

## A “Good” Mystery

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Scripture text: Ephesians 3:1-6, 14-19

“This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles—for surely you have already heard of the commission of God’s grace that was given me for you, and how the *mystery* was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the *mystery of Christ*. In former generations this *mystery* was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.... “ (NRSV)

“With this in mind, then, I kneel in prayer to the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name, that out of the treasures of his glory he may grant you strength and power through his Spirit in your inner being, that through faith Christ may dwell in your hearts in love.

***With deep roots and firm foundations, may you be strong to grasp, with all God’s people, what is the breadth and length and height and depth of the love of Christ, and to know it, though it is beyond knowledge.*** So may you attain to fullness of being, the fullness of God himself.” (NEB)



**Hymns:**

*WB 72: When All Thy Mercies, O My God*

When all thy mercies, O my God,  
my rising soul surveys,  
transported with the view,  
I'm lost in wonder, love and praise.

Ten thousand thousand precious gifts  
my daily thanks employ,  
nor is the least a cheerful heart,  
that tastes these gifts with joy.

Through every period of my life  
thy goodness I'll pursue,  
and after death, in distant worlds,  
the glorious theme renew.

Through all eternity,  
to thee a joyful song I'll raise,  
but, oh, eternity's too short  
to utter all thy praise.

*WB 143: Amazing Grace*

Amazing grace! how sweet the sound,  
that saved a wretch like me!  
I once was lost, but now am found,  
was blind, but now I see.

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,  
and grace my fears relieved.  
How precious did that grace appear  
the hour I first believed.

Through many dangers, toils, and snares,  
I have already come.  
'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far,  
and grace will lead me home.

Yes, when this flesh and heart shall fail,  
and mortal life shall cease,  
I shall possess within the veil,  
a life of joy and peace.

The earth shall soon dissolve like snow,  
the sun forbear to shine;  
but God, who called me here below,  
will be forever mine.

When we've been there ten thousand years,  
bright shining as the sun,  
we've no less days to sing God's praise  
than when we'd first begun.

Most of us love “a good mystery”—  
 a good “who-done-it” type of mystery!  
 I especially like “Mystery Theatre” on PBS  
 (although I’m not as serious a fan as my wife, Melinda.)  
 So when I hear the term “mystery” writer,  
 I think of such authors as Agatha Christie—  
 not the apostle Paul.  
 And what kind of mystery is Paul telling the Ephesians  
 about—  
 not a “murder” mystery, surely,  
 but still, perhaps, a “who-done-it”?  
 Or perhaps the question underlying the mystery is  
 “What?” ...or “How”? ...or “Why?” ...or “When?”  
 Here in *Ephesians* he writes of  
 the “*mystery* of Christ”—  
 Can the question be “Who is Christ?”  
 But earlier in *Ephesians* (1:9) he writes of the “*mystery* of  
 His will”:  
 “And he made known to us the *mystery* of his will  
 according to his good pleasure,  
 which he purposed in Christ.”  
 and later in 6:19, the “mystery of the gospel”:  
 “Pray also for me,  
 that whenever I open my mouth,  
 words may be given me  
 so that I will fearlessly make known  
 the *mystery* of the gospel.”  
 To Timothy he writes of another mystery (*1 Tim. 3:16*):  
 “Without any doubt, the *mystery* of our religion is  
 great:  
 He was revealed in flesh, vindicated in spirit,  
 seen by angels,  
 proclaimed among Gentiles,

believed in throughout the world,  
 taken up in glory.”  
 The “mystery of Christ”...  
 “mystery of His will”...  
 “mystery of the gospel”...  
 “mystery of our religion”...  
 Is Paul writing about several different mysteries,  
 or is Paul referring to the *same* mystery in various  
 ways?  
 According to my bible dictionary (*Harper’s Bible  
 Dictionary*), mystery is  
 “that which is secret, hidden,  
 or beyond normal human understanding,  
 although it may be revealed or disclosed to certain  
 people.”  
 It goes on to say that the Greek word for “mystery”—  
*mysterion*--  
 (also translated “secret”),  
 is based on Jewish eschatology,  
 the concept of God’s secret plan for history.  
 In Daniel, for example,  
 divine *mysteries* are sealed in books in heaven,  
 which God will make known at the end of this age.  
 For example, Paul, in *Romans 16:25-26*, speaks of  
 the “revelation of the *mystery* hidden for long ages  
 past,  
 but now revealed and made known  
 through the prophetic writings  
 by the command of the eternal God,  
 so that all nations might believe and obey him....”



Scientists also find a lot of good mysteries  
which arise in trying to understand the universe,  
but the clues they continue to discover  
seem “curiouser and curiouser”,  
and the theories they propose to explain it  
seem more and more “far-fetched.”

One of the founders of quantum theory said  
that anyone who claims to understand it  
(himself included) is deluded!  
The universe, scientists are discovering,  
is not only more strange than we do imagine,  
it’s more strange than we *can* imagine!  
Stephen Hawking concludes his book  
*A Brief History of Time*  
with the following brash statement:  
“If we *do* discover a complete theory [of everything]...  
Then we shall all... be able  
to take part in the discussion  
of why it is that we and the universe exist.  
If we find the answer to that,  
it would be the ultimate triumph of human reason—  
for then we would truly know the ***mind of God.***”

I think, however, that the words  
written over 2000 years ago in Job 11:7-9  
are no less true today,  
despite scientific progress:  
“Can *you* fathom the mysteries of God?  
Can *you* probe the limits of the Almighty?  
They are higher than the heavens—  
what can *you* do?”

They are deeper than the depths of the grave—  
what can *you* know?  
Their measure is longer than the earth  
and wider than the sea.”  
A number of other leading scientists have voiced their  
feeling that,  
within the design,  
within the fabric of the universe,  
within every speck of dust,  
there lies some sort of life-enabling factor:  
*Freeman Dyson* (major contributor to quantum theory):  
“I do not feel like an alien in this universe.  
The more I examine the universe  
and study the details of its architecture  
the more evidence I find  
that the Universe must in some sense  
have known that we were coming.”  
*John Wheeler* (quantum physicist): “It is not only  
that man is adapted to the universe.  
The universe is adapted to man.”  
*Fred Hoyle* (physicist/astronomer): “The properties of  
water  
appear to be anomalous and ‘a put-up job’”.  
(A simple example would be  
the fact that water, like most liquids,  
becomes more dense as it gets colder—so cold water  
sinks and warm water rises.  
But as it nears the freezing point,  
it suddenly becomes *less* dense,  
so that ice floats on top of water—  
can you imagine the repercussions if instead ice sank,  
so that lakes would freeze from the bottom up,  
rather than the top down?)

All of the chemical elements except the very simplest, hydrogen, were formed by the processes of fusion in the interior of stars.

Fred Hoyle's analysis of the complicated multi-step process of forming carbon could only occur if certain combinations of intermediate elements had a "resonance" at a certain level, a property which was unsuspected at the time, but which was discovered later.

If this resonance varied only slightly from the actual level, one way or the other, carbon would be relatively rare in the universe, and life as we know it would not exist.

This is only one of dozens of such properties of matter and energy identified by scientists, properties that had to be *precisely* as they are in order for the universe to be able to support life—and scientists are puzzled by the "coincidences".

*Fred Hoyle*: "A commonsense interpretation of the facts suggests that a super-intellect has monkeyed with physics... and that there are no blind forces worth speaking about in nature."

Scientists wanting to avoid this conclusion have offered a so-called "explanation"—called the *Anthropic Principle*—they say that we shouldn't be at all surprised that the universe has these strange properties,

since if it didn't, we wouldn't be here to express this wonderment....

Even given these conditions which make life possible, the fact that there are actual living organisms here on earth remains a mystery to science.

Evolutionists claim to be able to explain the variety of life on our planet, given "something" alive, some "raw material", to start the process, but how did that *first* life happen to be?

Darwin's famous book, *The Origin of Species*, claimed to explain how species evolved from earlier *species*, and explains nothing of the origin of life itself.

And even the ability of evolution to explain the complexity of life is questioned by many, who argue that it requires what they call "intelligent design" (like Hoyle?) or a predisposition woven into the fabric of the universe in order for complex organisms to develop.

Nothing in the known universe is as complex as the human brain, which in some mysterious way creates consciousness, which plays a key role in quantum theory.

The Anthropic Principle that I've mentioned implies that the universe would exist in some form or other without all of the coincidence of properties which make life and consciousness possible—

it's just that no one would be aware of it.  
 The *Strong* Anthropic Principle goes much further.  
 Based upon quantum theory, it says  
 that in fact a universe *cannot exist*  
 without conscious beings.  
 According to quantum theory,  
 each elementary particle—an electron for example,  
 is said not to exist at all  
 until it is observed by a conscious observer.  
 Since everything material  
 is composed of these elementary particles,  
 the existence of *everything* we see around us depends  
 upon the presence  
 of conscious observers.  
 I'm reminded of the old question,  
 "if a tree falls in the forest  
 and no one is there to hear it,  
 does it make a sound?"  
 By this interpretation of quantum theory,  
 without a conscious observer,  
 the falling tree not only doesn't make a sound,  
 it isn't even "there!"  
 It becomes even more mysterious than that...  
 if every conscious observer is composed of matter,  
 it owes its existence to a conscious observer,  
 which in turn owes its existence  
 to another conscious observer, ....

[Story about early (Greek?) scholar who taught that the  
 flat earth was supported on the back of a huge turtle.  
 Someone asked him how the turtle was supported, and  
 he answers, "On the back of another turtle!" He is

then asked how this turtle is supported, etc. Finally  
 he says in exasperation:  
 "It's turtles all the way down!"]

We believe that, of course,  
 God is that consciousness  
 to which the universe owes its existence.  
 Christians believe that  
 God is conscious of every individual person.  
 To be forgotten by God is to cease to exist,  
 but God never forgets—  
 He remembers always,  
 and in remembering, "re-members" the person.  
 The Bible does not actually say much  
 about our having an "immortal soul",  
 but speaks instead of *resurrection*.

God's remembering of each individual person is the basis  
 of my hope of resurrection.



But back to the mysteries that Paul spoke of...  
 what was he talking about?  
 Not the mysteries exposed by quantum theory.  
 As he says of this mystery (in Eph. 3:6), it is...  
 that through the Gospel  
 the Gentiles are joint heirs with the Jews,  
 part of the same body,  
 sharers together  
 in the promise made in Christ Jesus.  
 I think he stated this more clearly  
 earlier in this epistle, in 1:9-10:

“He has made known to us  
his hidden purpose—  
such was his will and pleasure  
determined beforehand in Christ—  
to be put into effect  
when the time was ripe:  
namely, that the universe,  
*all in heaven and on earth,*  
might be brought into a unity in Christ.”

I am very grateful to Kevin Kummer,  
who several years ago recommended to me  
a book which speaks to this issue,  
*The Mystery of Christ,*  
*and Why We Don't Get It,*  
by Robert Capon,  
an Episcopal priest and theologian.

As Capon says,  
although the exact phrase “the mystery of Christ”  
appears only in the Epistles  
to the Ephesians and to the Colossians,  
“the notion of the work of God in the world  
as a ‘*mystery*’—  
as a reconciling gift hidden throughout creation—  
appears more widely...  
This Mystery... has been present at *all* times  
and in *all* places  
but “kept secret for ages and generations” (Rom.  
16:25).  
In fact, this mystery has been hidden...  
even “*before* the foundation of the world” (Eph. 1:4)  
until it could finally be revealed in Jesus....

In other words,  
the mysterious, reconciling grace  
that was revealed in Jesus  
is not something that got its act together  
for the first time in Jesus;  
rather, it is a feature  
of the very make-up of the universe—  
a feature that was there all along.

From this,

Capon comes to a conclusion  
that has often been labeled as *heretical*  
by some in the church.

“Even though you may go on saying in church  
that the Lamb of God  
takes away the *sins of the world,*  
you are actually saying  
that he has taken away  
only the *sins of the church....*”

The model I think you should try to construct  
will not be based on transactions  
like earning, working, deserving,  
or any other tit-for-tat operation.

Rather it will be based on the imagery  
of what you say you really believe in anyway—  
namely, the imagery of a free gift *already given,*  
without condition, to everybody—  
a gift hidden in every particle of creation,  
a gift that goes by the name of *Mystery of Christ.*”

More recently I have come upon a book  
which follows this line of thought  
more explicitly to its conclusion—  
which is the “heresy” that is called “universalism”—

that ultimately all of humanity will be saved,  
and hell will be empty.  
This book is titled *If Grace Be True*,  
written jointly by two Quaker ministers,  
Philip Gulley and James Mulholland.  
Its subtitle is *Why God Will Save Every Person*.  
By “salvation” they mean  
“much more than a ticket to heaven...  
much more than being cleansed of our sins  
and rescued from hell’s fire...  
even more than being raised from the grave  
and granted eternal life.  
By salvation, [they] mean  
being freed of every obstacle to intimacy with God.  
We will know as we are known  
and love as we are loved.”  
I have long believed  
that God’s judgment  
will not condemn anyone to hell.  
As Paul writes to Timothy,  
[God] “wants *all* men to be saved....” (1 Tim. 2:3-4)  
I didn't expect that  
everyone would experience eternal bliss, however.

Leslie Weatherhead,  
another British theologian,  
likenes eternity to a concert of classical music,  
to which everyone is not only invited,  
but *obliged* to attend.  
To one fellow--  
Joe, let's call him—

to Joe, who really appreciates classical music,  
the concert is sheer delight—  
he is in ecstasy!  
To the fellow sitting next to him--  
Bill, let's say--  
to Bill, who loves country & western music,  
or jazz, or rock music, or whatever,  
the concert is totally boring,  
*agonizingly* so.  
Joe and Bill sit together, side by side,  
but between them is a vast “gap”.  
Bill, the country & western fan,  
cannot cross it all in a moment  
and be where Joe is.  
Joe's years spent listening to music,  
perhaps studying and performing himself,  
have made him able  
to enjoy this wonderful experience.  
Poor Bill is feeling horribly out of it—miserable—  
he cannot respond to highbrow music,  
which leaves him “cold”—  
and at a concert,  
there’s nothing *but* music to respond to.

Weatherhead says,  
“I never think of heaven and hell as two places.  
I think it must be hell to be in heaven  
and not be able to enter into its delights--  
like being at an endless concert and being deaf....”

I once thought that human freedom argued against  
universalism:  
“God doesn’t send anyone to hell.



They send themselves.  
God simply respects their freedoms.”

“We were saved by our decision to accept God’s grace.  
Though grace may be a gift,  
it is a gift that must be unwrapped.  
Following this line of thinking,  
salvation was not dependent  
on God’s decision to save me,  
but on my decision to accept Him.

In my obsession with defending free will,  
I forgot a far more important truth:  
God is free.

I defended our freedom to reject God  
but denied God’s freedom to reject our rejection.

We are free to resist the grace of God,  
but I believe we are not free  
to separate ourselves from God’s love.

Like the fellows in the concert hall,  
we will eternally be subjected to God’s love....  
My favorite of Paul’s writings is:  
“I am convinced that neither death nor life,  
neither angels nor demons,  
neither the present nor the future,  
nor any powers,  
neither height nor depth,  
nor anything else in all of creation,  
will be able to separate us

from the love of God  
that is in Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 8:38-39)  
Nothing can separate us from the love of God—not even  
us.

Human resistance is real and stubborn,  
but I believe that God’s grace  
will ultimately wear down every obstacle.

Like the warmth of the sun in the fable which was re-  
enacted this morning for the children, the weakness of  
God is stronger than the strength of men.

As Mennonites, we believe that  
retribution, revenge, coercion, punishment, wrath—  
all are incapable of creating  
the kingdom of God.  
They represent the *weakest* form of power.  
They are an admission of a failure  
to persuade and attract.

I am discouraged at the number of Christians  
who favor the death penalty.  
Even one of my brothers, a Christian (but not  
Mennonite),  
wrote to me recently that  
“some people are evil to the core,  
and must be destroyed.”

But God doesn’t repay evil with evil.  
God is convinced His unyielding grace  
will wear evil down to nothing,  
just as poor Bill,

forced to sit in the concert hall,  
bombarded by classical music,  
may eventually develop an appreciation for the music!

Gully and Mulholland write,  
“How can you believe  
that God’s grace isn’t sufficient,  
that many of God’s children  
will languish in hell forever,  
that they’ll never be restored to their Father,  
that evil will claim victory in so many lives?”

The doctrine of atonement  
(payback for injury)  
appeals to our human obsession for justice.  
But it contradicts the ethic of Jesus,  
who rejected the demand for  
”an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.”

In this doctrine,  
Jesus ends up saving us from God  
rather than from evil.  
Jesus shields us from a vengeful God  
rather than leading us toward abundant life.

Atonement theology...  
refuses to allow God the freedom  
to simply cancel the debt.  
It ultimately contends  
that unless blood is shed,  
God is powerless to forgive.

But God has chosen to redeem us.  
Nothing *requires* God to condemn us,  
and so God has not.

“If God is for us, who can be against us?”

Forgiveness has always been God’s choice.  
God grace was as available before the cross  
as it was after the cross.  
The death of Jesus didn’t *enable* God to forgive,  
nor did it change God’s mind about us....  
Jesus came not to die.  
He came to teach us how to live.  
Jesus didn’t die to appease an angry God.  
He came to proclaim a God of love.

We’ve been so morbidly fascinated by the crucifixion—  
note the popularity of the recent movie, “The Passion”—  
we’ve failed to appreciate the true symbol of our hope—  
the resurrection.  
The death of Jesus is not the final word...  
the final word is undying love.

Jesus revealed what has *always* been true—  
God is our Savior.  
God is the one who created us.  
God is the one who sustains us.  
God is the one who redeems us from death  
and claims us as his own.

Paul wrote to Timothy,  
“This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus  
*before the beginning of time,*

but it has now been revealed  
through the appearance of our Savior,  
Christ Jesus,  
who has destroyed death  
and has brought life and immortality to light  
through the gospel.” (2 Timothy 1:9b–10)

I believe God’s grace will eventually save *all* of humanity...  
Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, pagans,  
Christians;  
atheists & agnostics;  
rapists, child molesters, & terrorists;  
the most despicable human on earth.  
I believe God will save us all.  
We will all repent and be transformed.

Assigning Hitler to hell is easy.  
No one is more deserving!  
Ironically, most Christians have suggested  
that Hitler shares the *same* hell  
as the Jews he murdered.  
Gulley & Mulholland point out that  
It’s also ironic that Hitler wanted  
to purge humanity  
of those he thought to be impure and deficient—  
which is the extreme manifestation  
of what many religions affirm—  
that some people ultimately deserve annihilation.

Hitler damned millions of people  
to concentration camps and furnaces,  
convinced he was purifying the world.

Hitler did on earth  
what many expect God to do in the afterlife!

I don’t expect that I’ve persuaded all of you  
that all of humanity will in the end be saved.  
But I hope that I have given you some ideas  
to think and pray about,  
some reason for hope not just for ourselves,  
but for both those we love  
and those that Christ commands us to love.  
Does this message  
that all will be saved  
seem to you to be “too good to be true”?  
or does it “offend your sense of justice?”  
or does it seem to contradict other teachings in  
scripture?

One who has welcomed this hope  
that all will be saved  
is the biblical scholar, William Barclay,  
the author of a well-known set of Bible commentaries,  
who said that  
“The only victory love can enjoy is the day  
when its offer of love is answered  
by the return of love.  
The only possible final triumph  
is a universe loved by and in love with God.”

Another well-known Christian author,  
Madeleine L’Engle, wrote  
“All will be redeemed in God’s fullness of time, *all*,  
not just the small portion of the population  
who have been given the grace

to know and accept Christ.  
All the strayed and stolen sheep.  
All the little lost ones.”



So for those who truly love a “good” mystery,  
the mystery that Paul writes of is truly the best!

“God has exalted highly exalted him

and bestowed on him the name  
which is above every name,  
that at the name of Jesus  
*every knee should bow,*  
in heaven and on earth and under earth,  
and *every tongue confess*  
that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father.” (Phil. 2:9-11)



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