

Born to Win

The Mystery Begins

by Ronald L. Dart

It may have been on this very night (it was *certainly* under this moon) that the first great step in the *mystery* of God was played out. Now, I don't know if you have any idea how *hard* this is going to be for me, as a teacher, to grapple with; because as a teacher, a preacher, a communicator, and so forth, one of the things I'm always looking for in class was when the furrowed brow begins to clear, and the light of understanding dawns on the face of the person who's listening. I work for that. I *strive* for that. I take great excitement out of that. To me, teaching and seeing understanding dawn on a person's face...that's mother's milk to me. It is *so* important.

And so consequently, when I come to the *fact* of the mystery of God, I've got a problem. There *is* a mystery, and not everyone gets it. In spite of all my persuasive ability, in spite of my clever reasoning, in spite of my ability to lay it all out for you so you would think anyone could see it...It reminds me of the line from *Li'l Abner* comic strips (some of you remember it): "...As any fool can plainly see." But not everyone does.

Now, Paul summarized what this is in his first letter to Timothy. It's First Timothy, chapter 3, verse 14. He said this:

1 Timothy 3

AKJV

¹⁴ These things write I to you, hoping to come to you shortly:

¹⁵ But if I tarry long, that you may know how you ought to behave yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.

What is? The Church is.

1 Timothy 3

AKJV

¹⁶ And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached to the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory.

Paul characterizes this as "the mystery of godliness", and he tells us what it is in six steps. Count 'em: God was "manifest in the flesh", "justified"—vindicated, seen to be righteous—"in the Spirit", "seen of angels", "preached to the Gentiles" (which some people for that first century had an *awful* hard time getting their mind around), "believed on in the world", and "received up into glory". It is with this first step in the mystery that we concern ourselves tonight: God was manifested in the flesh.

Before we go there, I think we need to ask one small question, and it's the one that troubles me: Why is it a mystery? When the disciples of Jesus asked him why he spoke to the multitudes and the crowds in parables, he gave them an answer. Now, this is fascinating to me, because I can remember clean back

when I was a little kid in Sunday school, having the teacher explain to us that the reason Jesus spoke in parables was so that everyone would understand what he is saying; it was to make his meaning clear. So imagine my shock when I came to what Jesus said to the disciples on this occasion. It's in Matthew 13, verse 11:

Matthew 13

AKJV

¹¹ [...] Because it is given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given.

Think about that. Here I am getting up to stand and talk to you tonight, expecting you to understand what I tell you. And to some it is given to understand, and to some it isn't given, and there's not a thing in the world I can do to make it different. *That* is what I mean when I said it tends to make me a little uncomfortable. But it's pointless to argue with it; Christ said it was so. And he quite deliberately told the crowds the truth in such a way that they could ignore it if that's what they chose to do.

Now, you may not be...I'm sure you know what the word "allegory" means, but you may not be aware of it fully as a literary form. The idea of an allegory is that you tell your story in such a way that a person can bring themselves to the story. They can bring their experiences, they can bring their hopes, their fears, their prejudices; whatever it is they bring, they bring themselves to the story. And people will read into the symbols of an allegory different things, depending on where they've been, how they were brought up, who they are, what they're afraid of, what they hope for. These are the things that make the difference. Well now, Paul, toward the end of his letter to the Romans, said this. He said in chapter 16, verse 25,

Romans 16

AKJV

²⁵ 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,

Fascinating! Here we've got a secret, here we have a mystery, that was a secret until...when? Till Christ came. It wasn't revealed...

Romans 16

AKJV

²⁶ 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:

You know, we read this and we take it for granted. This is a *huge* idea among all Jews of this time—that this gospel was to go to all the nations.

Romans 16

AKJV

²⁷ To God only wise, be glory through Jesus Christ for ever. Amen.

All nations? Yes. To every person? No. And that is where the difficulty comes in. Writing to the Corinthians, Paul mentions it again. First Corinthians 2, verse 4:

1 Corinthians 2

AKJV

⁴ And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, [...]

Now, this is fascinating to me, because basically what he's telling these people... I think of Paul as being an incredible speaker. He says he was not. Which is... I guess I'll just have to take what he says, because he plainly says that he was *not* an orator. We derive what we think he is from the way he expresses himself in his letters, but I gather when he's in person it was another matter.

1 Corinthians 2

AKJV

⁴ And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power:

Why? So...

1 Corinthians 2

AKJV

⁵ That your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God.

⁶ However, we speak wisdom among them that are perfect: yet not the wisdom of this world, nor of the princes of this world, that come to nothing:

Now, when you understand also that, in that world at that time, Greek oratory was a high art, and people were respected because of the way they could make their argument and form and shape the things they're trying to tell to people. And so consequently, Paul comes and says, "I didn't do that. *Why* didn't I do it? Because when I got through, I didn't want you believing because I persuaded you; I wanted you believing because you believed Christ."

1 Corinthians 2

AKJV

⁷ But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, even the hidden wisdom, which God ordained before the world to our glory:

⁸ Which none of the princes of this world knew: for had they known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.

What a thing to say: the Lord of glory. He didn't say that if they'd known this they wouldn't have crucified "the Messiah"; they wouldn't have crucified "the Lord of glory". But what's the mystery? And why does it stay a mystery in spite of everything? I don't know. (Which is a very sensible answer, isn't it, in the face of a mystery?) I only know this: You can tell a man outright what it is, and he will turn himself inside out trying to find ways to deny it. This is true, and I dare say a lot of you have experienced this. You stood there face to face, you've tried to explain something to someone, you made it as *clear* as it could be, and then watched that person turn himself into *a pretzel* trying to find another way to explain what it is that you have just told him. It is *this* which makes argument *pointless*. If he's ready for it, he will see it. If he's not ready, he won't.

I go back...over 50 years now...to when I was in Abilene, Texas, going to Hardin-Simmons University, and Allie's brother (who was a member of an organization called the Radio Church of God back in those days), he would come to visit us because he was a railroad telegrapher and lived down the road just a few miles. And he'd been listening to this guy on radio—this Herbert Armstrong fellow—and he would come up and talk to me about the things he knew. And I would ask him questions. In fact, I set out to see...He used to be a Baptist, and I set out to see if I couldn't make him a Baptist *again*. So we

would sit up until one, two, three o'clock in the morning, and we'd go round and round. But ever so often he would say, "Look, if you can receive it, this is what it is." And you'd kind of let it lie. "What do you mean, 'If I can receive it'?" To me, that was a challenge. I couldn't leave it alone. I had to keep working it over in my heart and in my mind. But he *did understand* what he could do and what he couldn't do. He could not make plain to me what I was not willing to have made plain to myself. So if a person is not ready, the most eloquent and persuasive argument will only cause him to dig himself in deeper, to raise barriers higher. Therefore, what is the intelligent thing to do? Back off. Very simple.

It also appears there's more than one aspect of this mystery. In Ephesians, chapter 3, verse 2:

Ephesians 3

NIV '84

² Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you,
³ that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly.
⁴ In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ,
⁵ which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets.

I don't know if you noticed that or not—the "now" connected with prophets. So there were not only apostles at the time, there were prophets at the time; and this was *now* being revealed to all of these.

Ephesians 3

NIV '84

⁶ This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.

So *part* of our mystery, then, is also not only that God has become manifest in the flesh, but that he is to be *proclaimed to the Gentiles*—which was a very, very big move. Later, Paul went on to write to the Colossians. Chapter 2:

Colossians 2

AKJV

¹ For I would that you knew what great conflict I have for you, and for them at Laodicea, and for as many as have not seen my face in the flesh;
² That their hearts might be comforted, being knit together in love, and to all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the acknowledgment of the mystery of God, and of the Father, and of Christ;
³ In whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.
⁴ And this I say, lest any man should beguile you with enticing words.

Paul says, "I'm not using enticing words, why should anybody else?" Why should anyone have to write a long, long treatise, book, and so forth (like, you know, the Dallas telephone directory) to explain something which can be explained in a paragraph? That is, if you keep the gospel straight and clean, and just tell it, and if a person is ready for it, they will hear it. If they're not ready, they won't.

So, on this night we come and consider the *first step* in playing out the mystery of God: God was manifested in the flesh. The story is familiar from *endless* repetition. We've heard it so many times, we could sit down and tell the story to somebody else—which is a part of the objective, if you understand it. That was what was going on for about the first eight years or so when the church had been... Christ had gone, left them behind. What they were doing that eight years was telling the story again, and again, and again, and again—so that *every single one of them* could go out, wherever they were, and sit

down (with a group of children, if necessary), and tell them the story. That's the challenge. Now, Luke 2:

Luke 2

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¹ In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world.

[...]

³ And everyone went to his own town to register.

⁴ So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David.

⁵ He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.

Oh, the King James Version is better: Mary was with him and Mary was “great with child”. And it just conjures up in my mind an image of this woman and the reality of what she was carrying in her body.

Luke 2

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⁶ While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born,

⁷ and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

What a *meager* description. But every mother knows what happened, don't you? You know that Mary went into labor. You know it was a struggle. You know, she hurt from time to time in this course. And she may have cried out once or twice. We know Joseph was there. We know that the baby crowned and then came into the world through her pain, and through her labor, and that he took a breath of air in his lungs and cried—like every baby coming into the world is prone to do, supposed to do, designed to do. It's important that they do. And they know what the little infant baby looks like: it looks like it needs to be cleaned up bad. And so you clean them up, wrap them up. They know how he cried, and they also know the child had to be placed to the breast.

It's incredible how *real* this story is, when you are a mother, and you know it, and you've been through it, and you know what all this is like. It is *this child* that *trumps* every argument ever offered about abortion. For from the moment of his conception his identity was established, just as it was for John the Baptist in the womb of his mother, so that when Mary—*days* pregnant—went to be with her, and the minute she walked in the door and called out, the babe *leaped* in Elizabeth's womb for joy because that baby knew who *that* baby was. To me, every argument goes out the window at that point. These were real, identifiable people at that moment in time. His identity was established at conception. He was who he was for nine months before he could be seen and held by his mother or by Joseph.

Luke 2

NIV '84

⁸ And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.

Those poor shepherders. I mean, they are the people I envy in the whole story. I don't envy Mary; I would not want to be there. I envy these shepherders, out there on a dark night, got themselves a little campfire going, sitting around talking about one thing or another. These men, by the way, were godly men. They knew their Bible. They understood...I have no doubt along with everybody else in the world at that time they were *expecting the Messiah*, because messianic fever was really running high in Judea

at this time. And for all we know they were sitting around the campfire talking about the very thing. And all of a sudden, sitting there in the dark around the fire, a *brilliant* light shines all around them there, and an angel of the Lord appeared around them, and they were terrified. And so would *you* be. It'd *scare you to death* to have that happen on a peaceful night; nothing but sheep out in the field, and now you've got *this* to deal with.

Luke 2

NIV '84

¹⁰ But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people."

I don't know if they understood what that meant. They didn't mean for Judea. It didn't mean for the Jews. It didn't mean for Israel. He means *everybody*.

Luke 2

NIV '84

¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.

Does it strike you as odd that the angel did not say, "Unto you this day is born in the city of David—Bethlehem—the Messiah"? That was what I think many people to this day think that was. Didn't say that. He said "the Messiah" [Christ]...and why did he add "the Lord"? Because Jesus was *more* than Messiah.

Luke 2

NIV '84

¹² This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.

And of course, the reason it was a sign was the humility and the humbleness of the birth. This is different from what you would have expected the Messiah to be. It's different from anything you *might have* expected. It is the fact that Jesus Christ came into this world as *one of us*—one of the lowliest of us—who was revealed, not to the priesthood in Jerusalem, that he had been born, but to shepherds in a field standing watch over their flocks; because, after all, he himself would be the Great Shepherd of the sheep.

So, the mystery of godliness begins. And most of mankind still doesn't get it. And the job is left to us to tell the story in *all nations*, by *all means*, to anyone who will hear, and leave the rest to the mercy of God. Have a good Feast.

Transcript of a sermon by
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