

The Mystery of Christmas

Romans 16:25-27 *Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery kept secret since the world began ²⁶ but now has been made manifest, and by the prophetic Scriptures has been made known to all nations, according to the commandment of the everlasting God, for obedience to the faith -- ²⁷ to God, alone wise, be glory through Jesus Christ forever. Amen.*

1 Peter 1:10-12 *Of this salvation the prophets have inquired and searched carefully, who prophesied of the grace that would come to you, ¹¹ searching what, or what manner of time, the Spirit of Christ who was in them was indicating when He testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. ¹² To them it was revealed that, not to themselves, but to us they were ministering the things which now have been reported to you through those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven -- things which angels desire to look into.*

What comes to mind when you hear the word 'mystery'? Probably you are thinking about something strange, something unsolved- like missing persons, murder cases. You might be thinking of things that are unexplained, that are a puzzle to us, like paranormal activity. For us, the word *mysterious* means, strange, unknown, even dangerous.

When the Bible uses the word *mystery*, it means something very different. When the Bible uses the word 'mystery' it speaks of what our text just described. A mystery is a matter which was previously unrevealed, but now has been made known. It was a sacred secret, something kept back from the eyes, ears and understanding of previous generations of believers. It was something unknown in Old Testament times, but now made known to New Testament believers.

The Bible describes several mysteries: that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs with Jews in one body (Eph 3:9), that marriage is actually a portrayal of Christ and His church (Eph 5:32), that in a moment at the last trumpet we shall be instantaneously changed and receive resurrection bodies (I Cor 15:51), that Israel has been blinded so that the Gentiles can come to faith (Rom 11:25), that He is going to gather all things together in Christ in the fullness of time (Eph 1:9), that Christ would dwell within us (Col 1:28) and even in the end times, something the Bible calls 'mystery Babylon'

But of all these mysteries, the greatest one of all is the mystery of Christ. The mystery of Messiah. Now Old Testament saints had some idea of Messiah. Enoch knew He was coming. Abraham knew He was coming. Jacob knew He was coming. Moses prophesied of His coming. David prophesied of His coming. By the time of the prophets, there was a lot more knowledge. Isaiah knew he would be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Prince of peace. Isaiah knew he would suffer on behalf of the sins of His people. Daniel knew He would be cut off for the sins of the people. Micah knew He would be born in Bethlehem. Zechariah knew He would set foot on the mount of Olives.

But you have to understand that we have the advantage of looking back and piecing their prophecies together. They were looking forward, desperately trying to work out how these prophecies would come together in one person. They saw on the one hand, he seemed divine, on the other hand he was going to be born. On the one hand he was coming in the clouds in glory, on the other hand he was going to die. On the one hand he was of the line of royal David, on the other hand he is born in little Bethlehem, and later is riding on a donkey.

It would be like if I gave you individual items of a face and asked you to put it together – brown eyes, medium lips, pointy nose, slanted eyebrows etc. You might imagine something – but how would you be able to recognise the person I was describing if they walked past you.

So it was for the prophets. Messiah was the greatest of mysteries. Peter tells us they inquired and searched carefully. They strained, they poured over the laws they had. But eventually they found out that they were not going to be privileged to see it or put it together. They had to submit to the light that they had received and be content with it, and write those prophecies down for others to read, who would come later.

The prophets saw much, but I do not know if any of them saw the extent of the mystery of the Incarnation. I am not sure if any of them realised the magnitude of the mystery.

There are two parts to that mystery which I want us to look at next:

Matthew 1:18-25 *Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: After His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly. ²⁰ But while he thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. ²¹ "And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins." ²² So all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying: ²³ "Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel," which is translated, "God with us." ²⁴ Then Joseph, being aroused from sleep, did as the angel of the Lord commanded him and took to him his wife, ²⁵ and did not know her till she had brought forth her firstborn Son. And he called His name JESUS.*

1 Timothy 3:16 - 4:1 *And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifested in the flesh, Justified in the Spirit, Seen by angels, Preached among the Gentiles, Believed on in the world, Received up in glory.*

Mystery # 1: God the Son became a man to save men from their sins.

Where do we see this? In the Scripture in Matthew we see two names – Immanuel and Jesus. Immanuel means God with us. Not in the sense of God is supportive of us, in the sense that God amongst us. God with us as one of us. Jesus or Yeshua simply means Yahweh is salvation; or Jehovah saves. Who is it that saves? Jehovah saves. How will Jehovah save us, by being Immanuel, one of us.

When I say God the Son became a man, I don't mean, God the Son turned into a man, like in the fairy tales where a prince turns into a frog. I don't mean God the Son appeared like a man for 33 years, and then threw off that appearance when He went to heaven, as if His humanity was just a shell, an outer clothing He was wearing. I mean, God the Son added to His divine nature a true and perfect human nature. He did this by entering humanity the way all of us enter humanity – by being born.

There were several occurrences in Scripture of heavenly beings appearing in human form. Angels looked like men when they visited Abram, and ate his food and drank. They were recognised as men when they went into the wicked city of Sodom. However, those beings simply had the appearance of being human for the brief time of their task on earth. Those angels took human shape to deal with living humans.

However, the Incarnation is different. God is not simply appearing to be a man. God is not projecting the image of being a man. God is becoming a man. God is adding to His nature a true

human nature, by being born. Not the birth of a regular human, but a birth which would make it possible for Him to be fully God and fully man at the same time.

Matthew 1:20 *But while he thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit."*

Jesus, fully God and fully man. Two natures, in One Person.

Have you ever stopped to imagine the immense paradoxes that the Incarnation brought about? Here is God, self-existent and self-sufficient, deriving His life from no one, and existing because of Himself, now nursing as a helpless baby. Now eating and drinking to keep alive. Still self-existent, but added to His deity a true human nature that needs sustenance.

Here is God, eternal and without beginning, now having a birthday – a particular entrance into the world.

Here is God, omnipotent and almighty - now experiencing weakness, tiredness, thirst, hunger.

Here is God, omniscient, all-knowing – now experiencing ignorance over His Father's timing of His return.

Here is God, immutable, unchanging – now growing from babe to boy to man.

Here is God, infinite, without bounds, omnipresent, everywhere at the same time, now being in one place, walking to his destinations.

Here is God, majestic and the sum of all beauty - now appearing as a plain Hebrew man, that Isaiah said, "There is no form nor beauty in him that we should desire him"

Here is God, the name of all names - now experiencing slander, mockery, disgrace.

Here is God, the One who has had perfect joy and sovereignty - now experiencing suffering.

This is a mystery not fully known before. That God would add to His deity a true human nature.

Philippians 2:5-8 *Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, ⁷ but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.*

The prophets could not have imagined the magnitude of the mystery.

Why? The angel said so. To save His people from their sins. But why? Why must He become a man?

Answer: Because to bring God and man back together, it required a God-man as a mediator.

See a true mediator must have sympathies with both sides. He must belong to both sides in some way:

Here is mankind, sinful, and estranged from God.

Here is God, holy and full of wrath for man.

The writer of Hebrews tells us that a priest was a mediator because he knew human weakness. He could represent weak humans to God. The problem is, all priests are sinners and need atonement for themselves. Human priests don't have adequate sympathy with God's holiness. Whatever they bring as a sacrifice is going to fall short of satisfying God's holiness.

What is the solution? If God adds to Himself true humanity, He has both. He has full sympathy with God's holiness and justice. He is God, He will not let sin pass. As a man, He experiences weakness, being able to sympathise with us. However, having a divine nature, He cannot sin, and His life

offered up to God has infinite value. He satisfies God's requirement. He draws men to Himself. You see, the reason this had to happen was simple: if God wanted any of the race of Adam to be reconciled to Himself, this was the only way. You couldn't send an angel. You couldn't overlook their sin. In other words, what this means is God had two choices: destroy man altogether, or become a man for the sake of saving some of them and what that means is this: when God created man, and knew He would sin, He was planning on this all along. When God thought up the universe, He was planning something far greater than we can imagine. He was planning on adding something of His creation to Himself, to love them and unite Himself with them in a way that only marriage fully pictures here.

Philippians 3:20-21 *For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹ who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself.*

Revelation 1:12-16 *and having turned I saw seven golden lampstands, ¹³ and in the midst of the seven lampstands One like the Son of Man, clothed with a garment down to the feet and girded about the chest with a golden band. ¹⁴ His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and His eyes like a flame of fire; ¹⁵ His feet were like fine brass, as if refined in a furnace, and His voice as the sound of many waters; ¹⁶ He had in His right hand seven stars, out of His mouth went a sharp two-edged sword, and His countenance was like the sun shining in its strength.*

1 Timothy 2:5 *For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus,*

Acts 1:9-11 *Now when He had spoken these things, while they watched, He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. ¹⁰ And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as He went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel, ¹¹ who also said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven."*

Mystery 2: God the Son Remains a Man to Save His People From Their Sins.

There is an idea in many Christians' minds that the Incarnation was something Jesus did for thirty-three years, after which He threw it off, like a diver who puts on his suit to go down into the deep, then comes back up to the ship and takes off his gear.

That is not the case. You see, the office of priest which Jesus took upon Himself, being a mediator between God and man is not something He did for a few years. In order for us to remain kept, Christ must forever apply His atoning work on our behalf.

Hebrews 7:24-25 *But He, because He continues forever, has an unchangeable priesthood. ²⁵ Therefore He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.*

Romans 8:34 *Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us.*

1 John 2:1 *My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.*

Do you know what that means? It means Jesus is the God-Man forever. That is why Revelation 1 describes Him as one like the Son of Man. Philippians 3 says our bodies will be fashioned to be like His glorious body. Acts 1 has the angels saying that Christ will return in like manner to the way He went.

It is why Paul says:

1 Timothy 2:5 *For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus,*

Jesus is our Man in heaven. Jesus is the glorified God-man forever. This is possibly more amazing than the Incarnation itself – that the Incarnation was permanent. That what we celebrate at Christmas is not that the Second Person of the Trinity became a man for a time, but that the Second Person of the Trinity added humanity to His nature forever!

Did you ever think that Christmas was permanent?

“Suppose you and I were able right now to go to the presence of the Father. If we could see the Spirit, who is God, and the archangels and seraphim and strange creations out of the fire, we would see them surrounding the throne. But to our delight and amazement, we would see a Man there, human like we are—the Man Christ Jesus Himself!”—A.W. Tozer *Jesus, Our Man in Glory*

This is a mystery that the prophets could barely see the outlines of. That Yahweh, the Uncreated, Immortal, Invisible, would at some point so identify with humanity, as to add it to Himself. God does not just have a place for humanity in heaven. God has included humanity in His nature. God the changeless, God the self-sufficient, decided to go through with creation and redemption knowing that in some way, it would change Him!

That should firstly make us realise how great God's plans are with humanity. If God has invested Himself in this way with the human race, He has plans for the redeemed of the human race that go far beyond what we could have possibly imagined. If marriage pictures Christ and the church, then Christ takes upon Himself human nature, so that our eternal union might be something far deeper and greater than the cherubim, seraphim, and all the host of heaven could know.

It also means this:

“Jesus has never forgotten what it means to be weak. He never will forget. Precisely because He walked this earth as a fragile human being, experienced testing, passed through suffering, and learned obedience, He is now qualified to be our merciful and faithful High Priest. He is the one mediator between God and humans. He is able to help us when we are tempted. He is able to save us to the uttermost. And for our part, we can come boldly to the throne of grace, knowing that we shall obtain mercy and find help in time of need.” - Kevin Bauder, *In the Nick of Time*

The mystery, the sacred secret not revealed until now, is something the prophets could only see the outlines of. God the Son would become a man to save us from our sins, and God the Son would remain a man to save us from our sins.

The mystery of Christmas is this – when faced with the choices of destroying mankind and continuing to enjoy fellowship within the Trinity, or saving man by becoming one forever, God chose to become one and remain that way. This amazes us; it awes us; it silences us. We could not have guessed it or imagined it. We are like the Queen of Sheba in front of Solomon's glory – we have no more spirit within us, it takes our breath away.

The right response, the reasonable service is praise, adoration, honour given to Him, love from a pure heart.