of peculiar life into which God only can enter. I say not it is the innermost chamber--but a chamber into which no brother, nay, no sister can come.

From this it follows that there is a chamber also--(O God, humble and accept my speech)--a chamber in God himself, into which none can enter but the one, the individual, the peculiar man,--out of which chamber that man has to bring revelation and strength for his brethren. This is that for which he was made--to reveal the secret things of the Father.

By his creation, then, each man is isolated with God; each, in respect of his peculiar making, can say, "my God;" each can come to him alone, and speak with him face to face, as a man speaketh with his friend. There is no massing of men with God. When he speaks of gathered men, it is as a spiritual body, not a mass. For in a body every smallest portion is individual, and therefore capable of forming a part of the body.

See, now, what a significance the symbolism of our text assumes. Each of us is a distinct flower or tree in the spiritual garden of God,--precious, each for his own sake, in the eyes of him who is even now making us,--each of us watered and shone upon and filled with life, for the sake of his flower, his completed being, which will blossom out of him at last to the glory and pleasure of the great gardener. For each has within him a secret of the Divinity; each is growing towards the revelation of that secret to himself, and so to the full reception, according to his measure, of the divine. Every moment that he is true to his true self, some new shine of the white stone breaks on his inward eye, some fresh channel is opened upward for the coming glory of the flower, the conscious offering of his whole being in beauty to the Maker. Each man, then, is in God's sight worth. Life and action, thought and intent, are sacred. And what an end lies before us! To have a consciousness of our own ideal being flashed into us from the thought of God! Surely for this may well give way all our paltry self-consciousnesses, our self-admirations and self-worships! Surely to know what he thinks about us will pale out of our souls all our thoughts about ourselves! and we may well hold them loosely now, and be ready to let them go. Towards this result St Paul had already drawn

near, when he who had begun the race with a bitter cry for deliverance from the body of his death, was able to say that he judged his own self no longer.

"But is there not the worst of all dangers involved in such teaching--the danger of spiritual pride?" If there be, are we to refuse the spirit for fear of the pride? Or is there any other deliverance from pride except the spirit? Pride springs from supposed success in the high aim: with attainment itself comes humility. But here there is no room for ambition. Ambition is the desire to be above one's neighbour; and here there is no possibility of comparison with one's neighbour: no one knows what the white stone contains except the man who receives it. Here is room for endless aspiration towards the unseen ideal; none for ambition. Ambition would only be higher than others; aspiration would be high. Relative worth is not only unknown--to the children of the kingdom it is unknowable. Each esteems the other better than himself. How shall the rose, the glowing heart of the summer heats, rejoice against the snowdrop risen with hanging head from the white bosom of the snow? Both are God's thoughts; both are dear to him; both are needful to the completeness of his earth and the revelation of himself. "God has cared to make me for himself," says the victor with the white stone, "and has called me that which I like best; for my own name must be what I would have it, seeing it is myself. What matter whether I be called a grass of the field, or an eagle of the air? a stone to build into his temple, or a Boanerges to wield his thunder? I am his; his idea, his making; perfect in my kind, yea, perfect in his sight; full of him, revealing him, alone with him. Let him call me what he will. The name shall be precious as my life. I seek no more."

Gone then will be all anxiety as to what his neighbour may think about him. It is enough that God thinks about him. To be something to God--is not that praise enough? To be a thing that God cares for and would have complete for himself, because it is worth caring for--is not that life enough?

Neither will he thus be isolated from his fellows. For that we say of one, we say of all. It is as one that the man has claims amongst his fellows. Each will feel the sacredness and awe of his neighbour's dark and silent speech with his God. Each will regard the other as a prophet, and look to him for what the Lord hath spoken. Each, as a high priest returning from his Holy of Holies, will bring from his communion some glad tidings, some gospel of truth, which, when spoken, his neighbours shall receive and understand. Each will behold in the other a marvel of revelation, a present son or daughter of the Most High, come forth from him to reveal him afresh. In God each will draw nigh to each.

Yes, there will be danger--danger as everywhere; but he giveth more grace. And if the man who has striven up the heights should yet fall from them into the deeps, is there not that fire of God, the consuming fire, which burneth and destroyeth not?

To no one who has not already had some speech with God, or who has not at least felt some aspiration towards the fount of his being, can all this appear other than foolishness. So be it.

But, Lord, help them and us, and make our being grow into thy likeness. If through ages of strife and ages of growth, yet let us at last see thy face, and receive the white stone from thy hand. That thus we may grow, give us day by day our daily bread. Fill us with the words that proceed out of thy mouth. Help us to lay up treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt.

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