

Published by LifeWay Press® © 2013 Mark Batterson

All rights reserved. No part of this work may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, without express written permission of the publisher. Requests for permission should be addressed to LifeWay Small Groups; One LifeWay Plaza; Nashville, TN 37234-0152.

ISBN: 978-1-4158-7580-3 Item: 005539340

Dewey Decimal Classification Number: 231 Subject Heading: GOD \ PROVIDENCE AND GOVERNMENT OF GOD \ THEOLOGY

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are taken from the Holman Christian Standard Bible[®], copyright © 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002 by Holman Bible Publishers. Used by permission. Scripture quotations marked NIV are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version, copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Scripture quotations marked ESV are taken from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version[®] (ESV[®]), copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Scripture quotations marked (NLT) are taken from the Holy Bible, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Wheaton, IL 60189 USA. All rights reserved.

To purchase additional copies of this resource: ORDER ONLINE at www.lifeway.com; WRITE LifeWay Small Groups; One LifeWay Plaza; Nashville, TN 37234-0152; FAX order to (615) 251-5933 or PHONE (800) 458-2772

Printed in the United States of America

Adult Ministry Publishing LifeWay Church Resources One LifeWay Plaza Nashville, Tennessee 37234-0152



God is never boring. Frustrating, perhaps. Confusing, enlightening, shocking, even funny. But never boring. If we think that God is boring, then we are obviously worshiping a God of our own making and not the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of the universe and of our lives. Growing in my knowledge of and relationship with Christ is always an adventure. The more I learn about God, the more I realize how little I really know about Him.

God is incomprehensible, but the mystery of God is revealed in Christ. There are some things we will always wonder about and question because God's thoughts are higher than our thoughts, and His ways are higher than our ways.

One of the most dangerous tendencies we have is to deify man and humanize God. We give Him human characteristics and reduce Him to someone we can completely understand. In the beginning, man was made in the image of God, but we've been making God in our image ever since. We reduce the mysterious God down to the logical constraints of our left brain and, in that process, all the mystery is lost.

One of the first things we learn about God is that we just can't quite figure Him out. There is an element to His transcendent, omnipotent, omniscient character that remains a mystery to us. With God, dirt can become the medicine that heals and love can become the best weapon we can wield. In the mystery of God, we discover life in death and abundance in sacrifice.

Let's take God out from under our microscopes and analytical boxes and let Him display all of His power, majesty, and glory to us. When we revel in His mystery, worship happens, and life becomes much more exciting.



%

Use this time to talk as a group about ...

What first comes to mind when you think about God? List two or three characteristics that you most associate with Him.

What are some of the characteristics of God that are most confusing, frightening, or unsettling to you?



If you could ask God any question, what would you ask?

What are some of the places in Scripture or moments in your life when God seemed most mysterious to you?

List two words you would use to describe yourself—words that define who you are now.

VIDEO DISCUSSION-

Fill in the blanks below on important points as you view the message from Mark. You'll unpack this information with the group after the video.

Our biggest problem is our		
The goal isn't just to know more	information. The goal i	s
One of our most dangerous tend	encies is to	man
and	God.	
If you lose the mystery, it is called		
Humility in the presence of mystery is called		
We offer answers; God offers a _		through Jesus Christ.

JOB 11:7, NIV

Can you fathom the mysteries of God?

1 CORINTHIANS 2:9-10, NIV

- "No eye has seen,
 - no ear has heard,
- no mind has conceived
 - what God has prepared for those who love him." —
- but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit.
- The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God.

PSALM 46:10, NIV

Be still, and know that I am God.

1 CORINTHIANS 8:2, NIV

The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know.

- A low of view God is the cause of a hundred lesser evils and a high view of God is the solution to 10 thousand problems.
- There are more than 400 names for God in Scripture and each one reveals a different dimension of His personality.
- We want a Twitter God we can reduce to 140 characters; a God we can put in nice, neat categories; a God we can understand; a God we can measure; a God we can comprehend; even a God we can control. But God doesn't fit in 140 characters.
- God is mysterious. The more we know, the more we know how much we don't know. The more we know, the greater the mystery. And that should make us fall in love with Him even more!

Mark uses the watermelon seed and theological tension to illustrate the mystery of God. What are some other examples you see in creation that reveal and celebrate the great mystery of God's character? What are some of the apparent theological tensions that remind you that there is a mystery to be explored?

SMALL-GROUP DIALOGUE

1 CORINTHIANS 2:1-10

When I came to you, brothers, announcing the testimony of God to you, I did not come with brilliance of speech or wisdom. For I didn't think it was a good idea to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. I came to you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. My speech and my proclamation were not with persuasive words of wisdom but with a powerful demonstration by the Spirit, so that your faith might not be based on men's wisdom but on God's power.

However, we do speak a wisdom among the mature, but not a wisdom of this age, or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. On the contrary, we speak God's hidden wisdom in a mystery, a wisdom God predestined before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age knew this wisdom, for if they had known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But as it is written:

What eye did not see and ear did not hear,

and what never entered the human mind—

God prepared this for those who love Him.

Now God has revealed these things to us by the Spirit, for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God.

Paul was a highly trained, educated, and skilled man. In other places in Scripture, we find him contending for the gospel against the brightest philosophical minds of Athens on the Areopagus, sharing the story of Christ with the political leaders of the Empire, and cleverly stirring up theological debates between members of the Sanhedrin. However, Paul recognized that there was a point at which he must come to the end of his brilliance and knowledge. In this letter to the church at Corinth, he admits that God cannot be contained by the hundred trillion synaptic connections that crisscross our cerebral cortex.

Paul contrasts human wisdom with the mystery of God. How should human wisdom be used?

Paul also speaks about the role of the Holy Spirit in helping us grasp the mysteries of God. Why do you think it is important to know that the Spirit "searches everything, even the depths of God"? What do you think this has to do with our relationship with God?

DEUTERONOMY 29:29

The hidden things belong to the LORD our God, but the revealed things belong to us and our children forever, so that we may follow all the words of this law.

I admit, I have a Deuteronomy 29:29 file. It's the place where I store the questions and circumstances for which there is no logical explanation. There are some things that will remain a mystery to us as long as we live within the space-time dimensions of earthly history.

What questions would you put in a Deuteronomy 29:29 file?

What life circumstances would you put in a Deuteronomy 29:29 file?

When God's actions don't seem to correspond with what you think you know of the character and promises of God, what do you do?

ROMANS 16:25-27

Now to Him who has power to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation about Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery kept silent for long ages but now revealed and made known through the prophetic Scriptures, according to the command of the eternal God to advance the obedience of faith among all nations—to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ—to Him be the glory forever! Amen.

Romans is the closest thing we find to a systematic theology in the New Testament. In this letter to the church in Rome, Paul outlines in bold detail the content, implications, and application of his faith. He closes with this idea that ultimately, Jesus Christ is the mystery of God revealed.

What are some things we learn about God's character and ways through the Person of Jesus Christ?



In looking at the life of Christ, where do we see the mystery of God in full display? In other words, where do we see truth in the tension of opposites, the foolish confounding the wise, or unconventional approaches to faith and action?

How does it make you feel to know that there will always be certain dimensions of God's personality and ways that remain a mystery to us?

Paul closes out the Book of Romans on a note of worship. That's where good theology should always lead us. How does knowing that God is Mystery lead you to worship differently?



WRAP

Ephesians 2:4-5 explains the mystery of the gospel: "God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love that He had for us, made us alive with the Messiah even though we were dead in trespasses. You are saved by grace!" We may find the mystery of God to be confusing and frustrating when we encounter questions and circumstances that don't make sense. And yet our greatest blessing and the greatest story God has written is found in the mystery of the gospel.

REMEMBER THESE KEY THOUGHTS FROM THIS WEEK'S STUDY:

- The mystery of God is embedded in His creation and revealed in Christ.
- God's thoughts are higher than our thoughts and His ways are higher than our ways. That's what makes Him God.
- The mystery of God should lead us to worship.

God's mystery is closely tied to His holiness—the idea that God is not simply a bigger, better version of us. He is in a category entirely to Himself. Next week, we will explore God's holy, transcendent nature.

PURSUING GOD

NEPHILIM, MOSQUITOES, THE CROSS, AND OTHER UNSOLVED MYSTERIES

"My thoughts are nothing like your thoughts," says the LORD. "And my ways are far beyond anything you could imagine. For just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so my ways are higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts." (Isaiah 55:8-9, NLT)

Personally, I've got tons of questions for God when I get to heaven. What the heck were the nephilim? Did You really create in just 6 days or did You do it over billions of years; and if so then how did all of the symbiotic relationships in nature develop? What happened to the 10 lost tribes of Israel? Why did You create mosquitoes and call them "good"?

What do you wish you understood better?

We might say, "God works in mysterious ways," but that is often just a polite way of asking, "Why does God do stuff that doesn't make sense?" There are so many things I would do differently. I would have never sent my son wrapped in the vulnerable skin of a baby and left him in the hands of a fallen people who had repeatedly proven their skillfulness at messing things up. And I sure wouldn't have left and entrusted the message of the kingdom to a bunch of people who denied it only 40 days earlier.

Let's think about the miracles for a moment. Imagine: Animals willingly and instinctually moved toward a big boat and climbed aboard. Huge walls crashed to the ground at the sound of a march, a shout, and a blast of the trumpet. A shepherd boy with no military training killed a giant. A virgin gave birth. And without question, the great mystery of our faith: Christ revealed in a human body and His death atonement for our sins. How does this happen?

For centuries, theologians have offered up theories and metaphors to explain how it works. Scriptures have been exegeted and systematic theologies configured to explain it. But in the end, we are left with the unsettling realization that "systematic theology" doesn't cover everything. We can't quite grasp the shocking and unorthodox mystery of His ways. All we really know is that the blood of life pumped through Christ's beat-less heart.

How has Jesus' work on the cross changed your perception and understanding of God?

PURSUING GOD

THE GOSPEL OF FAIRY TALES

"Once upon a time ..." This phrase is the door into a land of mysteries. Throughout history we have embraced stories that teach us about a world beyond what we experience everyday and somehow usher us into that other world. In a sense, they tell us that other world is not too far off or too difficult to get to. The tales begin in an everyday way in an everyday place. Lonely Cinderella is doing her chores, Dorothy is still in Kansas, Lucy is playing an ordinary game of hide-and-seek on a boring summer afternoon. The fairy tale world invades the normal world as if to tell us to enter the extraordinary through the ordinary. The stories themselves don't feel the need to explain the transposing of places. The leap from one world to the next isn't seen as a leap at all but simply the next step on a casual afternoon walk.

The new world is unrecognizably strange. Is it safe? Is it dangerous? And almost as soon as the characters enter, they find a quest more important than anything they've ever known. They are uncomfortably ill-equipped; everything hinges on their ability to complete the impossible. Nothing is what it seems or appears to be. Trees come alive and witches look like the Fairy Godmother. Everything is in disguise, and somehow the hero of the story learns to distinguish truth from the tricks and tune into the small whisper that they've known all along. Like an artist, the story writer knows that the process is where the real adventure is found. The process is dangerous with near misses and close calls. It's costly, transformative, and necessary; and at the end, everything is revealed for what it really is.

Most of all, we love fairy tales because a great but seemingly insignificant good conquers the unconquerable evil. It is a world where terrible and wonderful and impossible things happen. The under-glorified part of the story is the cost at which victory is achieved. All great tales must have an element of the tragic. But before we can say "The End," the wicked get what they deserve, deception is brought into the light, the good rise to the occasion and pass the test into greatness. Everyone becomes known by their true name, even if that means they get a new name.

The Book of Ecclesiastes declares that God has planted eternity in our hearts. That's why we love these stories. The mystery of something wonderful we can't quite put our finger on is as near to us and as real as our heartbeat.

This is the mystery of the gospel: somehow, against all odds, there is victory. And in this life we find ourselves in the middle of a story that has not yet ended.

Reflect on a time when God invaded the reality of your life and completely turned your reality upside down. How did that experience change you?

PURSUING GOD

THE UPSIDE-DOWN KINGDOM

The upside-down kingdom is like a homeless man who leads a radical revolution in a powerful city where he overthrows the rich by creating a currency based on the everyday life of the poor.

The Beatitudes tell us that Christ's kingdom values are profoundly backwards, inside out, upside down. They are totally opposite to the values of the world. The world rewards power, comfort, recognition, success, and security.

Remember the handwriting on the wall? It is another kingdom mystery. Daniel tells us that the message written on the wall is "MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN." It meant the king had sought temporary satisfaction and his time was over. The writing on the wall is for the kingdom of the world: if you are living for yourself, then you are like King Belshazzar and your kingdom will dissolve. Invest in what is lasting.

When Christ comes on the scene, He preaches a radical kingdom that is fundamentally different from the world. The meek inherit the earth. The poor are actually the rich ones. To gain your life you must lose it. To be first you must become a slave. The kingdom of God must be entered as a child.

Jesus awakens our minds to the mystery of the kingdom of God. The climax of Christ's message leaves Him hanging on a cross, dying for a world that denied Him. In the life He lived, the Person He was, and what He accomplished, Christ is the revealer of mysteries and He is the mystery revealed.

The gospel is often called the "great reversal" because it is so mysterious and contradictory to our normal definition of good news. Part of the good news is that you must die to yourself, take up your cross, and follow. The Beatitudes give us the beautiful insight that earthly rewards can be replaced with heavenly ones. We all have the opportunity to make that exchange.

We must live our lives upside down, and there are far more mysteries in this kingdom yet to comprehend: How does the Trinity work? What is the mystery behind the Lord's Supper? C.S. Lewis said, "The command, after all, was 'Take and eat,' not, 'Take and understand.'" Some things will never be understood on this side of heaven.

There can be certainty in the mystery—it's called faith.

Read Matthew 5:1-11. Which of these statements is most challenging to you right now? Write out a prayer asking God to help you look more like Christ by living a life wrapped in the mystery of the upside-down kingdom.