

## The Hiddenness of God

by David Orton

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*Truly you are a God who hides himself ...*

Isaiah 45:15

The *hiddenness of God* is one of the greatest paradoxes of the spiritual life.

On the one hand, he is the self-revealing God who delights to communicate with man, but on the other, he hides himself.

God is a mystery. An anonymous fourteenth century divine refers to this as, the *Cloud of Unknowing*. The psalmist cries out that he is surrounded by "*clouds and thick darkness*" (Ps 97:2; also 18:11). God often hides himself in the contradiction of our circumstances. He is good, but it is hidden in the pain of where we find ourselves.

This darkness is impenetrable to the natural or merely religious person. Human reasoning and religious pursuit cannot open to us the knowledge of his ways—they are past finding out (Rom 11:33). Even Bible knowledge – as good as that is – is insufficient to penetrate the darkness. He defies our understanding, especially in the face of adversity.

Now, this is not to deny the propositional truth of Scripture. But it is to say that mental assent without inner illumination is not enough. It inevitably results in an armchair knowledge of God. None are immune from this. Belief systems and worship patterns are exactly that—systems and patterns. They are the husks of truth, not the kernel.

And so, how do we penetrate this *cloud of unknowing* and come to a personal and intimate knowledge of God. It goes without saying that we are to be saturated in the Scriptures. From the moment of my conversion I have loved the Scriptures, meditating in them and searching them out. However, in my experience, they have not been what God has used to bring me to him. Certainly, they now feed and sustain me on a daily basis, but only because the Spirit of God possessed me first. Nor is to deny that from God's perspective his spoken word releases the creative action of the Holy Spirit in regeneration. Nonetheless, when I was born from above the Holy Spirit entered my in-most being and fused with my spirit. I was brought from death to life, and now my spirit echoes with the Spirit of God that I am his (Rom 8:16).

So, it is by the Spirit that we are given a new heart and come into the intimate knowledge of God. This is particularly so when the circumstances of life bring us to the end of ourselves. And this always entails pain. At this point head knowledge – as important as it is – is not sufficient. Because God is spirit he communicates with our spirit; it is "*deep calling to deep*" (Ps 42:7). This is why Jesus said: "*The words that I speak to you are spirit ...*" (Jn 6:63).

While, objectively, the Bible is the word of God and is always the rule of faith, subjectively, those words are only mine when they come by the Spirit. It is the difference between the *logos* and the *rhema* (two NT Greek words for the English word 'word'). The former can refer more to the *written* word and the latter the *spoken* word. When Paul refers to the "*sword of the Spirit*" as the *word* of God (Eph 6:17) it is the *rhema*. The cutting edge against the enemy of our souls is found in the living word that comes by the Spirit to our spirit.

And so the "*thick darkness*" of our pain can only be cut through by the revelation and illumination that comes by the Spirit. It is from the "*mouth of the Most High that both calamities and good things come*" (Lam 3:38). Job discovered this through his misfortune, and so asked: "*Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?*" (Job 2:10). This is a great mystery that both good and evil come from God. While we do not accept that God is the author of suffering, he allows it in his providential dealings to mature us. At the end of all his sufferings Job could testify: "*My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you*" (Job 42:5). His head knowledge of God was not sufficient. He had heard of him by the hearing of the ear; but now, through great perplexity of soul, his eyes had seen him. The goodness of God had been shrouded momentarily in the "*thick darkness*" of life's pain. However, *our extremity* becomes *God's opportunity*. In our darkness, the Spirit of God carries to us the revelation of who he is despite the lie of our circumstances.

I recall one of the dark moments of our lives. As a young couple in our mid-twenties Jenny and me had responded to the invitation of a highly respected and senior leader to work with and be trained by him. Believing it to be the fulfilment of the call of God that had come seven years earlier we moved from the city of our birth, filled with our youthful dreams, to another city and people we did not know. Within a short period, without explanation, all the wonderful promises were broken and we found ourselves in the cold—without a job and without a ministry. God's goodness was suddenly shrouded in "*thick darkness*". Confused and wondering what had gone wrong I recall singing with tears the words of a chorus popular at the time:

He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he.

Deuteronomy 32:4 NIV

It has been said that, "*God isn't fair, but he is just!*" We feel that our lot is not fair; but our concept of *fairness* doesn't compute with who God is. And so, it is only by revelation that we can be reconciled with our lot and with God. For me this entailed the declaration of God's justice and faithfulness in the face of my experience—of injustice and unfaithfulness. It literally tore my soul in half. Would my knowledge of God be informed by my feelings and circumstances—by *sense* knowledge, or by *revelation* knowledge? With pain I fell to the side of revelation. Something in the basement of my soul was settled. I was at peace.

He is the one who "*forms the light and creates darkness*"; who "*brings prosperity and creates disaster*" (Isa 45:7). But because "*all his ways are just*", and because "*he is a faithful God who does no wrong*" we are safe!

God hides himself in our pain. But if we turn to him, he opens our eyes—we learn to see him through tears and "*thick darkness*". He gives us the "*hearing ear and the seeing eye*" (Prov 20:12).

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