

# **THE MYSTERY OF GOD**

## **Part 1**

I want to begin this morning with a reading from the word of God, taken from the **10<sup>th</sup> chapter of the book of Revelation**. I will be reading from the English Standard Version. ...

*Then I saw another mighty angel coming down from heaven, wrapped in a cloud, with a rainbow over his head, and his face was like the sun, and his legs like pillars of fire. 2) He had a little scroll open in his hand. And he set his right foot on the sea, and his left foot on the land, 3) and called out with a loud voice, like a lion roaring. When he called out, the seven thunders sounded. 4) And when the seven thunders had sounded, I was about to write, but I heard a voice from heaven saying, "Seal up what the seven thunders have said, and do not write it down." 5) And the angel whom I saw standing on the sea and on the land raised his right hand to heaven 6) and swore by him who lives forever and ever, who created heaven and what is in it, the earth and what is in it, and the sea and what is in it, that there would be no more delay, 7) but that in the days of the trumpet call to be sounded by the seventh angel, the mystery of God would be fulfilled, just as he announced to his servants the prophets.*

*8) Then the voice that I had heard from heaven spoke to me again, saying, "Go, take the scroll that is open in the hand of the angel who is standing on the sea and on the land." 9) So I went to the angel and told him to give me the little scroll. And he said to me, "Take and eat it; it will make your stomach bitter, but in your mouth it will be sweet as honey." 10) And I took the little scroll from the hand of the angel and ate it. It was sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it my stomach was made bitter. 11) And I was told, "You must again prophesy about many peoples and nations and languages and kings."*

Do you like a good mystery? Many people do. There seems to be in every person a natural desire to know things, to understand, to figure out, to solve, or resolve. We love puzzles, riddles, brainteasers, challenges. Perhaps that accounts for, at least in part, why so many people are attracted to the Bible. They are attracted, because in this book are many, many puzzling, difficult passages. Sometimes these actually become a problem for people's faith since they are not able to resolve all of the difficulties, and explain all of the mysteries. Even so, I propose to you that in this book (the Bible) is found the greatest mystery of all, what verse 7 calls "*the mystery of God*."

Now, the writer was not referring to the mystery concerning God Himself, although there is certainly much about God and His eternal attributes that we do not know or understand. I wish I understood better and could explain more clearly the whole concept of the Godhead. There are many things about God that defy our understanding. That doesn't bother me but these are mysteries we wish we could solve.

By “the mystery of God” I am talking about the plan or scheme of redemption that originated in the mind of God before there was ever a lost soul to redeem; before time began and the first clod of dirt and the first drop of water were made. I am talking about that mystery that was revealed bit by bit both by word from God and by the events of history that unfolded providentially in keeping with the sovereign will of God. This is the mystery that brought us to the greatest moment in human history, when Christ’s arms were spread upon that cross and nails were driven through his hands, and the blood that takes away all sin began to run upon the ground.

Not even then, however, was the mystery fully and finally understood. That is not because there is something lacking in the divine revelation with which we have to work. I say that because not all the pieces of the puzzle are in place as of yet, and they won’t be until that trumpet is sounded by the seventh angel.

Although the Bible faithfully records every clue given, and although much of it was announced by angels, and proclaimed by the apostles, the wonder of this “mystery of God,” is something that very few understand. I am reminded of what Paul wrote to the Corinthians in **1 Corinthians 2:6-14**.

*Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. 7) But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. 8) None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. 9) But, as it is written, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him"-- 10) these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. 11) For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. 12) Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. 13) And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual. 14) The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.*

In another place, Paul wrote, *“For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known,”* (1 Corinthians 13:12). Even so, even if we cannot see clearly, even if we are limited in our understanding, what clues and information we have is more than sufficient to warrant our falling down in fear and trembling!

Unfortunately, that isn’t happening much today. I’m afraid not many people think about this very much, this concept of there actually being a way to have forgiveness of our sins. We hear

so much talk, so much preaching about a God of love, a God of mercy and grace, of infinite patience, that people tend to take forgiveness and salvation almost taken for granted. *“Well of course I am going to be saved. God loves me and I love Him. I’m not a bad person, you know!”* So many people are like the rich young ruler who came to Jesus. All they want to know is if there is anything lacking that they need to take care of. Anything? Anything at all! As long as they don’t have to make any real changes, or invest much time.

Have you ever thought about it, this “mystery of God,” this possibility that you can be forgiven of your sins? We expect God to forgive us, don’t we? We expect Him to be merciful. That’s what He is supposed to do! That’s what God does! On the other hand, think about how incredible that is; so really incredible! Think about how rare that is. Think about how much unforgiveness there is in the world. Think about how hard it is for you to forgive others. Really, because of what was accomplished for us on the cross, we tend to think that forgiveness is as common as water and air. But it isn’t common at all.

Think about it, it isn’t something you find in nature. No lion ever forgives its prey. No wolf ever spares the lamb. Are the so-called laws of nature forgiving? Are they? If you accidentally step off of a cliff in the dark, will you find forgiveness just because you didn’t mean to do it? If you grab the end of a live electrical wire, can you beg for mercy; can you plead ignorance? No, we know that forgiveness in these kinds of instances is not even an option.

What about the angels. Do angels sin? We know they do, but if they have any forgiveness, the Bible doesn’t saying anything about it. In **1 Peter 2:4**, we are told, *“For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to chains of gloomy darkness to be kept until the judgment.”* Think about that! Are you better than angels? Are you more deserving?

There wasn’t even any forgiveness under the Law of Moses. There were all kinds of offerings and sacrifices but there wasn’t any real forgiveness. **Hebrew 10:1-4** makes that very clear. The writer there says,

*For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near. 2) Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, since the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have any consciousness of sins? 3) But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. 4) For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.*

You see, we need to understand: until Christ came and died on the cross, no one had any real hope for forgiveness. What the Bible calls ‘the mystery of God’ is just how God brought about the possibility for forgiveness of sins. It is the mystery that gives us the right to be here this morning filled with thankfulness and hope rather than cowering somewhere with fear and hopelessness.

We must never forget, the Bible declares that “the wages of sin is death.” We are reminded of that in what God told Adam and Eve. He said, “*In the day that you eat of that tree, you shall surely die!*” Now, we might wonder, “*Why must it be that way?*” “*Why must the wages of sin be death?*” The reason why it must be that way is because that is what is consistent with the nature of God, the almighty Being who is our creator. He is holy and just, and He is light and truth. Sin is not permitted. Sin and sinners are an affront to God, and so He has pronounced judgment upon both. “*The wages of sin is death!*” You and I might not like that. We may want to argue with God about that, but that isn’t going to change reality.

Some people are critical of God. They think He is too judgmental, too sensitive. They think they should be allowed to live however they want, believe whatever they want, do whatever they want and never have to account for it. They are not happy that other people think and live like that, and they demand that those people be held accountable, but they don’t want God holding them to any such standard. People like that are fools! They are the ones who come to the insane position that God doesn’t exist. They prefer to live in a fantasy world where everything is as they want it to be; where everything must meet their ideas of goodness and truth. Leave them alone, they are blind guides!

But I want you to think about the fact that Adam and Eve did not die that fateful day. Talk about “the mystery of God!” Think about it: would God have been justified if Adam and Eve were immediately punished for their sin? Some people do not think so, but why wouldn’t He have been justified? Is He not their creator? Did He not specifically and clearly tell them NOT to eat of that one tree? Did He not clearly tell them that in the day they ate of that forbidden tree that they would surely die? What kind of perversion inhabits our soul that we would insult and slander the very nature of God in an attempt to find an excuse for those foolish and disobedient parents of ours?

Tell me, on what basis do you suppose that either that man or that woman had any hope for escaping the consequences of their actions? Do actions have consequences? Absolutely! We know that! We teach our children that! Do decisions (as brother Lyle Harms use to say) determine destiny? Absolutely!

They knew better, didn’t they? That’s why they ran and tried to hide themselves. The divine record tells us that they were afraid, but why were they afraid? We know, don’t we? We know they were terrified at the thought that they must now suffer the death God had warned them of.

You see, that’s the mystery, isn’t it? Why didn’t God keep His word? Why did the sun that day not go down on two lifeless corpses laying there in the midst of that garden?

Paul gives us the answer to that question in what he wrote in his letter to the Christians in Rome. In **Romans 3:21-26**, Paul says, ...

*But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it-- 22) the righteousness of God through*

*faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: 23) for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24) and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, 25) whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. 26) It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.*

I urge you to take that passage home with you and spend some time with it. That's the mystery that I'm talking about. Think about that. Did you hear what Paul said in **verse 25**? He said "*In His forbearance, God passed over the sins previously committed.*" What did Paul mean by that? He meant that God did not immediately, fully and justly punish every sin with the punishment of death which had been earned. He passed over those sins. In **Acts 17:30**, preaching to the philosophers in Athens, Paul said: "*In the times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.*" He chose to forbear those sins; to put up with them until such a time that He would be able to demonstrate His righteousness once and forever. And of course, that time came when Christ went to the cross and God Himself tasted of death in our place.

God's forbearance of sins, His overlooking sins is illustrated for us in what took place there in the Garden of Eden. After finding the pair who had hid themselves, and rebuking them for their sin, God said three things to them and to the serpent that implied that He was going to bear with their sins for now, that death come to them immediately. I am going to go in reverse order from what we find in the text. First to Adam, **verse 17**, God said:

*Then to Adam He said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree about which I commanded you, saying, 'You shall not eat from it'; Cursed is the ground because of you; In toil you will eat of it All the days of your life.*

We often call this a curse, but Adam may have very well been thinking about how blessed he was! Oh, when we see this, when we receive God's mercy and we know we didn't deserve, we can't help but cry out, "*God is good!*"

Then in **verse 16**, we find God speaking to the woman. He says:

*To the woman He said, "I will greatly multiply Your pain in childbirth, In pain you will bring forth children; Yet your desire will be for your husband, And he will rule over you."*

Again, instead of a pronouncement of death, she hears a promise of life. You will bring forth children.

And then finally, listen to this which has been called the very first, or beginning of the good news—**verse 15**. Speaking to the serpent himself, God says:

*And I will put enmity between you and the woman, And between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise you on the head, And you shall bruise him on the heel."*

One can imagine that the tears of shame and fear were scarcely dry upon Eve's cheeks before she heard those first utterances of good news. Do you think she understood everything God was saying? Probably not, but she had already heard that her seed would somehow get even with this diabolical creature! Her seed would see to it that He would get what was coming to him.

But what about her? She's the one who sinned; what about her? Didn't she deserve to die? Didn't she deserve for God to pour out His wrath on her? Indeed she did, but something else was going on there. The bowls of wrath were not being poured out; instead, the windows of heaven were opened that day!

**I'm telling you again people, we don't deserve to be here, do we?**

A few minutes before, that first pair knew that, didn't they? They knew they were in trouble; serious trouble. They were terrified. They tried to hide themselves. They had sinned but what could they do about it? They had no answers, they had no hope. All they had was this terrible sense of fear welling up in their stomachs. What could they do? They had no idea, but never in a thousand years could they have imagined how this God they had chosen to disobey would come to their rescue; to the rescue of all those millions and millions that would come after them.

And so the mystery that had originated in the mind of God was now underway. It had already begun when the first star was put into its place. Even so, the drama had now begun, and God would slowly but surely put every necessary element into place. He would bring it about in ways that no human mind could have ever imagine. Do you remember what I read a few moments ago from the **2<sup>nd</sup> chapter of 1 Corinthians? There in verses 6-9**, he said: ...

*Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. 7) But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. 8) None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. 9) But, as it is written, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him"--*

He would do things that from ground level would not make any sense. But just as surely He would bring about His purpose. He Himself would pay the penalty of death for man's sins.

Now, before I close, let me just deal briefly with the question of “Why?” Why did God allow that serpent to come into the garden in the first place? I will be talking more about this serpent this evening at 5; I hope you will come back as we continue this study. But, why didn’t God make mankind with no other ability than to love God with all of his heart, and obey Him without fail?

Well, the full answer to questions such as that may never be known in this life, but I believe some reasonable explanation can be given. The Bible says, God is love ( John 4:8) and all that we know about God it is clear that God wants His creation—that part of His creation which was made in His image—to also know love; to be loved and to love. The greatest commandment in the Law, Jesus said, is to love the Lord our God with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength. And of course, we intuitively know that love that is not freely given is not love at all. In the very nature of things, for true love to exist there has to be a freedom to choose; a freedom of the will. Those qualities could not have existed in us apart from God’s putting them there, and so in the very nature of things, in order to give us a choice, there had to be forbidden tree, and there had to be a means by which the choice might be clearly seen and made. The serpent too, is part of the

God knew, of course, what choice the man and woman would make, and had purposed a way of forgiveness for this creation in whom He had made in His image. He saw, long before the world began, that cross on Calvary. And He saw us sitting here today, listening to this, and thinking about this, and trying to come to grips with all of this ourselves. Just how He got us, and the rest of the world, to this place at this moment is all part of that grand purpose that the Bible calls, “the mystery of God.”

From that time in the garden to the time when the seventh angel sounds, signaling the full and final fulfillment of the mystery of God, mankind has and will continue to experience a long, painful journey. It is a journey filled with every conceivable thing, both good and evil. It is a journey that can, and will, for many, end in everlasting death, in a place that was literally prepared for the devil and his angels. For some, however, that journey holds the promise, not only of forgiveness, but of the opportunity to live forever in a world where there is no death, no sickness, no shame or sorrow, no pain or crying.

Where your journey ends is not up to the devil. It isn’t even up to God. It is up to you. You are the one who must make up your mind. By the way, none of us know just when our journey will end. Last Monday a service was held here for a young man, just 18 years old. He was on his way to work when he found himself at the end of his journey.

So what do you think? Do you enjoy a good mystery? I hope you like this one, the mystery of God, and that you will be back with us tonight for part 2.

If right now you are doing some serious thinking about your relationship with God, I hope you will let it cause you to step out and take advantage of this moment. As Paul reminded the

Corinthians, "*Behold, now is "THE ACCEPTABLE TIME," behold, now is "THE DAY OF SALVATION."*"

If you need to come, please come while we stand and sing!