

In Relation to the Race as It Is

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon emphasizes the profound significance of the face of God in human history, particularly through the lens of the Cross and the believer's relationship with God.

Scripture: Genesis 3:22-24, Psalm 4:6, Psalm 31:16, Psalm 89:15, Isaiah 35:1, Isaiah 40:1, Matthew 27:46, Luke 23:46, Hebrews 13:5, Revelation 22:3-4

Topics: "The Cross of Christ", "The Face of God"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the significance of the face of God throughout human history, illustrating how the expulsion from Eden marked a separation from God's presence. He connects this theme to the Cross of Christ, where Jesus experienced ultimate desolation, crying out in forsakenness, yet through His sacrifice, believers are granted access to God's face once more. The sermon highlights the wilderness as a symbol of spiritual desolation, contrasting it with the joy of being in the light of God's countenance, which is restored through faith in Christ. Ultimately, Sparks reassures that through Jesus, believers can experience an open heaven and never face total forsakenness again.

Transcript

"And the Lord God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil; and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever - therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken. So he drove out the man" (Genesis 3:22-24).

"And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? that is, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46).

"And there shall be no curse any more: and the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be therein: and his servants shall serve him; and they shall see his face" (Revelation 22:3-4).

THE FACE OF GOD

So, 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 this whole story of man's creation, calling and destiny, we seem to see that one matter governs the whole long record of human life, and this one matter is that of THE FACE OF GOD. The expulsion from the garden was expulsion from the face of the Lord. From that time the face

of God was never again seen by man, except in tokens - such as His mercy, His goodness - and even then only on certain conditions; but His face in reality man did not and could not see.

And throughout this Book, we find that man's greatest blessing, highest good and deepest longing always related to the face of God. How often from the heart of man the cry is heard - "Lift thou up the light of thy countenance" (Ps. 4:6); "Make thy face to shine on thy servant" (Ps. 31:16); 'to walk in the light of his countenance' (Ps. 89:15). The deepest longing in the heart of man is ever for what that means, and his highest good is always seen to be connected with the face of God; while, on the other hand, man's deepest misery and desolation is always when God's face is turned away - when he senses that that countenance is not toward him. To be spiritually alive and sensitive, and to feel that there is a cloud over the face of the Lord, is the most miserable experience of which we are capable, the greatest desolation of heart.

THE ISSUE CENTRED IN THE CROSS OF CHRIST

Now, that great, shall I say, eternal issue of the face of God was brought to a focus in the Cross of Christ. It is, I think it can be said quite safely, the very heart of the Calvary story. At the beginning God drove the man out. The end of the Bible is "they shall see his face". But midway, not in the Bible as a book, but in this human history, the Cross gathers up that great matter of the face of God. On one side, that face is turned away - the man is in desolation. On the other side, that face is turned toward - there is a new hope, new joy, new prospect, all things are new: because once more the light of His countenance is, in the full sense, lifted upon believers. Genesis and Revelation meet at Calvary.

THE WILDERNESS OF THE TURNED-AWAY FACE OF GOD

A wilderness is always a type of desolation and death through the curse. The wilderness came when the Garden was lost. It was the very fruit of the curse. In other words, it was THE outcome of God's face being turned away, and from that time we find the wilderness again and again coming up in the picture of human life. Israel in the wilderness spoke of the curse, desolation and death. In that wilderness, if Heaven had not intervened, they certainly would have perished - and they knew it, too. There was nothing there to assure of life. It was only because there was a Testimony in their midst that they could possibly live in the wilderness; and when their hearts were rightly adjusted to that Testimony, they lived above 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. And that Testimony was the Testimony of Jesus.

When, later, they went into the far captivity and knew the desolation again for seventy years, and at last the seventy years' accomplishment came into view, the prophet cried with his gospel of hope - "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished" (Isa. 40:1). The issue of that is that "the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose" (Isa. 35:1). "In the wilderness shall waters break out, and streams in the desert" (Isa. 35:6).

THE LORD JESUS IN THE WILDERNESS

But you know quite well that, set there for the real fulfilment - not for the symbolic or partial fulfilment, but for the real fulfilment - Isaiah 53 has its place. "He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed." The Lord Jesus went for forty days into the wilderness - the place of desolation, the place of death, the place of the curse; that wilderness being the place of Satan's power, because he made it. Every wilderness belongs to

the Devil. It is in the wilderness that you will always meet the Devil. In that place of Satan's power, that One would not have survived, had He not been a Heavenly Man with no relationship whatever to the wilderness; had He not just before gone to Jordan, and in figure died, and, rising, overcome death.

But it says that He was led "of the Spirit" into the wilderness (Matt. 4:1). When He rose from the waters, when in figure He was risen from the dead triumphant, the Spirit came upon Him. By that Spirit He went into the wilderness, and there, in virtue of a victory already secured, He overcame.

The wilderness is always a symbol of the desolation of death because of the curse. Look back to Israel's life in the wilderness. You remember one of the most poignant of all the figures of the tabernacle ritual - that of the scapegoat. You never read that little account, I am sure, without feeling deeply and desperately sorry for that goat, with all the curse transferred by identifying hands to its head, and then led by a priest to the outer bounds of the camp and beyond, away, till the last sign of human life is out of sight, and then, driven from that last man, alone in the wilderness to die, forsaken of God, desolate, bearing sin.

Well, that is the Cross. That is the meaning, but only a shadow of the meaning, of the words we read in Matthew 27 - "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" "Why hast Thou turned Thy face away from Me? Why am I in this awful desolation, beside which every other kind of desolation is nothing - the desolation of losing God? Why?" Well, thank God, there is probably no one reading these lines who could not answer that question. But it is not my object at this moment to try to answer it. I am just pointing to two sides of this great matter - the lost face of God and the regained face of God.

So the heavens were closed against that man; so that face was lost as for eternity; so the deep and awful desolation settled down upon his soul; and for ever that orphan soul, that desolated soul, is crying, 'Where can I find Him? Where can I find HIM?' "Oh that I knew where I might find him... Behold, I go forward, but he is not there; and backward, but I cannot perceive him: on the left hand, when he doth work, but I cannot behold him: he hideth himself on the right hand, that I cannot see him" (Job 23:3, 8-9). And yet there has never been one who has known that desolation, and that sense of forsakenness, in any measure commensurate with what the Lord Jesus knew, in the hour, in the moment, of that cry. That desolation has broken many a soul. Ah, but never in the way in which it broke His heart.

He had sensed what was coming. There have been many arguments about His cup and His exceeding sorrowfulness and His cry - "If it be possible, let this cup pass away from me" (Matt. 26:39). I think the only answer is here: that He sensed what was coming. It was certainly not His physical death and sufferings. He was going, of necessity, to be forsaken of the Father with whom, through those thirty-three years, He had had unbroken fellowship. Favours were shown to Him in His birth; He grew in that favour as a lad; He came out into public life, and the open heavens declared "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:17). In the secret of His own heart He was in the favour of the Father. He dwelt in the bosom of the Father every day. And now that was to be withdrawn; He was to know the loss of that. Surely there is nothing to approach it!

We are speaking of facts, and if we were to speak of any experience of our own, it would be almost approaching sacrilege. And yet some of you may have known what it is to have a very blessed time with the Lord - when the Lord has seemed so real, and everything was betokening the Lord's nearness and the Lord's favour - and then it has gone, completely gone: all the tokens seem to have been withdrawn and the Lord seems to have gone out of your world entirely. You will say that there is nothing more miserable than an experience like that. But how small compared with this! How infinitely terrible that He, who had

from eternity been in the bosom of the Father, should lose that - not as an act in a play, not as something staged, but as a reality, a terrible soul reality. He was taking the place of all who had lost the face of God, in order to get it back again for them - for you, for me.

THE LORD JESUS AND THE OPEN HEAVEN OF GOD'S FACE

And you can look at the other side, the open heaven, the face of God. He had it in His birth - all heaven was open. He had it in His childhood. How manifest it was we do not know, but we do know that at the age of twelve He could speak of God as "My Father" (Luke 2:49). This was surely expressive of a lad's life with God in very intimate and affectionate terms. At His baptism, the heavens were opened to Him and a voice was heard saying, "Thou art my beloved Son". To Nathanael He said, "Thou shalt see greater things... Ye shall see the heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man" (John 1:50-51). His transfiguration again saw those same heavens opened, that same voice attesting Him as the beloved Son. And after the desolation of the Cross, at His 'receiving up in glory' (1 Tim. 3:16) - I like that better than the word 'ascension'; His 'receiving up', that was how they liked to put it then - the heavens were opened for the great reception. There is no question here; no having to stand at the gates and meet the Apostle Peter to get a passport! No, He was "received up in glory"; the heavens opened. And at Pentecost the heavens were opened, and "he hath poured forth this" (Acts 1:33); and through the heavens which He Himself had opened by His merit, by His Cross, He attested for all who would believe, that God's face was back again in their direction. How could you better express those days of Pentecost and following than in the words that the light of God's countenance was upon them? What joyous days they were, what precious days! - and it was simply because they were in the light of God's countenance.

But there is a still more intimate witness. "Did ye receive the Holy Spirit when ye believed?" (Acts 29:2). The Holy Spirit is given, not only to the Church as a whole, but to every member of that Church to dwell within. And what is the Holy Spirit dwelling in the believer? It is only, in other words, that the Lord is for us and with us again, His face is in our direction. The old invocation which has become a benediction was - "The Lord make his face to shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee: the Lord lift up his countenance upon thee, and give thee peace" (Num. 6:25-26). Is that not just it, that when we come into the good of the work of the Cross and of Pentecost, that is, the coming of the Holy Spirit, that is the light of His countenance, and it is peace? When His face is not toward us there is no peace. The indwelling Spirit is just another way of saying that the face of the Lord is toward them that fear Him, and the great glorious consummation of that is in the words in Revelation: "His servants shall serve him, and they shall see his face" (Rev. 22:3,4) - as though that were the crowning blessing of all, the inclusive blessing of all, in the last chapter of the Bible. "They shall see his face": this is the one thing that has been the great issue through all the ages - the face of God in its towardness being man's greatest blessing, in its loss man's greatest desolation. You are not surprised therefore to read in the same utterance - "there shall be no curse any more". "No more curse... they shall see his face."

IN CHRIST AN OPEN HEAVEN FOR US

Well, all that is, I know, very simple, but we shall not do ourselves any harm by contemplating what He won for us in that wilderness, how great a thing it was that resulted from that cry. The answer given to that cry - "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" - is our supreme and all-inclusive blessing: it is that we may never know any more forsaking of God. Oh, put your feet down upon that. It is not as simple as it sounds. No more forsaking of God! Have you, a believer, a believer perhaps for many years, in full devotion to the Lord - have you never been tempted to believe that God had forsaken you, God had left

you, had given you up, washed His hands of you, parted company with you, withdrawn? If you have never had that temptation, I am not going to say that you ought to, but I will say that I do not think you will get through your course in a really spiritual life without having it, and more than once. As in Adam's case, so with every son of Adam and every child of God, with every member of this human race, the Devil's greatest work is to get between us and God. Once he has done that, if he can establish himself there between us and God, it is an end of all things, it is hopeless. But in the case of a believer he cannot now do that in actuality. He can only do it in effect, by the attitude that a believer takes toward this great thing that happened on the Cross, by the answer that the believer will give in his or her own heart to Christ's question, "Why hast thou forsaken me?" If you really will give the answer, 'In order that I might never be forsaken' - if you give that answer and stay there, you have entered into the value of what the Lord Jesus accomplished in destroying the works of the Devil, especially his supreme work of getting between you and God.

Calvary is always an open door, an open way, to God's face. You know that it was ever by Jordan that the place of God's face was reached - always by Jordan. Of the promised land the Lord said, "The eyes of the Lord thy God are always upon it, from the beginning of the year even unto the end of the year" (Deut. 11:12); His face would be toward it, and so it was described as the land of unspeakable blessing. Israel never arrived there except by the Jordan. When they came back from the captivity to the land again, where God's face was, they had to go across the Jordan again or through the Jordan. When the Lord Jesus went to the Jordan, He passed that way in order to come to the place where the heavens were opened, where the face of God was seen; always by Jordan to the place of God's face - in other words, always by the Cross. It is by the Cross that we come into the light of His countenance.

THE VICTORY OF FAITH

But the point here is that faith is the victory (1 John 5:4). It is faith in one thing. If you pin your faith to this one thing, all other things will come into line, all the other problems will be overcome: if you really will pin your faith to this - that the Lord Jesus, in that terrible moment, lost the face of God in order to secure it for us forever, so that we might never be out of the light of that countenance. He has brought that face back to us - and what blessing there is in that! I am not saying that we may never experience some shadow over His face because of our folly, because of our grieving Him. We have to admit sometimes that there is a shadow between us and the Lord. Ah, but never need it be total eclipse, and never His forsaking. He is behind that shadow, and a thousand times we who have known such shadows, because of either our unbelief or some other grieving Him, when we have adjusted, cleared that matter up, got right with the Lord, we have found Him there just where He was. He is behind the shadows; His word abides - "I will in no wise fail thee, neither will I in any wise forsake thee" (Heb. 13:5).

THE FALL A FALL INTO THE HANDS OF SATAN

Surely Israel has a many-sided testimony, and this is one side. God has written the story of His willingness to be toward man. That story is written very fully in the life of Israel. If ever a people might have been fully and finally forsaken, Israel might have been. I think there is nothing that proves the fall more than Israel - proves the fall not in a general but in a specific way. We say of Adam that the fall took place, Adam fell. How did he fall? Where did he fall? Into what did he fall? He fell into the hands of Satan, to be used as Satan's instrument against God, and his fall developed in Israel. They fell into Satan's hands. "Ye are of your father the devil" (John 8:44), said the Lord Jesus. They fell into Satan's hands to be his instruments against God to crucify His very Son. There is nothing deeper than to be the instrument of Satan to kill God,

to put God out of His place. That is why the record of Israel's spirit and attitude is given us so fully in the Gospels, leading up to Israel's crucifying of Christ. Their attitude is all brought out by Christ, and He focuses upon this - that what they did to Him they did to God. And so in the Cross of the Lord Jesus we see a people, a nation, held by Satan, having sold themselves into the hands of Satan to crucify God and put Him out of His place. That is not too strong, to speak of Satan's instrument against God. That is the fall - into the hands of Satan. That opens up the Word of God in many ways, from many angles. It is a terrible thing.

When the Lord Jesus came, there was one who, looking upon that infant, said, prophetically, "to grant unto us that we being delivered out of the hand of our enemies..." (Luke 1:74) - and that went far beyond any earthly enemies. Have you really felt the force of what I have just been saying? Have there not been times when, through duress and suffering and oppression, through spiritual trial to the depths, Satan has got so near to your soul or has been so bound up with your soul that it has seemed he would turn you against God, make you bitter toward the Lord, make you the enemy of God, bring up such feelings in you? These things are real. That is what he is trying to do all the time - to get man back into his power, to get the believer into his power, to use him against God. There is no instrument more useful to Satan against God than a Christian. You expect unbelievers, men of the world, to be against God; but see a Christian revolting against the Lord, and that gives Satan just what he is after - one who is supposed to know the Lord, in rebellion against Him. What a battle there is over that! - but what a triumph our Lord has secured to get us right out of that realm, to destroy all the impingement of Satan's insinuations and suggestions. If you do ever know the cloud, the temptation, remember Calvary: remember that the Lord Jesus has established forever the ground upon which God will never forsake you, never leave you, never withdraw His face from you. Believe that. That is the faith which overcomes and it is a mighty overcoming, going right back to the beginning.

DELIVERANCE BY THE CROSS OF CHRIST

"Why hast thou forsaken me?" I am so glad that the story of the Cross does not end there. The cry, the awful cry, is "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?", but the last words from the Cross are not such. "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit" (Luke 23:46). He is back on the ground of perfect fellowship with the Father and absolute trust. The victory is gained, the work is done, the enemy is defeated, the ground is secured. Whatever Satan says, as he does in our deep hours of spiritual experience, about the Lord having given us up, departed from us - all that sort of thing; whatever he says, it is not true. It may be that you do not feel the full weight of that; but if ever you come, as perhaps some of you have come, to a time, such as many of the most faithful and devoted and greatly-used servants of God have known, when the dark forces spread themselves over, gather around in their hordes, and seek to come between you and your Lord and then begin their whisperings - 'The Lord has given you up, handed you over', or something to that effect - when you come to that place, then I trust you will know that this word is no light word, no unimportant word: for the last depths of Calvary were fathomed in the moment when our Lord cried that bitter cry and gained the answer and came out victorious and into rest. "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit." That was not for Himself, that was for us - for you, for me. I feel that that is the Good Friday morning message: the depth of Calvary and the eternal value of His having secured for us the face of God. Never, never is it necessary for anyone to know that desolation of God-forsakenness while they put their trust, their faith, upon His taking up this age-long issue as Man for man - the issue of "the light of thy countenance".

So let us rejoice that we have an open heaven secured for us by our blessed Lord. We have but stated the truth, the fact, of this thing. There is much more bound up with it, which the Lord may show us as we go on, as to what kind of man it is who enjoys that opened heaven, but that is with the Lord. Let us thank Him for the fact that we may have the heaven opened to us. He has done it. But to a Nathanael He will say, "Ye shall see the heaven opened". God grant that we may all be in that blessed position.

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