

The Mystery of God
LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church
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I Corinthians 2:1-10; Colossians 2:1-5

Preachers are always looking for ways to connect with the people they are trying to reach. When he was in Athens the Apostle Paul saw that the city was chock full of idols, idols to every imaginable god and just to make sure all their bases were covered, there was even one with the inscription, “To an Unknown God.” So when Paul spoke there in the Areopagus that was his connecting point. “Men of Athens!” he said, “I see that you are very religious...as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found on altar with this inscription, ‘To an Unknown God.’ Now what you worship as something unknown, I am going to proclaim to you.” Then he told them about God’s revelation in Christ.

In our passage Paul does the same sort of thing. In the first century Mediterranean world there were many “mystery religions.” They were called that because they included rites of initiation into the cult during which secret knowledge or mysteries were shared. Supposedly, that secret knowledge could enable the person who received it to become one with the deity. That union with the deity was limited to those who knew the “mysteries.” That was a connecting point for Paul. He knew the phrase “the mystery of God” would connect with people who were drawn to a religion that promised union with the divine through secret knowledge or mysteries. But for Paul “the mystery of God” wasn’t some secret, esoteric mumbo jumbo, an “open sesame” that unlocked the heart of God. “The mystery of God” is a person, “namely Christ.”

But that may raise a question for you. Why does Paul call Christ “the mystery of God”? Doesn’t the Bible clearly explain who Christ is? To understand this it will help to look at some of the other places in Paul’s letters where he uses words like “mystery” or “secret” or “hidden.” In Ephesians 3 he says “Surely you have heard about the administration of God’s grace that was given to me for you, that is, the mystery made known to us by revelation...which was not made known to people in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God’s holy apostles and prophets.”(Ephesians 3:2-5). In the first chapter of Colossians he writes about the commission God gave him “to present to you the word of God in its fullness – the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations but is now disclosed to the saints.” And in I Corinthians 2 Paul calls it “God’s secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began” (I Corinthians 2:7).

Christ is called “the mystery of God” because he was hidden in the plan of redemption which unfolded until the fullness of time. Christ is the fulfillment of the entire Old Testament but that was not evident even to the saints of old. Did Abraham understand that his son Isaac prefigured the Christ because both were children of promise? Did Moses understand that painting the doorposts of Hebrew homes in Egypt with the blood of a lamb would be fulfilled on Calvary? Did David understand that his greatest descendent would not sit on an earthly throne but die on a cross? Did Isaiah understand that the Messiah would be “pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities?” People misunderstood even after Jesus’ resurrection. Luke tells the story of two of Jesus’ followers who were walking to the village of Emmaus on Easter evening. Suddenly and mysteriously Jesus joined them they didn’t recognize him. He was hidden in plain sight. “What are you talking about?” he asks them. With long faces they told him about the man named Jesus who was a prophet of God and had stirred their hopes of redemption. But those hopes had been dashed when he was cruelly executed. Then Jesus said

to them, 'How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?' And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself." But they still didn't see it. They didn't recognize him until he broke bread at their table.

Why not? Why didn't his closest disciples see it? Why didn't Paul see it in his earlier life? He knew the Scriptures like he knew his own name. Was it only because they were foolish and slow of heart to believe their own Scriptures or was it also because in the inscrutable wisdom of God "the mystery" was "kept hidden for ages and generations"?

But unlike the secret knowledge in mystery cults, "the mystery of God" has now been revealed. The curtain has been pulled back, the veil lifted. The mystery of God has a name and a place in history: he is Jesus of Nazareth. As the Nicene Creed puts it, "For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven; he became incarnate by the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and was made human."

That's the heart of the gospel and what's more, it's a gospel for all people. That too had been kept hidden for ages and generations. There were hints of that wider purpose. God told Abraham that through him all nations would be blest. Isaiah wrote about Israel being a light to the Gentiles. Jonah called Nineveh to repent because God loved its people and even its animals. But for the most part it was commonly thought that God's embrace was limited to Abraham's biological descendants, that God loved his covenant people exclusively.

But then came the day when Jesus reached out his arms on the cross to include all people regardless of race or color or language or status. "I when I am lifted up will draw all people to myself" he said. (John 12:32). "Go and make disciples of all nations" were his parting words as he ascended into heaven. That's why Paul said to the Ephesians, "The mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members of one body, and sharers together in the praise of Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 3:6). Think of the thrill it must have been for Paul to realize that God had entrusted to him the greatest mystery of all time, not to keep it secret but to tell it far and wide! Of all the people God might have chosen, he chose a man who had hated Christ and had sworn to wipe his name off the earth. When Paul had looked at Jesus he had seen red!

But remember what happened when Paul was converted on the road to Damascus? He was blinded by blazing bright life from heaven. Later on through Ananias, Paul's sight was restored. But it wasn't only his physical eyes that received sight. Even more important, from that day on when Paul looked at Christ he saw not red but revelation. He saw Jesus as the seed of the woman who would crush the serpent's head in fulfillment of Genesis 3:15. He saw Jesus as the son of Abraham through whom all nations would be blessed. He saw that Jesus' blood sealed the New Covenant. He saw Jesus as the prophet, priest and king that had been foreshadowed in ancient Jewish history. His letters are full of proof that for Paul Jesus is the key that unlocks the whole treasure of Hebrew Scripture.

So the mystery of the ages is no longer a mystery. What had been hidden for centuries has been revealed for all to see, right? Well, yes and no. It has been revealed but not everyone sees it or understands it or accepts it. "None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of Glory," (I Corinthians 2:8). "The mystery of God" has been revealed in Christ but because it's a divine mystery it is not apparent to the human mind, unless something happens to change it.

When I was serving my first church we lived next door to a woman who was a member of the church, but her husband was not a member. He was a fine man who loved our kids and shared the fruit of his garden with us. Occasionally he would attend a service with his wife, but

when we'd talk about the faith he would say, "I just don't get it. It doesn't connect for me. I can't believe it." Without the Holy Spirit, Christ is still a mystery.

Nicodemus was a spiritual leader in Israel who came to Jesus with a question: "Rabbi," he said, "we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him." The subtext there is OK, Jesus, I don't get it, just who are you? Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." In other words, you will not see me for who I am unless the Spirit opens your eyes. It's like being born again.

"No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him,' but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit...we have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us" (I Cor. 2:9-12).

What a gift, what a wonderful gift it is to know "the mystery of God, namely Christ in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge"! "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out. Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor? Who has ever given to God that God should repay him? For from him and through him and to him are all things, to him be the glory forever! Amen (Romans 11:33-36).

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