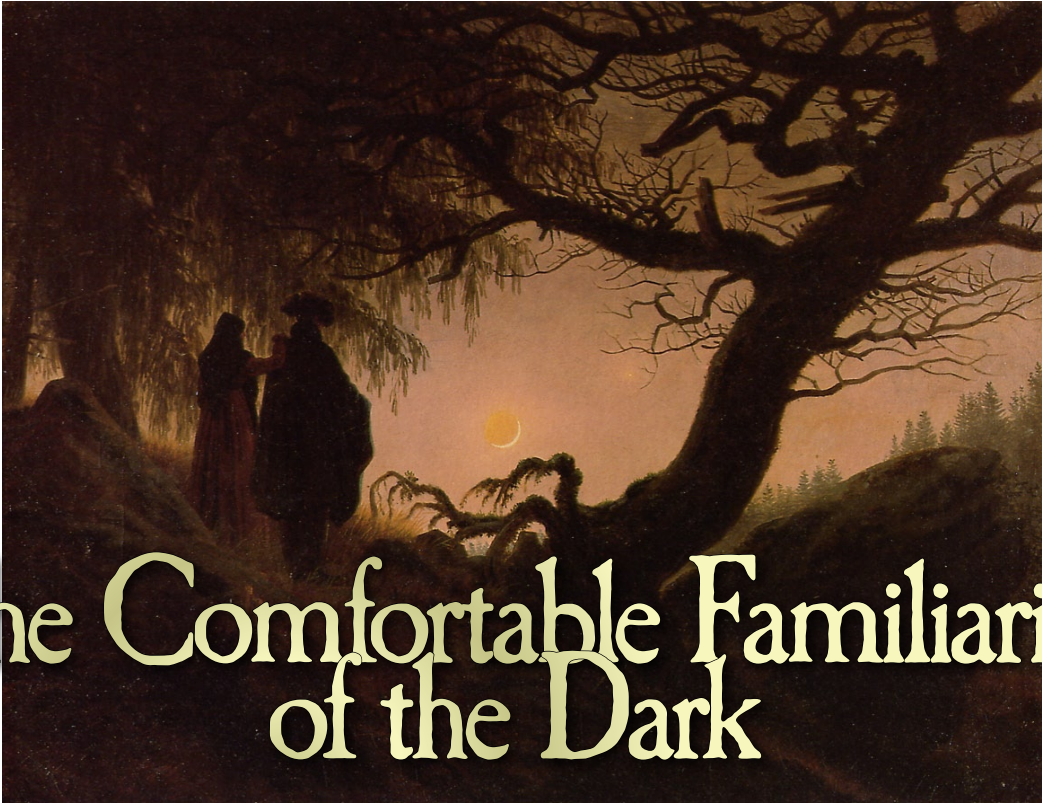
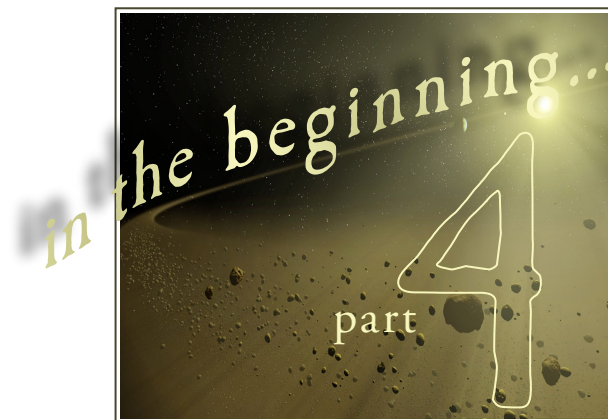


In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being. In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men. **The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.**

(John 1:1-5)



# The Comfortable Familiarity of the Dark

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**T**he epilogue to Christmas today is the same that it was 2,000 years ago. Now as then man may pause for a moment to consider the Christ child—to linger over the prospect of forgiving grace and peace with God, to embrace the warmth of love come down to man—but ultimately he turns away, choosing the familiar darkness over revealing light. That peculiar decision remains a mystery, but it is not a stranger—even to those who have chosen to believe.

Through ignorance, misconception, sloth, or simple hatred, most in creation have rejected the life Jesus offers. And there is the tragedy: man rejects the One who made him.

## The Warm Fuzzies

"Then He shall become a sanctuary;  
But to both the houses of Israel, a stone to strike  
and a rock to stumble over,  
And a snare and a trap for the inhabitants of Jerusalem."  
(Isaiah 8:14)

Light illumines, it shows the way, it heals the melancholy spirit, it brightens the outlook. Light is a positive and powerful force. But light also reveals. Bright sunlight cheers a dark room, but also shows

the layer of dust that coats a table, exposes the cobwebs draped in the corner where walls meet ceiling, casts shadows from the little bits of things that clutter the surface of the carpet, and makes visible the previously invisible drifting motes of dust in the air.

There is something so very warm and cozy about a newborn lying in a manger. Mix in a little *Silent Night, Holy Night*, the nostalgic whiff of evergreen boughs, and the rewarding glow of doing something nice for someone else and Christmas becomes all warm and fuzzy and harmless. Or at least not so bad. Even those who during the rest of the year are profoundly uninterested in things holy are known to shed pieces of their armor for the birth of Jesus.

But as the calendar page turns, those who risked that uncomfortable nearness to Christ quickly lurch away, retreating like frightened mice back into the comfortable familiarity of their darkened corners. For even they know that when one lingers too long in the light of Christ, one might just become used to it. And want to stay.

## Illumination

The leaders of the Jews did not hate Jesus because they had an aversion to being saved—because they loathed the very idea of eternal life with God. No, they hated Jesus because His light revealed the putrefaction of their own belief system. The brilliant beam of His illuminating message revealed the hypocrisy and utter futility of what they had made of God's Law.

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also.

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. So you, too, outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness."

(Matthew 23:25-28)

They hated Jesus because He was right, and those who have built their power upon the foundation of self-exalting deceit will always hate what brings that hypocrisy into the light.

Jesus' light hurt their eyes—just as it hurts the eyes of unbelievers today.

The baby Jesus represents a goodness and grace that is an uncomfortable fit for the world. This present habitation prefers cynicism over innocence, selfishness over generosity, anger over kindness, lies over truth. The baby Jesus coming into *this* world is like a Midwestern agrarian being dropped into Times Square. The culture shock is brutally overwhelming for the farmer. And before long the residents reduce the naïve newcomer to pitiable insignificance through derision and contempt.

This world doesn't much like Jesus. Oh, it has a passing affection for *religion*, with its ceremony and splendid architecture, its manageable turn-the-other-cheek submissiveness—but only so long as it stays within its stained-glass box. But the God/man Jesus? No, we can't have that. And Jesus, after two millennia, is still what He was declared to be: an offense.

And coming to Him as to a living stone which has been rejected by men, but is choice and precious in the sight of God, you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For this is contained in Scripture:

"Behold, I lay in Zion a choice stone, a precious corner stone, And he who believes in Him will not be disappointed."

This precious value, then, is for you who believe; but for those who disbelieve,

"The stone which the builders rejected, This became the very corner stone,"

and,

"A stone of stumbling and a rock of offense";

for they stumble because they are disobedient to the word, and to this doom they were also appointed.

(1 Peter 2:4-8)

Christmas is a time of God extending His hand to those who do not yet know Him. Just as the believer's ordinance of communion is an opportunity to remember Christ's sacrifice for our sins, Christmas is an opportunity to remember God's sacrifice in sending His Son as a gift of life and light to the world. The child lying in the manger is God saying to all, "Come. Step out of your darkness and into my Light. Leave behind your cynicism and anger, your hard and callused existence, your self-centeredness and pride. Come. With the shepherds and magi kneel in worship and praise before the One who created you—the One who loved you, and gave you life. For He loves you still. And for you this child will die, that you might forever live in His light."

*O past and gone!  
How great is God! how small am I!  
A mote in the illimitable sky,  
Amidst the glory deep, and wide, and high  
Of Heaven's unclouded sun.  
There to forget myself for evermore;  
Lost, swallowed up in Love's immensity,  
The sea that knows no sounding and no shore,  
God only there, not I.*

*More near than I unto myself can be,  
Art Thou to me;  
So have I lost myself in finding Thee,  
Have lost myself for ever, O my Sun!  
The boundless Heaven of Thine eternal love  
Around me, and beneath me, and above;  
In glory of that golden day  
The former things are passed away—  
I, past and gone.*

(Gerhard Tersteege)