

# God Loves a Mystery

by: *Ronald L. Dart*

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I've thought about this a bit, and I think that God loves a mystery. I recall an old time radio show called, *I Love a Mystery!* I remember hearing it on my old Philco radio back in the days before there was television. I was an inveterate radio listener as a boy. I went to bed with the radio almost every night. My parents let me do that. The reason I bring this up is because it occurs to me that: 1) I am made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26) as all men are; and 2) I love mysteries. I like puzzles: jigsaw, crossword, mazes, word finders, whodunits, you name it. And if it's a mystery, I'm fascinated by it. Sometimes, when I'm studying the Bible, I'm faced with a mystery. What was God saying or doing on this occasion? And what did he mean by it? What did the event mean? Where does this thing go? What does it connect to? Someone once complained about this and they said, "Why does God hide stuff? Why doesn't He just come out and say what he means?" Well, I've got a few things to say about that.

## Does God Conceal Matters?

First, how plain does God have to be? What part of "Thou shall not steal" do we not understand? That's what I would call coming right out and saying it, wouldn't you? The truth is, the Ten Commandments are plain, unambiguous statements of how human beings should live their lives and conduct themselves.

Second, when you have found your own way to the answer of a difficult question, you're far more likely to remember it. It's a fundamental principle of education. You pose kids a problem. You sit them down and let them work their way through it, and when they come to the end of it, they will understand it much better than if you simply tell them.

Now, I can add a third thing. God loves a mystery. We should understand that well enough. There are people who take great pleasure in designing crossword puzzles that drive us nuts. There are people who like to build puzzles. There are some people who like to build puzzles about as much as some of us like to solve puzzles. And, then there is Proverbs 25:2, "*It is the glory of God to conceal a thing: but the honor of kings is to search out a matter.*" Isn't that fascinating? It's God's glory to conceal stuff and our honor to search them out. So that's why I say God loves a mystery. He likes to build them, He likes to present us with them, He likes to watch us solve these things, and on it goes.

## The Olive Trees

There may be a more serious side to this. There is a rather difficult passage in Paul's letter to the Romans that reveals something kind of unexpected. In the eleventh chapter, Paul was trying to sort his way through a vexing problem. Why were so many Jews rejecting the Gospel out of hand? After all, they were God's people. They had the promise of the Messiah, and now He'd come and they wanted nothing to do with Him. Paul likened Israel to a domestic olive tree and the Gentiles to a wild olive tree. He concluded that it was necessary to break some of the natural branches out of the olive tree—that is, Israel—so that the branches of the wild olive tree—that is, the Gentiles—could be grafted in. I used to wonder about this passage. Why was it necessary to get the Jews, at least some of them, out of the way so that Gentiles could enter? Wasn't it possible for the Gentiles to just simply be brought in among the Jews and everyone go ahead like one big happy family? It might have been, but there was really strong resistance to this idea among the Jews. In fact, virtually all of the disciples of Jesus were Jews in the beginning.

The Jews had a resistance to the Gentiles coming in. It was something they just could not imagine. Sometimes we see things clearly and still resist them, but in many cases we can't get our minds around them at all. They had no frame of reference for this. It was meaningless to them to suggest that the Gentiles might come in because, after all, God was the God of the Jews. They thought, "He's our God, not theirs." You don't have to think about this very long to realize that this was not the will of God. This was just something the Jews fell into, maybe without even realizing they had done so. But it is very clear, if you read your Bible carefully—well, maybe if you solve the mystery—that, from the beginning, He has been working to take His Word to the whole world, not just part of it. Abraham's seed (Genesis 18:18) was supposed to be a blessing to the nations and that means Gentiles.

## Gospel Must Go to the Gentiles

Here's what Jesus told his disciples just before his ascension. In Matthew 28:18-20, *"All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go you therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world."* Yes, I know, the translation you hold in your hand may say, *"All power is given to me in heaven and earth, go you therefore and teach all nations. . ."* or *"...make disciples of all nations. . ."* but in the Greek, the word is "Gentiles." Go. Teach all the Gentiles and baptize them.

Well, no one wanted to go to the Gentiles. Finally, God decided to teach another lesson. And so he went through a rather involved exercise. He almost led Peter by the hand to a man named Cornelius (Acts 10), a Roman centurion, and showed him by pouring out the holy spirit on these people while Peter was talking to them. So he had to ask, "Who could forbid baptism to these people? Look, God has given them His spirit." Now everyone had the picture, right? No, they didn't.

## Calling of Paul

It finally took the calling and commissioning of Paul (Acts 9:15) to get the job done. God had to break loose the faith of Jesus from its Jewish roots to allow the Gentiles to see and hear. That's why, when we began our Bible Study series now available to the public, we called the first book in the series, *The Breakout*, because it was a time of breaking out the Gospel to the world so they could know it. In the process of explaining, Paul said this about the unbelieving Jews, "*For God hath concluded them all in unbelief, that he might have mercy upon all*" (Romans 11:32). Let me say it again, because it's so counter-intuitive, "*God has concluded [or shut them all] in unbelief that he might have mercy upon them all.*" So, in a sense, He stamped unbelief on a whole range of people so He could later come back and have mercy upon them. This is totally counter-intuitive—contrary to what we might expect. How could shutting a person in a state of unbelief allow God to have mercy on them?

## Knowledge and Ignorance

I'll try to explain. Jesus concluded one of his parables with this particular judgment: "*And that servant, which knew his lord's will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he that knew not, and did commit things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes. For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required: and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more.*" (Luke 12:47-48). Now this is really fascinating. There's so much in here, if you'll take the time to think it through. It should be apparent. You've got two servants, both of whom end up doing the same thing, making the same stupid error. One of them knows he shouldn't have done it, and the other doesn't know. Do you punish them both the same? Answer: No. The man who knew better and did it anyway has a much more severe judgment upon him than the man who didn't know better when he did it. The second part of this lesson is, just because you didn't know better, it doesn't mean you're not going to get hurt. It just means you're not going to suffer in addition to it, the punishment for people who did know better.

Now, imagine you are reading the Bible one day, and you come across something you are not doing that you should be doing. Two things can happen at that point. You can repent and do what is right, or you can close your eyes to what is right and continue on your way. That, in its turn, presents God with two alternatives. What might those be? He could intervene and force you to see what is there. But there's a problem with this if God actually makes you see it, if He lays it out for you. He said, "*If we sin willfully, after we have received the knowledge of the truth. . .*" (Hebrews 10:26). That's what we're talking about. You're given something, you see it, it's clear as crystal, and you say I'm just not going to do it. "*For if we sin willfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remains no more sacrifice for sins, But a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries. He that despised Moses' law died without mercy under two or three witnesses: Of how much sorer punishment, suppose you, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden under foot the Son of God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant,*

*wherewith he was sanctified, an unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the Spirit of grace?" (Hebrews 10:26-29).* You can't say "No" to God for as long as you want, any way you want, and not suffer for it. There comes a point when you've said "No" to God once too often and he writes you off—forever. Now, perhaps you can see the problem. If God makes something totally clear to us and we turn away from it, there is no way back. No, I'm not talking about sins of weakness; I'm talking about presumptuous, albeit willful rejection of God.

Here's the other alternative of what God could do. God could conclude that you just aren't quite ready yet, count you as being in a state of ignorance, or perhaps in a state of stupidity, and decide to come back later. That later time may be a lot tougher than you want it to be, but at least God will not have written you off. It may seem better to Him to leave you in a state of unbelief for now. That doesn't mean you're getting off scot-free. You still will suffer the consequences of your error, whatever it may be, but you may not move beyond the possibility of mercy. I think that sounds pretty good, actually. It doesn't sound as good as doing the right thing the first time, but sometimes letting us suffer the consequences of the stupid thing we've done is useful for God because, in the end, we sit up a little straighter, pay a little more attention, and become a little bit more responsive.

### **When You Sin**

When you sin, two things are possible. One is the consequence of your sin and the other is the punishment for your sin. The punishment for sin? Oh, that's death. You're going to die—forever. The consequence of your sin? If you drive drunk, crash your car into a telephone pole and, in the accident, you lose your right arm, that is the consequence. It's not going away and you will not escape it. So, it may seem strange at first that God would leave us with an excuse, an out, for doing the wrong thing, but He isn't really doing that. If you sin, you will pay, and it's a whole lot better for you if you do it right the first time. Paul said, *"For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Spirit, And have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, If they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame" (Hebrews 6:4-6).* Do you see what I mean? Whenever we do this sort of thing, God has to decide how He is going to deal with it. Will He write us off, or put us on a shelf for a while? Let us suffer for the stupid things we're doing and come back later?

### **God Loves a Mystery**

God's love of mystery is not mere whimsy; it's part of His way of protecting us from ourselves. It's part of his way of teaching us lessons more deeply, in ways we are more likely to remember. Isn't it plain when you read the Bible that God has secrets? There are times when He reveals stuff and there are times when He doesn't. Partly because there are times when we're ready for it and times when we're not.

There's a short passage in Deuteronomy that I always find fascinating: "*The secret things belong unto the LORD our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law*" (Deuteronomy 29:29). When God reveals something, He just lays it out. God said, "*Thou shalt not bear false witness against your neighbor.*" "*Do not commit adultery.*" "*Don't lie.*" All those things God tells us we are not to do, in no uncertain terms. Those are the things which are revealed.

The secret things that belong to the Lord our God are another matter entirely. I conclude that there are some things we can find out by solving the mystery, because He wants us to. He wants us to take our Bibles and our concordances and whatever resources we've got, and study it, to come to understand. With other things—the only way we learn them is when God reveals them in His own time. Sometimes we can't tell the difference between these things when we start on a journey. We start off studying something, looking into it, and only later come to realize, "This is one of the secret things of God and I'm just not going to solve it."

### **Know-it-Alls**

One thing to watch out for is preachers who pretend to know, when they are really only guessing. Theorizing about what God is doing is okay. I have no problem with it. I do a lot of that myself. You will find rather a lot of theorizing about God in my book titled, *The Lonely God*. But, pronouncing our theories as God's own truth is a lie, and it can get people hurt. Some preachers are reluctant to admit they don't know because, by experience, they've learned that the instant they say "I don't know" someone else, who also doesn't know, will come along and try to enlighten them. I know what I'm talking about; I have been there. But saying simply "I don't know" is one of the most liberating things you can do. It liberates you to seek the truth in places you hadn't thought to look. Saying "I know" locks you up so you can't grow any further. You need to learn to say "I don't know," because that sets you free to find out.

I think some Bible teachers feel they're emulating Christ when they speak with authority. After all, Matthew tells us it came to pass when Jesus was teaching that the people were astonished at his doctrine because he taught them as one having authority and not like the scribes (Matthew 7:28-29).

Watch out for preachers who pretend to have that kind of authority. They can burn you. In 1 Corinthians 13:8, Paul said, "*Love never fails; but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away*" (NASB). We need to always remember that when someone tries to tell people about God or when preachers presume to speak from a position of total truth, keep your distance. Someone is likely to get hurt.

The truth is, now we do know things that were not known to the Ancients. It's fair to say that we only know in part, but those poor guys didn't know at all. It wasn't time. In Romans 16:25-26, Paul makes a statement, almost a throwaway statement, but it's important. He

said, *"Now to him that is of power to establish you according to my gospel, and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery, which was kept secret since the world began, But now is made manifest, and by the scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the everlasting God, made known to all nations for the obedience of faith."* Paul can write really long sentences, but there are two things here. There was a mystery which had been kept secret since the world began and that was now being made manifest, being revealed. Even though Paul was now openly declaring things about God that had been kept secret, he was painfully aware of the danger of becoming a know-it-all.

### **Make Simple Things Clear**

Paul understood the importance of making the simple things clear. In his letter to the Corinthians, he said, *"And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellence of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God" (1 Corinthians 2:1)*. That's a reference to Greek orators who had a style about using excellence of speech and diction and philosophy and so forth. He said he didn't bring that. *"For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (v. 2)*. That's the Gospel. That's the heart and core of our faith. Paul had no desire to make it complicated, or difficult, or mysterious. This was a hard idea for the Jews to accept. Some did; most did not. He continued, *"And I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power."* (v. 3-4) This is interesting, because from the last verse of that passage, you might conclude that a preacher who speaks with power and authority is a good preacher, doing a good thing, but how does one reconcile that with the first part of the passage where Paul says, *"And I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling"?*

I have watched a preacher on television, marching across the stage, holding the Bible high with his pages flapping in the breeze, speaking with power at the top of his voice. I can't help myself, I want to know where the weakness and fear and trembling are. I want to know where the humility is. It troubles me when I see preachers who look down their noses at their congregations, who talk down to people when they preach, because most of them, really, should be preaching to themselves first.

There was a time—this is a time for true confession—I did that myself. I preached. I don't do it any longer because when I see preachers, they seem to me to be talking down to people. I don't think Paul did this. At least he didn't do it late in his ministry. Now, I will confess, early on, Paul was a tough hombre, but by the time he got to Corinth, most of his cockiness had been beaten out of him. He'd been whipped, he'd been stoned, and left for dead on one occasion, and so he could look back at a prophecy like Isaiah 66:1-2, *"Thus says the LORD, The heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool: where is the house that you build unto me? and where is the place of my rest? For all those things hath mine hand made, and all those things have been, says the LORD: but to this man will I look, even to him that is*

*poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word."* And that's how Paul had come to see himself; as one who had to bow before God's Word, who was poor, of a crushed spirit, and who trembled before God's Word.

Frankly, you should keep your distance from preachers who brag about what they're going to do to the devil. Never challenge the devil. Remember what happened to Job? If you get too cocky, God may decide to let the devil teach you a lesson or two. So why did Paul do it this way? He said, "*So that your faith would not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God.*" (1 Corinthians 2:5). Paul was concerned that people would think more highly of him than they ought to and follow him instead of following Christ.

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This article was transcribed with minor editing from a sermon given by  
Ronald L. Dart titled: God Loves a Mystery (06GLM) 1/26/06

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