

THE MYSTERY OF GOD

Part 4

Are you any good with Stereograms such as you see upon the screen? These are funny looking pictures that have a 3-D image imbedded in them, which you can eventually begin to see if you stare at them long enough or if you just slightly cross your eyes.

- This first one is fairly easy to see, it is 3-D image of a box with a slightly smaller box on top of it.
- The second one, when you finally see it, is a large 3-D heart, kind of like one of the helium balloons, sort of floating against a background of hearts.
- One more, not too hard, if you get this one right you will see what appears to be paisley colored rhinoceros

Well, what does this have to do with anything? Probably nothing but maybe it serves as an illustration of something I was trying to get across last week. You may recall that last Lord's Day, I tried to stress the idea that on perhaps every page of the Old Testament, maybe even in every word on every page, are found clues to what is called in the New Testament, "the mystery of God." What is interesting is that no one in Bible times seemed to have really picked up on that.

Throughout the Old Testament period, from Moses on down to the time of Christ, God was literally giving men all kinds of information and insight into the coming of Christ. He did that in such a way that when Christ finally did come, there would be no doubt as to who he was, or the reason for His coming. Christ should have been the most recognizable man in history but in truth, only a handful of people ever realized who He was.

Last week I spent some time looking at the amazing clues given through the prophets and prophecies. It was pointed out for example, the place where he would come from was foretold and well-known by the time of Christ. His virgin birth was prophesied. The fact that he would spend some time in Egypt. What tribe he would come from, how he would die, the price that would be paid for his betrayal; even what he would say as he was dying. All of those were very clear, very specific clues, if one just knew what he was looking at. Let me give you one more that I found after preparing for my lesson on Isaiah 53 last Wednesday night. **Isaiah 53** is that wonderful prophetic passage about the suffering servant who was to come; that is, the Christ. In **verse 9**, Isaiah writes of this suffering servant, that, "*...they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death.*" Notice the two nouns, wicked and rich man. The first is plural, and the second is singular. Brother Coffman, in his commentary on Isaiah says that it was customary for the Roman soldiers after they crucified their victims to begin digging a hole near by as a place to toss the body after the person was dead. They undoubtedly did that, with the intention of burying Christ along with the two other men crucified that day. And no doubt that is what would have happened had not Joseph of Arimathea intervened, asking for the body

of Christ that he might place it in his own new tomb that had only recently been cut out of a rock. *"They made his grave with the wicked,"* but he was buried in the tomb *"of a rich man."*

Or think about the last verse of **Isaiah 53, verse 12**. Isaiah wrote: *"Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors.* Notice, Isaiah prophesied that Jesus would be *"...numbered with the transgressors,"* which he was, the two thieves, and he would make *"intercession for the transgressors."* Hear him from the cross: *"Father, forgive them, they know not what they do."* And what is he still doing to this day? **Hebrews 9:24** says, *"For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf."*

So we can see, the prophets provided a lot of information about Christ that should have made it possible for everyone to know who Christ was when He finally came. But there were many other kinds of clues given besides prophecies. I want you to think about the many characters of the Old Testament era who in one way or another typified the Christ who was to come.

Take Isaac, for example. Isaac was the son of Abraham. Look at how the New Testament begins—**Matthew 1:1**: *"The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham."* Isaac was the son of Abraham and the Holy Spirit called Jesus the son of Abraham. It is not unreasonable, then, to expect that there might be some ways in which Isaac typifies Christ. So what do we find when we go back and look at Isaac's story? You can read that story in Genesis, beginning in about chapter 17. We recall in Genesis 22, Abraham was commanded to go and offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice to God. Jesus, as the Son of God, was offered as a sacrifice to God. *"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life."*

Both, willingly gave their life in obedience to their father. Isaac carried the wood upon which he would be sacrificed, Jesus carried the cross. At the last moment, Abraham's hand with the knife was halted from being plunged into Isaac's chest, which the Hebrew writer says was a type of resurrection. Listen to these words from **Hebrews 11:17-19**: *"By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, 18) of whom it was said, "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named." 19) He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back."*

Interestingly, in the account of Isaac being offered in Genesis 22, as they arrive at the place where Abraham was to offer his son, in verse 7, Isaac asks a question. He says, *"And Isaac said to his father Abraham, "My father!" And he said, "Here am I, my son." He said, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?"* And what did Abraham reply? He said, *"God will provide!"* Afterwards, Abraham named that place, *Jehovah-jireh*, which means God sees, or God provides but which also became the basis for a saying, *"On the mount of the*

Lord it shall be provided," pointing to the sacrifice that Jesus would one day make on Mount Zion.

Moses was certainly another person who prefigured Christ. Of course, Moses himself prophesied about Christ. In **Deuteronomy 18:15**, Moses wrote: "*The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers--it is to him you shall listen.*" He went on to say, in **verses 18-19**: "*I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. 19) And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him.*" What did Jesus say when he came? In **John 12:48-50**, He said: "*The one who rejects me and does not receive my words has a judge; the word that I have spoken will judge him on the last day. 49) For I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment--what to say and what to speak. 50) And I know that his commandment is eternal life. What I say, therefore, I say as the Father has told me.*"

Through the providence of God, Moses was given a virgin mother, the princess of Egypt. Through the Holy Spirit, Jesus was born of a virgin. God established the old covenant through Moses, and He established the new covenant through Christ. Both were law-givers. Moses' first miracle resulted in water being turned into blood. Jesus first miracle resulted in water being turned into wine. Moses was a deliverer, bringing the Israelites out of Egyptian captivity. Jesus is a deliverer, providing a way for people to escape from the slavery of sin. Moses was a judge. Jesus is the judge. Moses interceded for Israel. Jesus, **Hebrews 7:25** says, "*always lives to make intercession*" for us. **1 Corinthians 10:2** says that the Israelites were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and we are baptized into Christ. Moses lifted up a bronze serpent in the wilderness to heal people when they were bitten by the deadly scorpions. In **John 3:14,15**, Jesus said, "*And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15) that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.*"

Essentially that phrase refers to God's plan of salvation, and I know we use that expression—*plan of salvation*—as if everyone in the world understood exactly what that means, but the truth is hardly anyone understands it at all!

I'm using that expression—*plan of salvation*—to refer to how a holy and just God can forgive sinful people like us. I'm not talking about the why, I'm talking about the how. How can God forgive us? On what basis can there be any reconciliation of a Holy God with sinful people?

A lot of people don't think that's any big deal. They think that God is a loving and merciful being, and that's true. They think that it is just in His nature to forgive and forget, and that's also true. But even God—with all of His love, and all of His mercy, and all of His grace—even God can't just ignore sin.

And here is why! We would all like it if we didn't have to answer for our sins, wouldn't we? But would we like it if others also got off scot-free? Think about that! Of course we want God to

forgive our little lies, our bad attitudes, our indiscretions, our secret sins; but do we want that same treatment for those who lie to us; who get mad and blow up at us; who cheat and defraud us out of our hard-earned money? If someone broke into your home, raped your wife and murdered your children—and that happens far too often these days, doesn't it?—do you think it would be okay if God said to that person, "Don't worry about! I forgive you?" Would you be okay with that? I don't think so!

You see the truth is, no one wants to live in a world where everyone is free to do whatever they want without any accountability whatever. I know it seems like we are already living in that kind of world, but that's my point. We don't like it! We say, "That isn't right!" We may want to pick and choose the rules we live by, but we want everyone else to play by all the rules. We don't want to live in a world where there is no justice. And the only way you can have a world that is just is if there is some kind of ultimate accountability. God says He is going to hold the world accountable, but do you understand that the only way He can do that is if He Himself is absolutely just.

So you see, it just isn't possible for God to simply say, "*allie, allie, else in free!*" If He is holy and just Himself, which He is, then every sin has to be punished. And that's what **Hebrews 2** says, isn't it? In that passage, the writer says, "*We must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it.*" And the reason why we must pay closer attention to what we heard is—**verse 3**—"*for since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation,*" as the gospel provides for us?

You see, the immutable law of divine justice still stands: "*The soul that sins shall die,*" (Ezekiel 18:20); "*The wages of sin is death,*" (Romans 6:23); "*Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God,*" (1 Corinthians 6:9).

So it is no easy thing for God to forgive men their sins, but before the world began, knowing even then what men would do, and how they would, everyone, sin against Him, He planned for how justice could be served while at the same time continuing to be just Himself. That's the point that Paul made there in **Romans 3:21-26**. I asked you to spend some time with that scripture, and really ponder what Paul was saying. Look at that passage again:

You see that don't you? Here it is in a nutshell. Paul said God did this, "*so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.*" You understand that, God has to be just, but He also desperately wanted to have some way to justify those who sinned against Him. What I really want you to notice, and get hold of, is how Paul makes it clear that this plan—this plan of salvation, if you will—what is at the very heart of it? It's Christ, isn't it! Three times he draws attention to Jesus Christ.

To the Colossian Christians Paul wrote that his desire for them was that they might "*reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.*" To understand "the

mystery of God,” you have to know and understand who Christ is; you have to know and understand what Christ did, AND IS STILL DOING FOR US.

God’s plan was this: He would pay the penalty of man’s sin Himself. But what is the penalty for sin? Its death, isn’t it? Well, can God die, or be put to death? The Bible declares the immortality of God. What does that mean? It means He is not subject to death. In **Psalm 102:25-27** that’s what the Psalmist declared. He says,

Of old you laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. 26) They will perish, but you will remain; they will all wear out like a garment. You will change them like a robe, and they will pass away, 27) but you are the same, and your years have no end.

So if God cannot die, how could He pay the penalty for man’s sin? Ah! Now we are beginning to see why this was such a mystery, and how this all fits together! God would pay the penalty for man’s sin Himself by allowing all of the transgressions and sins of every person to be laid upon Himself in the person of Christ. And so the mystery is the truly incredible way God designed and executed everything that led up to the coming of Christ, and everything that has happened since Christ came.

I want you to see—and I really mean that—I WANT YOU TO SEE that everything—EVERYTHING—in the Old Testament is pointing to Christ. I don’t think people understand that. I don’t think many people know what to do with the Old Testament. Paul tells us we are to rightly divide it, but if we don’t know what it’s purpose was, why it was given, we are probably not going to be able to rightly divide it, are we?

In **Matthew 4:4**, in the context of being tempted by devil, Jesus made a statement that may be more relevant than we realize. The devil tried to get him to turn some stones into bread, since Jesus had not eaten for 40 days. With an affront to his identity—“*if you are the son of God*”—and with an appeal to his craving for food, he urged Jesus to turn some stones into bread. But Jesus refused even that temptation—to prove that He was the son of God and to staunch his hunger. He said, “*It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’*” **John 1:4** tells us, “*In him was life, and the life was the light of men.*” In another place (John 10:10), Jesus said, “*I have come that you may have life, and have it abundantly.*” Well, if life is found in Jesus, then that means every word of Scripture is either pointing us towards Christ, or pointing us back to Christ! Let your mind dwell on that a little while and you will begin to see why this is called the mystery of God.

Think about the prophets, for example. What’s interesting is that the prophets of the Old Testament knew that God was doing something, they just didn’t have enough information to put it altogether. In **1 Peter 1:10-12**, we read:

The prophets knew something was in the works, they just didn’t know what. As the centuries of ancient history rolled on, God was giving one clue after another. This was so intentional and

pervasive that it is hard to understand why so many never saw it, especially by the time of Christ. I think about that passage in **the last chapter of Luke's gospel**, where Jesus is meeting with his apostles following the resurrection. **Verses 44 - 47** says,

The Jews divided their sacred scriptures into three parts: the law, the prophets, and the writings. So Jesus was helping the apostles to understand that the Law was talking about him. The prophets were talking about Him. The writings—books like the Psalms and Song of Solomon were talking about Him. I love verse 45: *“Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures.”* That’s the problem, isn’t it? People do not understand the scriptures.

All the way from the Garden of Eden to that little stable in Bethlehem, God was blazing a trail straight to Jesus. The clues were given in different ways and at different times, but they were all pointing to the same thing. Don’t you wish you could have Christ open your mind to understand the scriptures? Don’t you wish you understood all of the clues, and have a clear understanding of the mystery of Christ? I’m not saying that I do, or that anyone does, but isn’t it exciting to know that’s what it all about!

I am sure many of you know that there are numerous prophecies in the OT concerning Christ. There are hundreds of them that are fairly clearly identified as such. We call them messianic prophecies, but there are many other prophecies that point indirectly to Christ. For the person who is serious about seeking God, they will investigate these prophecies for themselves. When they do, they will find them amazingly accurate, not hard to connect; containing a wealth of information, details and plain prophetic assurance. They detail the families through whom Christ would come, give the name of the village—a little pathetic village—where he would be born. Details about his death would be spelled out, including the exact price of his betrayal, who his betrayer would be, how his followers would react, and even the very words both he and his enemies would speak while on the cross. No prophecy concerning Christ failed to come true. As Jesus said, “Everything spoken about me in the Law and in the prophets **MUST BE FULFILLED!**”

Let me give you just a few examples of the prophetic pointers to Christ.

In **Micah 5:2**, there is the prophecy that Christ would come from Bethlehem. That was so well understood by the Jews that when the wise men came to Jerusalem seeking the King of the Jews who had been born, Herod referred the matter to the Pharisees and they cited that verse that he would be born in Bethlehem. The amazing thing is that Jesus’ earthly parents did not live in Bethlehem, and they were only in that small village due to an edict by the Emperor of Rome that every man was go to the place of his birth to be registered for the census and poll-tax. That’s why Joseph and Mary were there at the time she went into labor.

In **Zechariah 11: 12, 13**, there is the prophecy concerning the exact price that would be paid for the betrayal of Christ. That same passage also sets forth what would eventually happen to that

money. The amazing thing about that is that this prophecy was made about 500 years before it was fulfilled.

Psalm 22, written by King David who lived about a thousand years before Christ gives us some minute details concerning the death of Christ on the cross. Look at what could be learned about that death just from reading this Psalm:

- 1) How his feet and hand would be pierced
- 2) How they would divide his garments among them
- 3) How they would cast lots for his cloak
- 4) How he would suffer thirst
- 5) How his bones would be revealed
- 6) How he would be taunted
- 7) How his heart would fail
- 8) The very words he would cry from that cross "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"
- 9) How he would be surrounded in his death
- 10) How people would stare at him
- 11) How he would suffer with no one to help him

We could go and on, but really, spend some time looking at that and prepare to be shocked! Prepare to be amazed! Practically every line in that Psalm says something prophetic about Christ who died on the cross. There are details included in this Psalm that aren't even found in one of the four gospels. And do you want to know something amazing? At the time the 22nd Psalm was written, crucifixion as a form of legal execution didn't even exist!

Psalm 34 contains yet another very interesting prophecy concerning Jesus' death. It tells us that not a bone of Christ would be broken. What is amazing about the fulfillment of this prophecy is that spiritually speaking, Christ is our Passover Lamb. The Passover lamb was to be sacrificed and cooked whole, with no bone of it broken. Furthermore, John 19:31-33 tells us that because the Jews didn't want the bodies hanging on the cross on the Sabbath Day, they asked Pilate to have the legs broken which was done many times to hasten death. However, when the soldiers came to the body of Christ, they found that he was already dead so they didn't break his legs. Instead, they stuck a spear in his side which fulfilled the prophecy in Psalm 22!

There's the prophecy in **Psalm 41:9** that Jesus would be betrayed by a friend, someone with whom he shared his bread. Of course that was fulfilled by Judas.

The chastisement of Christ and his atoning death was clearly spoken of by the prophets. **Isaiah 53:5** says,

"But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. 6) All we like

sheep have gone astray; we have turned--every one--to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all."

The resurrection of Christ was announced by the prophets. In **Psalm 16**, David, who was not only a king, but also a prophet, and he said—**verses 8 & 9**: *"I have set the LORD always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken. 9) Therefore my heart is glad, and my whole being rejoices; my flesh also dwells secure. 10) For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption."*

Peter cited that very passage in his Pentecost sermon recorded for us in the 2nd chapter of Acts. Jesus had told his followers what was going to happen to him, how that he would be betrayed into the hands of sinners, that this would happen in Jerusalem, that he would be killed, not merely die, but be put to death, and that he would rise again from the dead on the third day. That these things were so well known by the time of Christ's death, we read that even his enemies knew that is what He had been saying, so they asked for a guard at the tomb.

We could go on and there are a number of excellent books on this very subject, but let me say this as I begin to wrap up this lesson: in spite of all the promises and detailed prophecies that should have clearly identified Christ for who he was—and I haven't even touched on the role of John the Baptist, who himself was the subject of prophecy, somehow people did not seem to get it. Prophets, we are told, searched and inquired carefully. We are told angels longed to look into this matter but even they could not penetrate the depths of this mystery. The mid-day darkness of that fateful Friday is perhaps an apt illustration of the spiritual darkness and blindness that covered the world at that time, and pretty much continues to this day. It was not until three days later, when the angel announced that "He is not here, He is risen," that a few began to grasp the faintest details into this mystery of God.

I want to close this morning by giving you another assignment. I want you to write down, or remember this reference—**Colossians 1:9-29** (end of the chapter). Write it down and then go home today, while this lesson is still fresh on your mind and heart and read those verses, and prayerfully ponder it's message. I wish we could take the time to read them right now, and to discuss them, but we can't; so will you do that for yourself? I'm telling you, good people, this is not something you want to just let go in one ear and out the other. You do that and we will all meet back here this evening to once again worship the One who deserves our every waking thought and every beat of our heart.