

The Mystery of the Gospel

*As for the **mystery** of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the **seven golden lampstands**, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the **seven lampstands are the seven churches.** (Revelation 1:20 ESV)*

Why does Jesus call this a **“mystery”**?

The religious and intellectual environment of the New Testament World

- The word “mystery” is from **μυστήριον – musteerion** which means:

The etymology of the word is itself a mystery. Probably, though not certainly its derived from μύειν “to close” (the mouth, the lips) ... leads only to the fairly certain general conclusion that a μυστήριον is something on which silence must be kept. (Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, volume IV, (TDNT), page 803)

- **This word takes us right to the heart of the religious and intellectual environment of the New Testament World.** It had specific meanings and rich connotations in both Greek (Hellenistic) culture and in Jewish culture. Any use of the word would have been very “loaded” depending on the audience.
- Some New Testament examples:
 - ... praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication ... and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the **mystery of the gospel** ... (Ephesians 6:18-19 ESV)
 - Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ ... In him [Christ] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace ... making known to us the **mystery of his [Father] will**, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ ... (Ephesians 1:3, 7-9 ESV)
 - Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare **the mystery of Christ** ... (Colossians 4:2-3 ESV)
- So, Paul in writing to churches which were mainly Greek, defines the Gospel as a **mystery**, which is related to the will of God – his purpose, his plan. It is also **the mystery of Christ**.
- Why does Paul use this term? **How is Christ a “mystery”?**
- To answer we need to look at the context – what did the word **μυστήριον** mean to people of Hellenistic culture in the middle of the first century?

Greek Mysteries

- **Mystery Cults:** starting from about the 7th Century BC there were all over the Mediterranean world secret religious organizations which promised devotees **a means of “salvation”** – by the 1st Century AD these were a huge factor in society; some characteristics of mystery cults from TDNT:
 - Integral to the concept of the mysteries is ... those who wish to take part in the celebrations **must undergo initiation** (page 804)
 - Mysteries are cultic rites ... the destinies of a god are portrayed ... before ... devotees... **to give them a part in the fate of the god** (page 803)
 - The holy mystery of the rites is this **sanctifying union** between the suffering deity and the devotees ... (page 805)
- **Mysteries in Philosophy:** the Greek philosophers were in general very much interested in the concept of “deity” in contrast with the traditional pantheon of the “gods” – musterion is one of the notions developed in philosophy; from TDNT:
 - The aim of ... this ... philosophy is to distinguish between real truth and its symbolic appearance or concealment. As concerns origins it often **claims divine inspiration**. (page 809)
 - The adoption of the vocabulary of the mysteries by philosophy led to significant change in the understanding of μυστήρια. They were divested of their sacramental character and became **secret teachings** (page 810)
 - ... the mysteries are ... secret doctrines whose hidden wisdom may be **understood only by those capable of knowledge** (page 808)
- **Mysteries in Gnosticism:** true Gnosticism was not fully developed until the 2nd Century AD, but its roots are in the Mystery Cults and the Philosophic Mysteries – this developing Gnosticism was very much a part of the culture of the last half of the 1st Century AD; from TDNT:
 - ... the Gnostic reduction of all conceivable oriental and Greek myths into the myth of the heavenly primal man who has fallen into the chaotic cosmos, and **will be redeemed and brought to his original destiny** (page 811)
 - The mystery event, achieved in the **giving and receiving knowledge**, means ... the union of the original man and the newly born [devotee], who is fully like the man in nature ... (page 811)
- **Mysteries in Magic:** magic and the occult were on the fringes of society then as now, and similarly they exerted an influence: “magic involves individual practice without cultic connection” (TDNT page 810)
- **Mysteries in Secular Usage:** although the “mysteries” clearly had a religious origin, they came to be used also in every day life as metaphors – much as we use the term today
- The point of all this: **the hand of Satan is very clear in creating the deception and confusion which drives the world**

Paul's Teaching to the Greeks (in light of the environment)

- We all carry a lot of baggage from the world when we come into the Church – people in the 1st Century were no different: some would have come out of Mystery Cults; some would be “philosophy buffs”; some may have been deep into the occult; all through the New Testament documents there are traces of nascent Gnosticism – these are things Paul had to deal with in predominantly Greek Churches:
 - 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. But we impart a **mystery** and **hidden wisdom of God**, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. (1 Corinthians 2:6-7 ESV)
 - This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and **stewards** of the **mysteries** of God. (1 Corinthians 4:1 ESV)
 - ... assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you, how the **mystery** was **made known to me by revelation**, as I have written briefly. When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the **mystery of Christ**, which was **not made known to the sons of men in other generations** as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets **by the Spirit**. (Ephesians 3:2-5)
- The mystery was hidden by God; Paul is a steward of the mystery which he understands by revelation; and the mystery pertains to “Christ”, the Messiah – it was NOT made known in prior generations but is now revealed through the Holy Spirit.

Some further elaboration:

 - ... according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the **mystery** that was kept **secret for long ages** but has now been **disclosed and through the prophetic writings** has been made **known to all nations**, according to the command of the eternal God, **to bring about the obedience of faith** ... (Romans 16:25-26 ESV)
 - ... **to bring to light** for everyone what is **the plan** of the **mystery** hidden for ages in God, who created all things ... (Ephesians 3:9 ESV)
 - ... to make the word of God fully known, the **mystery** hidden for ages and generations but **now revealed to his saints**. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this **mystery**, which is **Christ in you** ... (Colossians 1:25-27 ESV)
 - [This **mystery** is] that the **Gentiles are fellow heirs**, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus **through the gospel**. (Ephesians 3:6 ESV) [inferred from verse 4 above]
 - They must hold the **mystery** of the faith with a clear conscience ...
Great indeed, **we confess**, is the **mystery** of godliness:
He was manifested in the flesh,
vindicated by the Spirit,
seen by angels,
proclaimed among the nations,
believed on in the world,
taken up in glory. (1 Timothy 3:9, 16 ESV)
- The mystery was hidden until revealed to Christians – by the Holy Spirit through what was written in the prophetic writings.
- The heart of the mystery is salvation for all people – by grace not race, not position, and not status. Salvation is made possible by the incarnation, life, crucifixion, and resurrection of Christ, as is being proclaimed to all nations.

Jewish Mysteries

- **Intertestamental Wisdom Literature:** The terminology of the Greek Mysteries was used and applied to God's teaching:
 - Wisdom of Ben Sirach 3:18-19 The greater you are, the more you should humble yourself, and before the Lord you will find favour. Many are lofty and of repute, but to the meek he reveals **his mysteries**. (A New English Translation of the Septuagint (NETS), page 722)
 - Wisdom of Solomon 2:21-22 Thus they reasoned, but they were led astray, for their wickedness blinded them, and they did not know the **divine mysteries**, nor hoped for the wages of holiness ... (NETS, page 700)
 - Wisdom of Solomon 6:22 What wisdom is and how she came into being I will declare, and I will hide **no mysteries** from you ... (NETS, page 703)
- **Old Greek Translation:** The translators freely incorporated terminology from the Greek Mysteries:
 - 1 Kings 15:12 And he took away the **mystic rites** out of the land ... (NETS, page 312)
And he put away the male cult prostitutes out of the land (ESV)
 - Amos 7:8-9
... I will no longer add to pass them by, and alters of laughter shall be annihilated, and the **mystic rites** of Israel laid waste ... (NETS, page 794)
... I will never again pass by them; the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste ... (ESV)
- **Apocalyptic Literature:** In Daniel 2:18, 27, 29, 30, 47, and 4:9 the Aramaic word ܠܐܝܢ - raz is used. It is translated "μυστήριον" in the Old Greek and in Theodotion. ESV translates it "mystery", also NIV, NASB, NRSV, and Moffatt; KJV, NKJV, and NEB use "secret". This usage was picked up extensively by subsequent apocalyptic authors.
 - **The disclosure of divine secrets is the true theme of later Jewish apocalyptic.** The fantastic fulness of statements does not conceal the underlying and explicit sense that God is infinitely remote, that heaven and earth, creation, history and its end, are full of puzzles, that the present is incapable of answering innumerable questions without a concrete prophetic word and human apprehension. **Thus the concept of mystery has now a very significant role.** (TDNT page 815)
 - 1 Enoch 63:2-3 Blessed be the Lord ... Your power exposes every secret thing from generation to generation and your glory is forever and ever. **Deep are all your mysteries** – and numberless ... (Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, vol 1, (OTP), page 44, J.H. Charlesworth editor)
 - 1 Enoch 48:10-49:4 Blessed be the name of the Lord of the Spirits! ... For his might is in all the **mysteries of righteousness** ... The Elect One stands before the Lord of the Spirits ... **his power is to all generations**. In him dwells the spirit of wisdom ... the spirit of knowledge ... He shall judge **the secret things** ... (OTP page 36)
 - He who receives the **revelation of the mysteries** ... knows "what inwardly holds the world together." ... The apocalypticist who sees mysteries ... is able to perceive the time of the world's course. He knows the mysteries of times and ... periods. (TDNT page 815)
- **Rabbinic Judaism:** The Mishnah was not written down until the end of the 2nd Century AD but the content of it is the Pharisaical teachings which were prevalent in the 1st Century.
 - The concept of mystery ... is also found in Rabbinic Literature. Among the secret doctrines are the exposition of the laws of incest and especially theosophical speculations (e.g. on the vision of the chariot in Ez1:10) ... Discussion of these is allowed only with strict reservations. But a mystery, too, is the whole of the oral tradition ... insights are promised to him who "occupies himself with the Torah for for its own sake ... "The mysteries of the Torah will be revealed to him." (TDNT page 817)

Christ's Teaching to the Jews (in light of the environment)

- The Jews among whom Jesus lived were steeped in the literature and traditions of the times – the extra-biblical wisdom literature was very popular; the Greek translations of the Old Testament were widely used; apocalyptic literature was very familiar; and, the Gospels record many instances of Jesus disputing the traditions of the Pharisees. This is the environment in which Jesus and the disciples lived and worked. The Gospels contain **only one dialogue of Jesus which specifically deals with the “mystery”** – it is embedded in the **Parable of the Sower** (Mk4:3-9, 14-20, Mt13:3b-9, 18-23, Lk8:5-8, 11-15).
- Mark 4:10-13 from ESV
 - And when he was alone, those around him with the twelve asked him about the parables. And he said to them, **“To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables, so that “they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven.”** And he said to them, **“Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?”**
- Matthew 13:10-17 from ESV
 - Then the disciples came and said to him, **“Why do you speak to them in parables?”** And he answered them, **“To you it has been given to know the mystery of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given.** For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. Indeed, in their case **the prophecy of Isaiah** is fulfilled that says:
“You will indeed hear but never understand,
and you will indeed see but never perceive.”
For this people's heart has grown dull,
and with their ears they can barely hear,
and their eyes they have closed,
lest they should see with their eyes
and hear with their ears
and understand with their heart
and turn, and I would heal them.’

But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. For truly, I say to you, **many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.**
- Luke 8:9-10 from ESV
 - And when his disciples asked him what this parable meant, he said, **“To you it has been given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God, but for others they are in parables, so that “seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand.”**
- All the synoptic authors call it the **“mystery of the kingdom ...”** which only disciples could understand, the general audience could NOT understand.
- **Why does Jesus bring this out in the middle of the Parable of the Sower?**

The Parable of the Sower and the Mystery of the Gospel

- The Parable of the Sower is about **"calling"** – the first step in the Christian life: calling is a miracle from God through hearing the word of the Gospel. Calling alone is fruitless – **the one called must respond**, and avoid the various pitfalls which draw a person away from the calling. **Then, a Christian bears fruit.**
- In the middle of the parable all the synoptic authors record Jesus' discussion of how to understand parables. **The understanding is the "mystery" of the Kingdom of God.** Many parables start out with words similar to "the Kingdom of God is like ...". This is the key to understanding parables. They teach some aspect of the Kingdom of God – most often a requirement of a Christian to be granted the gift of entering the Kingdom.
- **People who are not ready to be called cannot understand the mystery of the Kingdom** – if they did come to understanding too soon, and are not able to follow through with the calling, they could ruin their opportunity for eternal life. **The parables are meant to hide the mystery from those not ready to be called.**
- **The resurrection is the final part of the "mystery"** – this is how Christians truly **"bear fruit"**. As members of the God Family we will then carry the Gospel to all humanity, eventually to everyone who has ever lived.
- 1 Corinthians 15:50-55 from ESV
I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Behold! I tell you a **mystery**. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the **last trumpet**. For the trumpet will sound, and **the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed**. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written:
"Death is swallowed up in victory."
"O death, where is your victory?"
O death, where is your sting?"
- Revelation 10:5-7 from ESV
And the angel whom I saw standing on the sea and on the land raised his right hand to heaven 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, 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.
- **This gives us the answer to the mystery: why Jesus is standing among the lampstands ...**

Conclusion

- Revelation 1:20 - As for the **mystery** of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and **the seven golden lampstands**, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are **the seven churches**. (ESV)
- **Jesus Christ is in the midst of his church:** all Christians, everywhere, at all times, and very much so as we at the end time see the events of the Book of Revelation unfolding.
- The **Mystery of the Gospel** (Eph6:19) is the revelation of God's will (Eph1:7-9) in Jesus Christ (Cl4:2-3) – this mystery was hidden from all peoples, Jews and Gentiles, until the appropriate time according to the plan of God, when Jesus was manifest (Rm16:25-26, Eph3:9, Cl:1:25-26).
- The heart of the mystery is **salvation – for all peoples, Jews and Gentiles**, through the incarnation, life, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Eph3:6, 1Tm3:9, 16).
- Fundamental to the **Mystery of the Gospel** is **Christian calling**, as shown in the Parable of the Sower (Mk4:3-9, 14-20, Mt13:3b-9, 18-23, Lk8:5-8, 11-15). Calling is required to understand the Plan of God, revealed to the saints (Cl1:25-26).
- Jesus taught using parables so that people not yet ready could not understand the message of the Kingdom of God, the **Mystery of the Gospel**, which is the primary focus of the parables (Mk4:10-13, Mt13:10-17, Lk8:9-10).
- The final working-out of the **Mystery of the Gospel** is the first resurrection (1Cr15:50-55, Rv10:5-7), when the Saints, those who have been called and deemed worthy of the gift of eternal life, enter the God Family and bring salvation to all of humanity.
- **Christ's vital message to the Church**, symbolized by his **standing among the lampstands**, is contained in the messages to the seven churches of Asia Minor (Rv2:1-29, 3:1-22), which symbolize the Church, everywhere, at all times. The message is **to conquer, to overcome** (Rv2:7, 11, 17, 26, 3:5, 12, 21) – for the end time, Christ emphasizes the necessity of **"enduring to the end"** (Mk13:13, Mt 24:13, Lk21:18-19, Rv12:11, 13:7, 10, 14:13).

Other verses

- Romans 11:25 - Lest you be wise in your own sight, I do not want you to be unaware of this **mystery**, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. (ESV)
 - The mystery is the fate of "Israel" – in the end all "Israelites" will have an opportunity for salvation the same as all "Gentiles"
- 1 Corinthians 2:1 - And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the **testimony** of God with lofty speech or wisdom. (ESV)
 - This is an object lesson in "textual criticism": the ancient manuscripts are divided as to **μαρτύριον – marturion "testimony"** or **μυστήριον – musteerion "mystery"**; both can be exegetically defended. ESV has opted for "testimony"; TDNT argues for "mystery" (page 819, footnote 141)
- 1 Corinthians 13:2-3 - And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all **mysteries** and all knowledge, and if I have all faith ... but have not love, I gain nothing. (ESV)
 - Paul is using "mysteries" in an all encompassing sense: the Mystery of the Gospel, Greek Mysteries, and Jewish Mysteries
- 1 Corinthians 14:2 - For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters **mysteries** in the Spirit. (ESV)
 - Paul is almost reverting to a secular sense here: the person may be talking gibberish
- Ephesians 5:31-32 - "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." This **mystery** is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. (ESV)
 - This is part of the Mystery of the Gospel: marriage is a type of the relationship between Christ and the Church
- 2 Thessalonians 2:7 - For the **mystery** of lawlessness is already at work. (ESV)
 - This is the "dark side": Satan's deception and confusion are ever present
- Revelation 17:5 - And on her forehead was written a name of **mystery**: "Babylon the great, mother of prostitutes and of earth's abominations." (ESV)
- Revelation 17:7 - But the angel said to me, Why do you marvel? I will tell you the **mystery** of the woman, and of the beast with seven heads and ten horns that carries her. (ESV)
 - The ultimate deception by Satan has been the confused and deceitful "religion" foisted onto the world, symbolized by the "Great Whore"