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MYSTERY!

Most people are intrigued with a mystery. It may be Detective Columbo solving a murder case or the suspense of a mystery novel.

Biblically speaking, the word *mystery* can refer to something good, as the “mystery concerning Christ and the church” (Eph. 5:32); or something false and evil as “Mystery Babylon the great” (Rev. 17:5). There is on one hand the “mystery of godliness” (1 Tim. 3:16); and on the other, the “mystery of iniquity” (2 Thess. 2:7).

In our walk with the Lord, we often encounter mysteries—things we do not understand. In time, some of these mysteries unravel, others are elusive. The familiar words of a poem by William Cowper (1731-1800), express it well:

*God works in mysterious ways,
his wonders to perform,
He plants his footprints on the sea
and rides upon the storm.*

Some years ago I was one of the speakers at a summer Camp Meeting in Oregon. Between services people enjoyed times of fellowship and visiting. One afternoon a young man said to me: “I am an *accident!*” He went on to explain: “The night I was conceived, my parents had planned to watch a certain television program. But due to a storm, there was a power outage. With no television, lights, or heat, they went to bed early....” What he said may have been logical and biologically true; yet, as I assured him, *he was no accident*. As a believer, he was a child of God!

Still, who can explain the mystery of life? For every one of us, there are many factors—some seemingly insignificant—that played an essential part in our very existence.

Way back when, my grandparents decided to move from Missouri to California. Looking on a map, Grandma noticed a town called Riverside. It sounded like a nice place and this is where they moved. Had this not happened, I would not have been born; for it was in Riverside that my mother met the man who would be my father! What if grandma had not looked at a map? What if they had moved to some other town?

Some years ago, while holding meetings at a church in Arizona, the pastor’s wife told us something about her background. Long before, her grandfather belonged to a Mormon

group that practiced polygamy. As an evangelical Christian she did not believe in polygamy; yet, she explained: “Had it not been for my grandfather having multiple wives, I would have never been born!”

Speaking with exuberance, one of the speakers at a Texas ministers’ conference I attended, said: “I am a *preacher!* My father was a *preacher!* His father was a *preacher!* And his father was a....”, then lowering his voice, “...a *horse thief!*”

Unseemly things like rape or incest may be in one’s line. Fortunately salvation is not dependent on some flawless genealogy (Matt. 3:9,10). Even the genealogy of Jesus, *as to his fleshly descent*, was neither pure nor perfect (Matt. 1:1-16). Of the four women mentioned, two of them, Tamar and Bathsheba, were adulteresses (Gen. 38:24-26; 2 Sam. 11:3-5). The third, Rahab, was a harlot (Heb. 11:31; James 2:25). Both Rahab and Ruth were Gentiles. Being a Moabite, Ruth descended from a tribe that began by incest between Lot and his eldest daughter (Ruth 2:2; Gen. 19:37).

One of the questions the Corinthians asked Paul had to do with a believer being married to an unbeliever. Suppose a woman had become a Christian; but her husband was not a believer. Must she leave him? What about children born to this union, would they be “unholy”? Paul assured them that such children would not be unholy (1 Cor. 7:12-14).

Ed and Jane believed it was “God’s perfect will” for them to marry. But before they said, “I do,” Jane met another man, fell in love, and married him. So, assuming she married outside the will of God, where does this leave Ed? If he marries someone else, will he be forever outside God’s will? We think not. God’s will is vast, and is not frustrated by the folly of people.

We have heard people say—perhaps upon returning from a trip: “We knew we were in the will of God—everything went *smoothly*, there were no problems of any kind!” We rejoice when things go smoothly; but this, in itself, does not indicate one is in the will of God. The Israelites were following God’s will when they came out of Egypt, yet they found themselves between the Devil and the deep Red Sea! Paul the apostle certainly functioned within the will of God, yet things did not always go smoothly for him. Jesus, who *always* did the will of the Father, was crucified!

There is an element of mystery in why bad things happen to good people and, sometimes, good things happen to *bad* people.

A pastor we know tells about a young woman in his church

who was engaged to marry a dedicated Christian man upon his graduation from Bible College. Together they planned to go into the ministry, probably the mission field. On the way to his graduation, he was killed by a drunken driver. The young woman, his wife-to-be, was understandably devastated.

Back in the 60s, the pastor of a church in Tacoma, Washington, where I was holding meetings, told me about a difficult experience he had faced. His church had sent a couple to Nigeria to head a missionary outreach. Later, a young woman who had come to the Lord in his church, prepared for ministry, and was sent to assist the couple in Nigeria. Within a few weeks of her arrival, the pastor received a brief telegram stating she was dead. He had to contact her parents and let them know, an especially difficult task in that they were not believers and had opposed her going to the mission field. The brief telegram had not explained the cause of death, which only added to the trauma. Eventually it was learned she had died as the result of a rare insect bite.

In Dixon, Illinois, the hometown of Ronald Reagan, a monument commemorates a tragedy that occurred back in 1873. On a warm, beautiful spring day, over 200 people gathered on a bridge crossing the Rock River to witness a baptismal service in the river. But before the service ended, the bridge collapsed, killing 42 people and injuring more than 100.

These are difficult situations. We find ourselves asking “Why?” Even with possible explanations, a mystery remains.

A “story” has been told of two brothers that formed a unique evangelistic team. One brother was an evangelist; the other a murderer. As soon as the one brother would get someone to accept Christ, the other brother would shoot him—before he had time to “backslide”! Thus, supposedly, his salvation would be secured. While not all Christians understand the security of the believer exactly the same, surely none would advocate such drastic actions!

It is generally believed that children, before reaching the age of accountability, are within God’s saving grace (cf. Matt. 19:14; Deut. 1:39). Without in any way seeking to justify abortion, we will simply state a question some have asked: Will it end up that abortion clinics in a community will cause more souls to be saved than the churches?

In 2001, the nation was shocked when a Houston mother killed her five young children, all with biblical names. Insanity was involved, of course; but there was also a religious factor. She believed they would be unrighteous if they grew to adulthood, and be unable to escape the fires of hell.

Questions about the eternal destiny of billions of people who never heard of Christ have long been discussed by some—and avoided by others. Will innumerable multitudes be lost because they did not believe in someone they never heard of? On the other hand, if those who never heard of Christ can be saved by ignorance, why tell them?

That the God of all the earth will do *right* (Gen. 18:25), is not in question. But, admittedly, we do not understand all the details.

What about a nine year old boy who hears the plan of

salvation in Sunday School. He realizes he is a sinner and needs the Savior. He plans to receive Christ next week. But as he rides his bike home from Sunday School he is killed by a hit-and-run driver—at age 9. Someone else may live to be 99. Would not a person that lives many years have a better chance to be saved than one who only lived a few? But is “chance” even the right word? Is anyone saved by *chance*?

We hear talk about man’s “free will.” But we did not choose to be born, we did not choose who our parents would be, we did not choose our skin color, we did not choose what we would look like, we did not choose our nationality or DNA—many things we did not choose. So, even free will has its limitations—and mysteries!

Some say, “When it’s your time to die, you will die.” Yes; but how do we explain that if it is the pilot’s time, everyone else on the plane needs to die?

Not all Christians understand doctrines like “predestination” or “election” (Rom. 8:30; 2 Peter 1:10) exactly the same. Clearly God is sovereign—how else could he be *Almighty*? And, men are responsible before God—why else would they be judged? But does anyone fully understand the mystery?

Even prayer—that awesome privilege we have to communicate with God—is a mystery. God tells us to pray, to ask, to make our requests known to him. Yet, ironically, we are plainly told he *already knows* what we have need of *before* we ask! (Matt. 6:8).

A Christian farmer, needing rain for his crops, may be praying that it will rain on a certain day. But a Christian family, having planned a picnic, may be praying it will NOT rain on this day! Both prayers cannot be answered.

Even one with the spiritual stature of Paul, while stating that the Spirit will help us, says right out: “We do not know what we should pray for” (Rom. 8:26).

Jesus spoke of two or three agreeing in prayer, and Paul asked entire churches to pray for him. Today, through the internet and other ways, suppose one could get a thousand believers to pray for a specific request. Is prayer more powerful or effective if a large number of people pray for a specific request? It would seem so, but an element of mystery remains.

Let’s suppose an ungodly person becomes known for his sinful or notorious behavior. So this prayer group of a thousand begins to focus prayer on this individual. As a result, conviction falls on him, he turns to the Lord and is saved! God answered prayer. But what about the ungodly person who did not become well-known for his sinful or notorious behavior and who, consequently, did not get the attention of the prayer group? He would need prayer—and the Lord—as much as the other one!

Temptation also has its mysteries. A young girl who is physically attractive will definitely get more attention from boys than one who is not. But consequently, she will have more temptations. If this becomes her downfall, the question could be asked: Why did God give her this beauty, knowing it would work against her?

Someone good looking and talented—like Elvis Presley years ago—might have had a *million* women who supposed they

were in love with him, and would have married him! Temptations for someone like that would be far greater than for the average man who may find *one* woman willing to marry him!

Temptation for the Prodigal Son involved going into a far country; in David's case, temptation was more convenient: Bathsheba lived *right next door!*

Writing to Timothy, a young man, Paul said: "Flee *youthful lusts*" (2 Tim. 2:22). This admonition about sins of youth was rooted in scripture (Job 20:11; Psalms 25:7). Lustful temptations of youth are stronger than those of one who is old.

When a ministry or charity receives large amounts of money, there is a temptation for the leader to take a huge salary, live in a mansion, drive exotic cars, stay in the finest hotels, eat at the most expensive restaurants, etc. This sends the wrong message, raising questions about the real motive. Others are not tempted by such things because they never experience that flow of money!

When I was a young preacher, a pastor invited me to come hold meetings at his church. I knew his church was fairly small and felt he might be concerned about providing an adequate offering for me. I told him I had never set a price on my ministry, not to worry about money. He told me, "We don't worry about money; *we don't have any to worry about!*"

Why is there suffering? Why are innocent children born with birth defects? Why are people, good and bad, daily diagnosed with cancer and other diseases? Why are there droughts that lead to starvation for millions? Why are there suicide bombings, often in the name of religion? Why is there rape, murder, torture, and mutilation?

Had there been no *sin* on this planet, such problems would have been non-existent—of course. So why did sin defile mankind? Even with our best explanations, the subject is still shrouded in mystery. Paul used the term "the *mystery* of iniquity" (2 Thess. 2:7).

To be sure, when man sinned in the Garden of Eden, it was no *surprise* to God! How could it be? He had already planned salvation from sin, through Christ, BEFORE the foundation of the world (2 Tim. 1:9; 1 Peter 1:19,20).

"The creation was made subject to vanity, *not willingly*, but by reason of HIM who has subjected the same in hope, *because* the creation itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God!" (Rom. 8:20,21).

It is a glorious hope—to become a child of God—to be saved from sin. But, obviously, no one could be saved from sin *if there was no sin*. It is like the analogy: Without a valley, there would be no mountain top. So then, can even *sin* play a part in God's great plan? As strange as it sounds, it does.

Often it is when peoples' lives have been ruined by sin that they realize they need God's forgiveness. Those who were the greatest sinners, may become the strongest Christians. Scripture even says that a person who has sinned greatly, and is forgiven, loves God *much* (Lk. 7:47). Harlots, Jesus said, will enter the kingdom before self-righteous people (Matt. 21:31,32).

When sin had caused the life of the Prodigal Son to become a disaster, it caused him to return to the Father's House, illustrating the words of Jeremiah: "Your own wickedness shall correct you" (Jer. 2:19).

If sin can serve a purpose within God's program, can the same be said about Satan? Concerning Hymenaeus and Alexander, who shipwrecked their faith and became blasphemers, Paul said: "I have delivered them unto *Satan*..." For what purpose? To get even with them? No. "I have delivered them unto Satan," he said, "that they may learn *not to blaspheme*" (1 Tim. 1:19,20). We don't know the details, but whatever happened to them, learning not to blaspheme was a good thing, even though it involved Satan!

Then we have the case of a man "judged" by the apostle and delivered "*unto Satan* for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus" (1 Cor. 5:3-5). For some, lessons must be learned the hard way, but the final result is what counts, as in the case of this man.

It sounds very strange to say, but Satan even played a part in the *success* of Paul's ministry! Paul, having told of his heavenly encounter with the Lord—having heard inexpressible truths too awesome to even talk about—would write:

"And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, *a messenger of Satan* to buffet me, lest I be exalted" (2 Cor. 12:1-7).

In other words, had Paul become exalted, arrogant, and proud, God could not have used him effectively. So a messenger of *Satan* became instrumental in keeping him humble, and used of God.

I heard a preacher tell his audience he had asked God about something. Then he said, "Do you know what God told me?" He paused. Anticipation soared. His answer, quite simply, was this: "*Nothing!*" He was honest about it! Sometimes the seeming *silence* of God is for our own good. If we knew some things were going to happen, it could be counterproductive and *self-fulfilling*.

I recall my father saying years ago, "If a person knew where he was going to die, he would not go there."

The Bible itself does not tell us everything about what Jesus did (John 21:25). When he was 12 until he was 30 are known as the 18 silent years. Details about those years are not spelled out in scripture.

In Revelation 10:4, John heard seven thunderous messages. He was about to write them, and a voice from heaven said, "Write them not." Yet, some still try to figure out or speculate what those messages were!

Samson's father, Manoah, unaware he was talking to an angelic being, asked his name. The angel said, "It is a secret" (Judges 13:18). So be it! God not only *reveals*, he also *conceals* (Isa. 45:15). To some "the mysteries of the kingdom" are revealed, to others they are not (Matt. 13:11).

Years ago, a pastor in whose church I was holding meetings, said to me, "Sometimes the answer is: 'There is no

answer!’ No answer—at least not yet! The answer to some mysteries will come when it is God’s time.

At one point, Jesus instructed his disciples not to tell anyone he was the Christ (Matt. 16:20). But later, obviously, they went everywhere preaching this (Acts 5:42). They may have been anxious to tell of their glorious encounter with Elijah and Moses on the mountain, but Jesus told them not to talk about this until *after* his resurrection (Matt. 17:9; cf. 12:16).

One man Jesus healed was told to go tell what great things God had done for him (Mark 5:19). Some were told *not* to talk about the miracles they experienced (verse 43; Matt. 8:4); but later these things were revealed—they are in the Bible.

Certain revelations given to Daniel were to be “sealed” because they were “yet for a time appointed” (Dan. 11:35; 12:4, etc.). The book of Revelation, on the other hand, was not to be sealed, for the time was “at hand” (Rev. 22:10).

Prior to Pentecost, even the disciples of Jesus did not understand many things that were later revealed: “I have yet many things to say unto you, but you cannot bear them now. Howbeit when the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth” (John 16:12,13)—even truths “kept secret from the foundation of the world” (Matt. 13:35; cf. Rom. 16:25).

In the Old Testament, God chose Israel in a unique way. “You *only* have I known of all the families of the earth” (Amos 3:2; Deut. 7:6). Back then, who would have fully understood how Gentiles would also be included in God’s program! Paul writes of this “*mystery*...which in other ages was *not* made known unto the sons of men, as it is *now* revealed...that the *Gentiles* should be *fellow heirs*, and of *the same body*, and *partakers of his promise in Christ* by the gospel” (Eph. 3:4-6).

I have had several dogs in my life, all of which I remember fondly. In childhood, there was Blackie; later, in adult life, Bimbo; after this Greta and Cricket, and more recently, Oliver and Heidi. I knew them; they knew me. They could have easily picked me out in a crowd. Certainly they had mind, emotions, and will. With each of them I had a great relationship, even though they knew nothing of world geography, mathematics, American history, or biblical theology!

So we, as God’s creatures, have a Master. He loves us, even though our knowledge, compared to his, is minimal. We have a relationship with him, even though his ways are higher than our ways. The fact there are mysteries we do not *yet* understand need not rob us of our peace. As an old gospel song, written a century ago, phrases it:

*Farther along we’ll know all about it;
Farther along we’ll understand why;
Cheer up my brother, live in the sunshine;
We’ll understand it all, by and by.*

What a great and glorious Day it will be when we stand in the presence of HIM who knows the end from the beginning (Acts 15:18); when we will no longer see through a glass darkly, but face to face! (1 Cor. 13:12).



Photo taken at the very outstanding Abraham Lincoln Museum and Library, Springfield, Illinois, September 2010. Statues in the display represent the Lincoln family. Ralph and Arlene Woodrow are standing on each side of Lincoln. Behind the display is a replica of the White House and the lone statue in the background at the left is John Wilkes Booth, Lincoln’s assassin.

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