

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,  
on Sunday, June 10, 1990, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

### **EXODUS 20:21**

“And the people stood afar off, while Moses drew  
near to the thick darkness where God was.”

### **ON FINDING GOD IN THE DARKNESS**

“The thick darkness where God was.” Surely that sounds mysterious, indeed paradoxical. “God is light,” exclaims St. John, “and in Him is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5). St. Paul tells us that the God we worship “dwells in unapproachable light” (1 Timothy 6:16). And St. Peter tells us that God has called Christians “out of darkness into His marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9). Yet here in this significant verse in Exodus we find these words: “the thick darkness where God was.”

Our text says that “the people stood afar off” and left Moses to ascend Mount Sinai alone. They were glad to remain at a distance -- indeed the further away the better! The mountain was grim enough even in the sunshine. But today with that ominous black thundercloud enveloping it, they dare not go near it. Who knew what horrible demons might have their dwelling there? “Stand back! Not one step farther!” So, the whole host of Israel halted, and left one iron-nerved man, their leader Moses, to go up there alone. And with faith and determination he scaled the mountain, climbing up into that thick darkness that looked like the abode of doom -- “the thick darkness where God was.”

Let us think about the thick darkness -- and God!

**1. First let us think of the darkness of history** -- that welter of chaos and confusion and incredible suffering where unbelievers tell us that no living God, certainly no loving and almighty heavenly Father can possibly be. “You talk about a kindly providence,” they say. “Well, what about the millions of starving people in the world? What about the ruthless slave camps, the Russian gulags? What about the six million Jews sent to death in the ‘Holocaust’; and what about that infinitely worse holocaust which nuclear weapons could unleash upon the earth?” This is the darkness of history, and any cheap talk about all being right with the world is shamefully shallow.

But let us go back to another hour in history. It is 1200 years after the nation of Israel escaped from the slavery of Egypt and stood at the foot of Mount Sinai to receive the commandments of God. Proud Rome is now the mistress of the world. And where was the nation of Israel now? -- a vassal province, less than the dust beneath Caesar’s chariot wheels. Israel’s politicians were groveling, time-serving appeasers, her priests were secularists, and there hadn’t been a true prophet in the land for 400 years.

And at that precise moment, when the thick darkness enveloped the chosen people of God, there came a little Child to Bethlehem, a Carpenter to Nazareth. “He came to His own home, and

His own people received Him not” (John 1:11). And soon the servile cry went up, “We have no king but Caesar!” And then there was the unanimous vote for Barabbas against Jesus; and within a few hours, the sordid squalor of the execution squad on the hill of Calvary, with the sun hiding its face for very shame, and darkness at noon over all the land.

But God was there in that awful darkness, where it seemed He could not possibly be. Indeed, God was there in redeeming love and power as He had never been at any previous time in human history. For that accursed gallows became the altar of salvation, and the act of sinful man’s consummate devilry became the instrument of God’s omnipotent love; for Jesus took His Cross and transformed it into a Throne! “The thick darkness -- where God was!”

And so, we take a look at our sad and sinful contemporary world, and our dilemma of collective evil, and the threat of impending doomsday. And the skeptic taunts us: “You ought to know better than chatter about providence in a world like this. Where is this God of yours? Is He sitting in some fictitious heaven? Why not jettison such a childish belief and embrace militant materialism instead? ‘Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die.’” But the skeptic is dead wrong. We Christians ought to confront the contemporary world with seriousness, but never in an attitude of faithless defeatism.

It is an awful thing to hear Christians, as I have heard them, bemoaning the world with as much pessimism as any godless unbeliever. It is an embarrassment to meet Christians so obsessed with the distressing problems of the world that they forget the eternal victory Christ achieved by His death and resurrection. Do let us believe our own faith that the God Who was reconciling the world to Himself amid the thick darkness of Calvary, is not deserting us now. Our emphasis should not be upon the iron curtain but upon the rent veil; not upon the devil’s strategy, but upon the divine sovereignty. God is going to win! “His truth is marching on...”

**2. And then there is that darkness that we might call “the dark night of the soul”** through which almost all of us pass at one time or another. There are tragedies that can strike us with the speed of an assassin’s bullet. In any Christian congregation, there are those who have experienced a failure in business, the loss of health, a shattered romance, the terrible onset of terminal disease with its accompanying pain, the breakup of a marriage, the desolating loneliness of bereavement.

Our text says that “the people stood afar off” when Moses went alone into the darkness; and it is like that still -- the people stand afar off; for even with all the Christian love and sympathy imaginable around you at such times, you still feel that you are enveloped in that thick darkness all by yourself -- you feel alone and utterly lonely, don’t you?

But when I speak of “the dark night of the soul” I am thinking of something that can be even worse than the devastating trials I have just now mentioned. What about those times when you feel that life is empty and meaningless and futile? -- those times when your enthusiasm withers and your very faith seems to evaporate? -- when you feel like exclaiming with the writer of Ecclesiastes: “Vanity of vanities; all is vanity” (1:2).

Are there not days when you find yourself questioning the very basis of your creed? We

sing the Psalmist's words:

“Each day I rise I will Thee bless,  
And praise Thy Name time without end.”

Is that always true? “I will Thee bless each day I rise”? Are there not days when life gets you down, the wear and tear of the rat race take their awful toll, the hallelujahs of the saints irritate you to death, and prayer and Bible study seem weary, stale, flat and unprofitable? And at such times you feel like clenching your fist and exclaiming, “I don't believe this sorry, jumbled and unjust scheme of things makes sense. I don't and I can't believe!” If you have never felt like that, then you don't know how blessed you are.

But let me hasten to say this -- don't lose heart in that thick darkness. For remember, all the saints in every generation have had that same experience. You remember the conversation the Psalmist had with himself:

“Why are you cast down, Oh my soul, and why are you  
disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again  
praise Him, my help and my God!”

(Psalm 42:5).

The saints are not liars; they all admit that they have been there before you.

There was that terrible night when Jacob wrestled with an adversary he could not even see in the thick darkness. It was not until the dawn broke that he suddenly knew that he had been wrestling with God; and ever afterwards Jacob looked back and was convinced that that night was the most incomparably important in his life. He did not only get through the darkness: something fantastic happened to him amid the darkness -- he was transformed from being a mean, selfish, unlovable creature, into what the Bible henceforth calls him -- a prince with God.

My struggling, dispirited, doubting friend -- don't lose heart in the dark hour! For the God Who Himself went through the darkest hour of all to redeem the world, is right beside you in your thick darkness. And some of the finest Christians in every congregation would never have been what they are today if they had not proved this to be true beyond the shadow of a doubt -- “the thick darkness where God was.”

**3. Think also about the darkness of sin.** You remember that Jesus said, “And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil” (John 3:19). They love the darkness because they hope that that darkness can hide them from God!

St. John the Evangelist, with a unique touch, related how Judas Iscariot, immediately upon receiving the morsel of bread, dipped in wine, from the hand of Jesus, went out from the Upper Room, and the Last Supper, “and,” says John, “it was night” (John 13:30). Judas must have welcomed the darkness -- surely it would cover up the dastardly betrayal of his Lord! But it

didn't!

When our first parents sinned, what did they immediately do? They hid themselves from the presence of the Lord "among the trees of the garden" (Genesis 3:8). There, amidst those deep, dark shadows, they thought they could escape from a Voice that seemed uncomfortably near. But, of course, they couldn't, for God was right there beside them in the darkness!

You remember what the Psalmist said, "I can never get away from my God! If I go up to heaven, Thou art there; if I go down to the dark cavern where the dead reside, Thou art there... If I try to hide in the darkness, the night becomes light around me. For even darkness cannot hide from God; to Thee the night shines as bright as day. Darkness and light are both alike to Thee" (Psalm 139:7,8; 11,12). There is nothing I can think or say or do in the darkness of my sin but my loving, redeeming God sees it all. "The thick darkness where God was."

But this is where judgment turns to mercy. This is where the Good Shepherd pursues me as I stray, a lost sheep, amid the darkness of the night. He is the "Hound of Heaven," if you will, Who never gives up on me until He finds His sheep that was lost.

I think of Simon Peter hiding his tormented conscience on the dark night when he betrayed his Lord. It was precisely because God was in the thick darkness that Peter came out of that experience of ignominy and shame, not an outcast but an apostle.

I think of Saul of Tarsus, self-confessed blasphemer, persecutor, murderer, falling suddenly off his horse on the road to Damascus. It was because God was in that fall that Saul emerged to become Paul the apostle, not a soul in hell, but a saint destined for heaven.

Yes, even when we have gone our own self-chosen way into the darkness of sin, we have not shaken Jesus Christ off. It is awful to realize that He knows us for what we are, but that is also the source of all our hope and blessing and renewal. He loves us in spite of what we are; surely that is the essential meaning of "grace" -- unmerited love. And when we know that God loves us like that, then surely there can be no greater incentive for us to come back home with Him in repentance and faith. Even if I am a denier like Peter, a self-justifying sinner like Paul, Thou art there, my ever-loving Lord! "The thick darkness where God was."

The darkness of history, the dark night of the soul, the darkness of sin -- each of them transfigured by our redeeming Lord.

**4. Finally, there is the last dark valley of all: the darkness of death.** As one grows older, and as relatives and companions of life's pilgrimage leave us one by one, it is borne in upon us how foolish and how wrong it is to practice the familiar modern subterfuge of pretending that death is not there. No doubt some of our forbears thought about it too much, but the popular mood today is not to think about it at all -- sweep it under the carpet.

But what is wrong with that attitude is this: it has never Christianized its thought of death. Mind you, the New Testament never takes death lightly. It would not insult a grieving person by doing that. The New Testament says that death is "the last enemy to be destroyed" (1 Corinthians

15:26). “The people stood afar off” when Moses drew near to the thick darkness; and when we approach that deep, cold, dark river of death, we enter it one by one, alone. All this is true. But the Christianizing of death by the New Testament is this -- “the thick darkness where God is.” And that does not mean slurring over death by speculating about some possible survival of personality after we draw our last breath. No, it means rather the shattering of death by the glory of Christ’s resurrection. “Now is Christ risen from the dead” (1 Corinthians 15:20), to make the valley of the shadow the very gate of heaven. Our dear ones who knew and loved Jesus and who have now passed on to the Father’s house have proved that this is true -- “the thick darkness where God was” -- “And all the trumpets sounded for them on the other side.”

There was a little child, the daughter of a widowed father, whose last words regularly every night when he tucked her into bed were, “Goodnight, Daddy, I’ll see you again in the morning.” One awful day that father discovered that she was suffering from an incurable disease, and day-by-day he had to watch as she grew weaker. And just before the end, she looked up at him again, and the whisper came, “Goodnight, Daddy, I’ll see you in the morning.”

“And with the morn those angel faces smile  
Which I have loved long since and lost awhile.”

Perhaps our Lord’s last words on Calvary were not so very different, “Father, into Thy hands I commend My Spirit” (Luke 23:46). Undoubtedly these were words which, as a little child, He had learned as His bedtime prayer, years before in the home in Nazareth, at His mother’s knee. In a sense, it was the counterpart of our--

“Jesus, tender Shepherd, hear me.”

And now, as He looked death squarely in the face, and amid that unearthly darkness that covered the earth, these words were on His lips again, “Father, into Thy hands I commend My Spirit.” And the Father’s presence restored, because Jesus had borne the ultimate penalty of our sin, made the darkness light!

And now when our turn comes, He has promised to be there by the riverside to take us safely across. There is nothing, absolutely nothing, to fear. The darkest road with Christ is better than the brightest road without Him and as an early saint of the Church, Clement of Alexandria, so beautifully expressed it: “Christ turns all our sunsets into dawns.”

Question 37 of our Shorter Catechism asks:

“What benefits do believers receive from Christ at death?”

Just listen to the glorious answer:

“The souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness and do immediately pass into glory; and their bodies, being still united to Christ, do rest in their graves till the resurrection.”

Doesn't that fill your heart with joyful anticipation? Death for the Christian is the greatest adventure imaginable! Listen to the greatest words in all of Scripture, spoken by our Lord Himself - "Because I live, you will live also" (John 14:19).

Hallelujah! What a Savior!  
And what a salvation!

"And the people stood afar off, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was."

**AMEN.**