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An Open Heaven

by T. Austin-Sparks

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"His servants shall serve him; and they shall see his face" Revelation 22:4.

With the book of Genesis and the book of the Revelation we have the whole bound of human history and, as we read through the Scriptures, the matter which governs in this long record of human life is that of *the face of God*.

The expulsion from the garden (Genesis 3:24) was expulsion from the face of God. From that time on, the face of God was never again seen by man - except in tokens such as His mercy and goodness - and then only on certain occasions. In reality man did not and could not see God's face.

Throughout the Bible we find that man's greatest blessing, highest good and deepest longing always related to such a Vision. How often from the heart of believing men the cry is heard: "Lift thou up the light of thy countenance". "Make thy face to shine on thy servant"! On the other hand, man's deepest misery is always when God's face is turned away - when he senses that God's countenance is not toward him. To be spiritually sensitive and yet to feel that there is a cloud over the face of the Lord is the most desolating experience of which we are capable.

The abiding issue of the face of God was brought to a focus in the cross of Christ. At the beginning, God drove the man out. At the end, "they shall see his face". But midway, not in the Bible as a book, but in human history, the cross makes it possible for men to see God's face. On the one side, that

face is turned away - man is in desolation. On the other side, that face is turned to him - there is hope, with new joy and new prospects. All things are new because once more the light of God's countenance is, in the full sense, lifted upon believers. Genesis and Revelation meet at Calvary.

The Wilderness

A wilderness is always a type of desolation and death. The wilderness came when the garden was lost. It was the result of the curse, in other words, the outcome of God's face being turned away. Israel would certainly have perished in the wilderness if Heaven had not intervened - and what is more, they knew it. There was nothing there to maintain life; it was only because there was the Testimony in their midst that they could possibly live in the wilderness. When their hearts were rightly adjusted to that Testimony, they survived in the wilderness. In the midst of death they were in life; in the midst of desolation they were in plenty; in the midst of the curse they were in blessing.

Later they went into captivity and knew desolation for seventy years, and it was only when that seventy year's accomplishment came into view that the prophet cried, with his gospel of hope: "Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her that her warfare is accomplished". From that came the issue: "The desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose"; "In the wilderness shall waters break out, and streams in the desert" (Isaiah 35:1, 6).

The wilderness is always a symbol of desolation and death because of the curse. Perhaps one of the most poignant of all the issues of the Tabernacle ritual was that of the scapegoat. One cannot read the story without feeling desperately sorry for that goat, with all the curse of Israel's sins transferred to it by the laying on of hands, led out by the priest to the outer bounds of the camp and beyond, away until the last signs of human life were out of sight, driven out into the wilderness to die, forsaken by God, desolate, bearing the burden of sin.

All this, of course, was symbolic of the sufferings of the Saviour who came to bear our sins. After His baptism He went for forty days into the wilderness, into the realm of Satan who was the cause of it. Every wilderness belongs to the Devil. In that place of Satan's power the Lord Jesus would not have survived had He not been a heavenly Man, and in type a resurrection Man. He had been to the Jordan and in figure had died and by rising, had overcome death.

We note that He was led of the Spirit into the wilderness. When He rose from the baptismal waters in triumph, the Spirit came in a new way upon Him, leading Him into the wilderness as One who had overcome desolation and death. This was all leading to the cross. The Lord was led forward by the Spirit and He sensed what was coming. There have been many arguments about His cup, His exceeding sorrowfulness in the garden and His cry: "If it be possible, let this cup pass from me" (Matthew 26:39). Surely it was because He sensed what was coming. It was certainly not His physical death and sufferings which troubled Him; it was because of necessity He was going to be forsaken of the Father with whom, through those thirty three years, He had enjoyed unbroken fellowship. Favours were shown to Him at His birth: He grew in that favour as a lad, and when He came out into public life, the heavens were opened to Him and the voice came: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17). In the secret of His own heart He enjoyed the Father's favour, dwelling in the Father's bosom every day, and now that was to be withdrawn. He was to have the Father's face turned away. This was most dreadful of all.

So it was that on the cross He cried: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Why have You

turned Your face from me? Why am I in this awful desolation, beside which every other kind of desolation is nothing. Thank God that when we hear the gospel we know why. The heavens were closed against fallen man who, apart from this suffering of Christ, would be lost for eternity. Job gives a hint of that cry of an orphan soul: "Oh that I knew where I might find him... Behold I go forward, but he is not here; and backward but I cannot perceive him: on the left hand where he doth work, but I cannot behold him: he hideth himself on the right hand that I cannot see him" (23:8-9). This, however, is but a faint indication of the sense of forsakenness known by the Lord Jesus as He took the sinner's place.

To attempt to compare any other human distress with Christ's cry of forsakenness on the cross would be a sacrilege, yet many Christians have passed from experiences of blessing when God seemed so near and so full of favour, to times when it all seems completely to have gone. All the tokens of the Lord's loving presence seem to have departed. It can be a dreadful experience. But how small are our worst trials in comparison with the experience of being forsaken which came to the Son who from all eternity had been in the bosom of the Father and was now taking the place of all who had lost the face of God through sin.

Christ's Open Heaven

Yet there is the other side, the open heaven, the face of God. Jesus had it from the first, for heaven was open to Him. We know that at the age of twelve He spoke freely of God as His Father (Luke 2:49). His language was expressive of a life with God on most intimate and affectionate terms. At His baptism, the heavens were opened to Him and a voice heard saying, "You are my beloved Son". To Nathanael the Lord was able to say, "Ye shall see the heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man". His transfiguration saw those heavens opened again, with the same voice attesting Him as the beloved Son.

After the desolation of the cross and the tomb we read of His being "received up in glory" (1 Timothy 3:16). Somehow that term gives point to His resurrection. His "receiving up" suggests that the heavens were opened to give Him a tremendous reception. There was no-one to question His right to be at the Father's right hand; the gates lifted up their heads and the everlasting doors opened to welcome Him. Then at Pentecost the heavens were opened to all believers. He poured out His Spirit through the heavens which He Himself had opened by the merits of His cross. In this way He attested to all who would believe that God's face was again in their direction. How could one better express those Pentecostal days than to say that the light of God's countenance was upon them all!

But there is also an inward witness. Men received the Holy Spirit when they believed (Acts 19:2). The Spirit is not only given to the Church as a whole, but to every member of that Church. It is an inward reality; it proves that the Lord is with us and His face in our direction. The coming of the Holy Spirit, as we come into the good of Christ's death and resurrection, brings the light of God's face. In the terms of the Old Testament benediction: "...the Lord lift up his countenance upon thee, and give thee peace" (Numbers 6:26). When His face is not toward us there is no peace. In what seems like the crowning blessing of that last chapter of the Bible, it is said, "They shall see his face". This is the one thing which has been the issue through all ages - the face of God towards man being his greatest blessing; the loss of that vision man's greatest desolation. Here then is the end of the story: "There shall be no curse any more... they shall see his face".

An Open Heaven For Us

This may seem a simple fact, how Christ won the victory for us in the wilderness, and how much blessing comes to us because He was willing to be forsaken on the cross. The explanation of His cry, "Why hast thou forsaken me?" is that this has brought to all believers the supreme and all-inclusive blessing of knowing that we will never be forsaken if we are in Christ. It is not really as simple as it sounds. Have you, a believer - perhaps for many years - in spite of devotion to the Lord been tempted to feel that God has forsaken you? Have you never felt as though God had left you, parted company with and washed His hands of you? I am not going to say that you ought to have passed through such an experience, but it may well be, even now.

As in Adam's case, so with every child of Adam, every member of the human race, the efforts of Satan are directed to getting between us and God. If only he can do that, if he can bring about that separation, it is an end of everything and an occasion for despair. Happily in the case of the believer in Christ, he cannot do that in actuality; he can only tempt us to accept his suggestions and accusations. To grasp the significance of Christ's cry and to enter into the value of His work on the cross in destroying the works of the Devil, this is at times the sphere of our conflict. Nothing can get in between us and God.

Calvary always provides an open door, an open way to God's face, and faith is the victory (1 John 5:4). The central matter for faith is that for one terrible moment the Lord Jesus suffered the eclipse of that divine face so that fellowship with God might be secured for us forever. He has brought the light of God's countenance back to us, and that is the great blessing. I am not saying that we may not experience some shadow between us and God because of some folly in grieving His Spirit. This does happen but, thank God, it can never be a total eclipse, for grace restores. The Lord is behind that shadow, so that however often we experience it because of some unbelief or failure of ours, we will find Him still just where He was when we get the matter adjusted and are again right with God. His promise is secure: "I will in no wise fail thee, nor will I in any wise forsake thee" (Hebrews 13:5).

Satan's Antagonism

Satan is the great enemy of fellowship with God. When the Lord Jesus was about to come into the world, the prophetic statement made by Zacharias was "that God would grant unto us that we being delivered out of the hand of our enemies would serve Him without fear" (Luke 1:74). That went far beyond any earthly enemies. Have you never had times when, through stress and suffering, Satan has got so near your soul that it seemed he might turn you against God and make you bitter towards Him? This can be a very real experience. Satan tries to use the believer against God, for there is no instrument more useful to him than a Christian revolting against the Lord.

You are not surprised when unbelievers, men of the world, flare against God, but when there are Christians rebelling against their Lord it is a great disgrace to His name. This need not be. Our Lord has secured victory for us, destroying for all the impingement of the Devil's insinuations and suggestions. If you ever do come under such a cloud, remember that the Lord Jesus has established forever the ground upon which God will never leave nor forsake you, never withdraw His face from you. Believe that! Remember that!

Deliverance by the Cross

"Why hast thou forsaken me?" I am so glad that the story of the cross does not end there. The awful cry to "My God..." is followed by the last words from the cross: "Father, into thy hands I commend

my spirit" (Luke 23:46). Jesus was back on the ground of perfect fellowship with the Father. The victory is gained; the work is done; the enemy is defeated; the Father's smile is upon His beloved Son.

And upon us in Christ! Whatever Satan may suggest in our deep temptations to feel that God has left us, it is not true. It can be a very real trial for even the most mature Christian, to be enveloped in spiritual darkness and provocations to despair. At such times we have many precious promises. But even more effective for us can be the recollection of the time when the depths of forsakenness - real forsakenness - was plumbed for our sakes, producing that bitter cry from our Saviour, and then followed by the shout, "It is finished" and the restful committal into the hands of the Father. All that was not for Himself; it was for us who belong to Him. Never, never will a true believer know the desolation of God-forsakenness now that by His cross Christ has obtained the blessing of the light of God's countenance shining on him.

So let us rejoice that we have an open heaven, secured for us by our blessed Lord. Not to Nathanael only but to each of us is given the promise: "You will see heaven opened..." One day in the glories of eternity, we will see His face and have His name on our foreheads. "And there shall be night no more... for the Lord God shall give them light: and they shall reign for ever and ever" (Revelation 24:4-5).