Excursus 1: The Ascent into the Darkness of Unknowing

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September 2026

God is incomprehensible. He *dwells in the light which no man can approach unto; whom no man hath seen, nor can see* (1 Tim. 6:16). From this principle we distinguish three kinds of light.

1. The Light of Nature. This is the knowledge derived from natural reason, inquiring into God's effects and tracing them back to their First Cause.
2. The Light of Faith. This is the knowledge derived from believing God's Word.
3. The Light of Glory. This is the beatific vision wherein we see God face to face.

Subject	**Medium**	**Object**
Sinners in Darkness	Natural Light	God's Created Effects
Believers in Grace	Light of Faith	God's Word
Saints in Glory	Light of Glory	God Himself (unmediated)

For those who desire to make progress in spiritual things, it should be recalled that, *The Lord said that he would dwell in the thick darkness* (1 Kings 8:12), and that within the most holy place of the Tabernacle, no light or candle was lit, but rather all was darkness, hidden in a cloud of incense. *He made darkness his secret place; His pavilion round about him were dark waters and thick clouds of the skies* (Psalm 18:11). And when Moses ascended to speak with God, it says, *And the people stood afar off, and Moses drew near unto the thick darkness where God was* (Ex. 20:21). In what sense then is God light, and yet hidden in darkness? In what sense is God both knowable, and yet incomprehensible? Why do the mystical writers speak so often of perfection in this life as a kind of un-knowing?

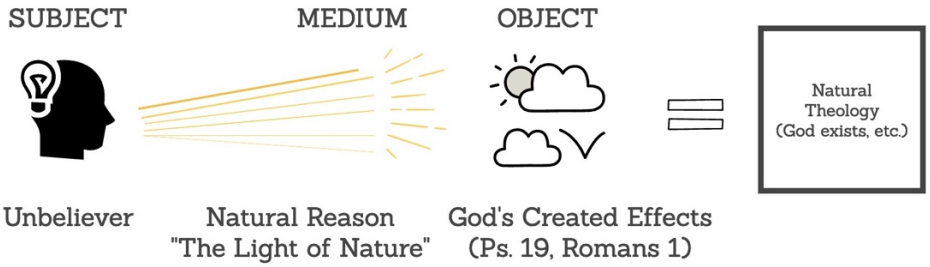
Consider your own experience of physical sight in relation to light. When your eyes have been closed for a long time, they need time to adjust to a bright environment. If you have been sleeping and then suddenly all the lights are turned on in your room, the light is so bright that it actually inhibits your ability to see anything. Or, if you were to stare at the sun, you would eventually go blind, not because the sun is dark, but because your eyes cannot handle the sun's brightness. So it is with us in relation to God.

1. In our state of sin and ignorance, our minds are dim even to the natural light of God's effects all around us. We may arrive at some truths about God's existence, goodness, power, and wisdom (Romans 1). But since we are totally devoid of any saving knowledge of God, we call this state of sin *darkness.*
2. In our state of grace, God has enlightened our minds by the Holy Spirit, and through the exercise of faith, and the infusion of knowledge into our soul (e.g. the Articles of Faith), we believe and come to understand the truths He has revealed in His Word. We call this state of grace *light* insofar as we can now perceive supernatural truths that lead to eternal life, but we also call this state of grace *darkness* insofar as we cannot see God *as He is in Himself* with our physical eyes or natural reason. We walk by faith (in God's darkness), not by sight (2 Cor. 5:7).

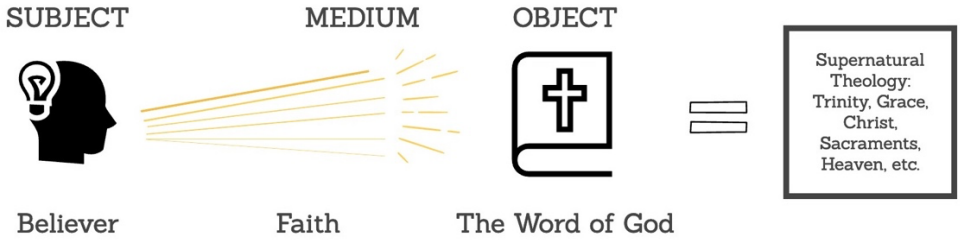
3. In our state of glory, God makes our intellect capable of seeing what was too bright for us to look at in the state of grace. At death, divine darkness finally gives way to pure light. *In thy light shall we see light* (Ps. 36:9), that is, In God we shall see God.[1]

[1] See also: https://aquinas.cc/la/en/~ST.I-II.Q67.A3.C.4

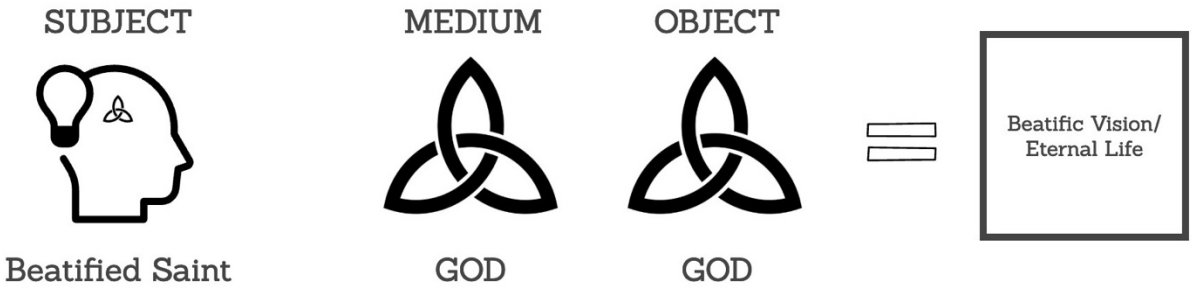
THE LIGHT OF NATURE



THE LIGHT OF FAITH



THE LIGHT OF GLORY



For with thee is the fountain of life: In thy light shall we see light. (Ps. 36:9)
For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known. (1 Cor. 13:12)

Some Observations

Observe that this distinction between Subject, Medium, and Object allows us to explain why so many people can look at God's creation, or read the same Bible, but then come to very different conclusions about what is true. We can account for these differences on the part of the Subject, or on the part of the Medium, even if the Object remains the same.

For example, in the Believing Subject, ignorance and sin can obscure reading Holy Scripture in the pure light of faith. A man comes to a passage of Scripture that conflicts with his personal opinion, and chooses his own personal opinion over believing God's trustworthiness. In this instance, the believer may think he is reading in faith, and indeed he may have faith (in potency), but his faith is hindered in its activity by sinful thoughts, or carnal desires, or misunderstanding, or physical weakness, etc.

To address this problem, the church has used various means to try to safeguard, defend, articulate, and define the faith. In the Reformed Tradition, the historic Creeds and Confessions define the boundaries of the faith (insofar as they accurately exegete Holy Scripture, which itself is open to dispute and varying interpretations). In the Roman Catholic Tradition, it is an infallible magisterium with the Pope as spokesperson who does this (which itself is open to dispute and varying interpretations amongst faithful Catholics). In the Eastern Church it is the ecumenical councils and the traditions of the church fathers (which again are open to dispute, etc.). Whatever the case, it is an inescapable problem that the church must deal with as we strive for the unity of faith.

***Faith* Is Said in Many Modes**

Now in the paragraphs above, I used the word *faith* in at least two different senses. In the Bible, faith can refer to many different things, but most commonly it refers to *the act of faith* (which is to believe), or to *the doctrinal contents of faith* (e.g. the Articles of Faith as summarized in the Apostles Creed). Here again we can apply the distinction of Subject, Medium, and Object.

1. The doctrinal contents of faith are the Object (e.g. James 2:1, *My brethren, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with partiality.*)
2. Our act of believing is the Medium that we call "the light of faith" (e.g. Luke 7:50, *And he said to the woman, Thy faith hath saved thee; go in peace*.)
3. And then a "man of faith" or "faithful Abraham" refers to the Subject who possesses the infused theological virtue of faith (e.g. Matthew 25:23, *Well done, good and faithful servant; thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord.*)

More Examples of Subject – Medium – Object

- The Father – Eternally Begets – The Son
- The Son – Is Eternally Begotten From – The Father
- Christ – Baptizes – Sinners
- Sinners – Are Baptized By – Christ
- God Speaks – Through the Prophets – To Man
- Man Hears – Through the Prophets – From God
- We – See Through A Glass Dimly – God
- God – Through Knowing Himself Knows – Us

Exegetical Practice
Using the chart below, read the following passages and then try to determine whether ***faith*** is referring to the Subject, Medium, or Object. Recall that the line between Subject and Medium can be blurry since the act of faith is always exercised from within a person as Subject.

Faith as Subject	**Faith as Medium**	**Faith as Object**
Refers to the person, faculty, or power in which faith resides. -This may refer to *the knowledge of faith* as it resides in the intellect. -Or it may refer to *the power/habit/virtue of faith* which can choose to believe.	Refers to the act of believing (as instrumental cause), or the disposition of the soul/mind/intellect to hear God's Word and give assent. Note, whenever something is said to be "through faith," this is a clue that it is speaking of faith as a Medium for obtaining some Object.	Refers to the doctrinal contents of faith (the gospel), or to the truth that Christ has revealed. It is sometimes called "the faith of Christ."

1. Luke 17:5, *And the apostles said unto the Lord, Increase our **faith.***
    a. Increase our power or capacity to believe (Subject), or the frequency with which we do works of faith (Subject/Medium), or the firmness of believing what Jesus has revealed (Subject/Medium).
2. Romans 10:17, *So then **faith** cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.*
    a. Since the virtue of faith is infused directly from God (Eph. 2:8, Phil. 1:29), the faith that comes by hearing must refer either to the contents of faith (what is to be believed/Object), or to hearing as the occasion or instrument that God uses to awaken faith within us, that is, to bring it from potency to act, etc. Taken this way, we may say that faith comes by hearing, as sight comes by color. Color is the object and occasion that specifies the power of seeing, even as the truth of faith is the object and occasion for the power of faith to believe. Faith needs an object of truth to move it from potency to act.
3. Ephesians 4:5, *One Lord, one **faith**, one baptism,*
    a. St. Thomas comments on this text, "***Faith*** is sometimes applied to the reality believed in, as with *this is the Catholic faith*, meaning this is what must be believed. At other times, ***faith*** refers to the habit of faith by which a man believes what he must in his very heart. Faith in both these senses can be called one. In the former, ***one faith*** would mean that you are bidden to believe in the same truths and in the same way of acting. For what is believed by all the faithful is one and the same reality, hence their faith is termed Catholic or universal. *Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak*, that is, think, *the same thing and that there be no schisms among you; but that you be perfect in the same mind and in the same judgment* (1 Cor 1:10). In the second way, ***one faith*** designates the unity of the habit of faith by which all believe. I mean that it is specifically one—not numerically one—since the same faith is

present in each one's heart; just as when many persons want the same thing, they are said to be of one will."

4. Galatians 1:23, *But they had heard only, That he which persecuted us in times past now preacheth the **faith** which once he destroyed.*
    a. Object of revealed Truth
5. Galatians 3:23-26, *But before **faith** came, we were kept under the law, shut up unto the **faith** which should afterwards be revealed. Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by **faith**. But after that **faith** is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster. For ye are all the children of God by **faith** in Christ Jesus.*
    a. Since Old Testament saints share the same faith with us (see Hebrews 11, Abraham, etc.) "before faith came" must refer to "before Christ came," as the One who reveals the way to salvation, and the means by which he redeems the world (Object).
    b. The law was a tutor leading us to Jesus, so that we might be made just by receiving faith from Him as a gift of grace (Subject), believing in Him and all that He reveals (Medium), or by believing in Christ as the Object towards which the law pointed (Rom. 10:4).
    c. After faith/Christ/redemption/fulfillment (Object) has come, we are no longer under the law. Because we are all children of God, like Abraham, by believing (Medium) in Jesus Christ, in whom Abraham also believed.
6. Acts 6:7, *And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the **faith.***
    a. Object of revealed Truth.
7. 1 Timothy 3:9, *Holding the mystery of the **faith** in a pure conscience.*
    a. Object of revealed Truth
8. Colossians 1:3-4, *We give thanks to God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, Since we heard of your **faith** in Christ Jesus, and of the love which ye have to all the saints.*
    a. This is an interesting text because Paul has heard of the faith of the Colossians (something invisible in the soul as Subject), which for Paul to have heard about must then refer to some external works of faith (profession, baptism, works of love, etc.) that bear witness to a living faith within them.
9. James 1:2-3, *My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations; Knowing this, that the trying of your **faith** worketh patience.*
    a. Subject, habit of faith within the soul.