

The Mystery of Christ

Ephesians 3:1-7 | Bryce Beale | November 26, 2017

The demand God makes of you is trust.

Yes, he makes other demands as well; but these demands are simply trust dressed up in different clothing.

God's voice, preserved in Scripture, reaches the ear of the man imprisoned in bitterness, the man who holds a grudge with both fists clenched round it like iron; and that voice says, "Love your enemies. Drop your grudge. Leave your prison. Obey me." But what is this command, "Obey me"? Remove its mask, and you will find a familiar face—it is, "Trust me."

"Never avenge yourselves," we read in Romans, "but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.'"¹ The question of your obedience is a question of your confidence in God, that he will avenge, so that you do not have to. If you do not trust God, that he will avenge in the time and manner best, then you will disobey, but that disobedience will be more than disobedience—it will be mistrust. For "Obey me" is always a cover for "Trust me." And this trust is what God demands of the world.

Consider another demand of Scripture.

Jesus plants his foot beside the Sea of Galilee, and his ancient call comes travelling over the water to you: "Follow me." He explains what he means by follow: "any one of you," he says, "who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple."² To follow Christ is to count all else as loss, to allow nothing and no one else to compete with him; it is to remove him from the colosseum of your heart in which he competes for your affections, to demolish that structure, and to build in its place an uncontested throne for him to sit upon.

But isn't this a hard demand, this "Follow me"? It would be, but notice that when our Savior says the words, he offers his hand. And if you are observant, you will hear what lies underneath his statement—he says, "Follow me," and he means, "Trust me." You will lose your hold on every other security if you follow Christ; how will you live, so uncertain what following Christ will cost you? You will live by faith, by a trust that all you leave behind cannot protect you so well as him whom you follow. This is the trust that Christ demands of you.

¹ Romans 12:19 (ESV).

² Luke 14:33.

Abraham wanders out from the land of Ur, not knowing where he goes, but knowing who goes before him; Moses leaves behind the comforts of Egypt, following Jehovah as though he could see him who is unseen. God did not demand that Abraham know where he was going; he only demanded that he trust and go. He did not demand that Moses know how to lead a nation, he only demanded that he trust and lead.

And he demands no more of you than he required of them: "Trust me."

If we choose to trust and follow, we will one day find that our pathway ends. The light that has directed our steps runs ahead of us, and we are left as though alone on the edge of a dark cliff. Before us the mystery of death looms. Behind us are the friends and experiences of our life, all that we are familiar with, but we cannot go back to them; we hear them far behind us, but they cannot reach us here. Alone, we face the chasm.

And that voice which all our lives said, "Obey me," and "Follow me," does not seem to speak so loudly as before. But on the wind is carried a still, small voice, and we can faintly make it out: "Don't be afraid; trust me." We are not required to understand the darkness, or to find a way around it. We are asked to jump into the darkness, trusting that Christ will catch us.

This trust is the one demand God makes of the world. It is the one demand God makes of you.

And it is a demand we consider in our text today, in Ephesians chapter 3. Paul turns aside from his line of thought in order to give us reason to trust that what he writes is not invented, is not fairy tale or religious fable, but is from God. He is pleading that we believe not only what he writes, but by extension, all of Scripture, as being the word of God. If he is wrong, we have nothing to trust in, no line of communication with the Creator of heaven and earth. But if he is right, we have found the voice that leads us, and our trust has found a rock on which to stand.

EPHESIANS 3:1-7

¹ For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles— ² assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you, ³ how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly. ⁴ When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, ⁵ 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. ⁶ 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.

⁷ Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of his power.

Paul has been writing about the gospel. In the first half of the chapter before, he claimed that individuals dead in sin can become alive to God because of the death and resurrection of Christ; in the second half of that chapter, he claimed that groups of people, Jews and non-Jews, alive to God can become united with each other because of the death and resurrection of Christ.

He begins chapter 3 as though he were going to continue this theme of the gospel, with the words "For this reason." But then he reaches the end of that verse: "For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles." He has just claimed that these Gentiles, these non-Jews, are part of the people of God—that is not surprising to us (after all, we are the Gentiles, of course we're included!) but it was a shock to many of the early Jewish Christians. And we imagine that Paul imagines someone at this point thinking, "You are making some big claims about matters that cannot be seen with the eye. Why should we believe you?"

And that brings us to a much larger question—namely, why should any of us believe anything written in this book? Why should we trust that these words are the words of God? And what I wish to argue today is that this question of the Bible's validity stands or falls with Paul.

If Paul, this obscure prisoner of the Roman empire two thousand years ago, is in this passage telling the truth, then this book is God's communication to us, and we ought to rest all our hopes in it. For Paul's writings assume that almost all the rest of Scripture is Scripture; he believed that the Old Testament came from God, he quoted Jesus from the gospels, and his teachings align with all else that Scripture teaches.

If Paul is telling the truth, then our friends who have fallen asleep are in bliss before the throne of Christ, and our sacrifices in the cause of Christ are not born of a fool's hope.

Trust is the one thing God requires of us; so then, can we trust that he speaks to us in the Scriptures? That is our question, and it is that question that Paul aims to resolve in this passage.

From God

And he does so first by pointing to the origin of his message.

See verses 2 and 3: "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..."

The mystery

See the word Paul chooses for his message: “mystery.”

By this word he means not something that cannot be known, but something that was not known but now is. He says as much in verses 4 and 5: “When you read this [what he had written before, probably], 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 made revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.”

What was this mystery, once hidden in God but now revealed to mankind? Verse 6 answers: “This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.” Many ages prior God had promised that through Abraham’s offspring all the nations would be blessed—that is no new message. But *how* the nations would be blessed—not by becoming Jews themselves, but instead by the work of Christ removing all barriers to their free, Gentile access to God—that was new. That was the mystery.

There is something important about this word “mystery,” and Paul himself suggests it in verse 3: “how the mystery was made known to me *by revelation*.”³ If a mystery is something once hidden that is now revealed, then that something cannot be known without someone revealing it. And in this sense, though Paul is speaking of one particular mystery—this inclusion of Gentiles in God’s people—we may rightly say that all of Scripture is a “mystery.”

If you inhabited a world without Bibles, would you one day in your private musings say to yourself, “You know, I don’t know why but I just feel like the being that created this world did so in six days. Five and seven do not feel right—six does.” Or would you ever guess, “I bet we have inherited our broken natures from whoever the very first man was; and he probably broke that nature by eating fruit.” Or again, “I imagine that if this mess of a world is ever to be fixed, it will involve an ancient Roman method of execution, and will happen in the eastern Mediterranean.”

There are many facts which God has hidden in his created world—in trees and under rocks—and these we may find by a close study of the universe. But lift a thousand rocks and you will not find underneath one of them the mysteries revealed only in Scripture. By nature, by what we term general revelation, men may know there is a god, and that he is strong; but what more can we know about him? Is he kind, or is he cruel? Is he here, or is he absent? Is he happy with us, or angry, or indifferent? Is he a force? Is he a spirit? You cannot guess these things—

³ Emphasis mine.

the world has tried, and you can see by our many religions that we have all made quite different and contradictory guesses.

If we are truly to know God, it must be by more than what we find in nature or in ourselves. He is a mystery, and we cannot know him unless he reveals himself to us by special revelation.

God wants us to know him

It is at precisely this point Paul steps in and says, “He has.”

Notice what Paul says of the mystery that he himself proclaimed—it was a message entrusted to him as, in verse 2, “the stewardship of God’s grace that was given to me for you.” He nearly repeats himself in verse 7: “Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God’s grace, which was given me by the working of his power.”

This does not prove your Bible, but it does prepare the way for trust. For Paul proclaims what we already suspect, namely, that God wants us to know him. God, says Paul, gave him this message freely, that he might freely proclaim it to mankind. As the salvation which it offers is of grace, so the message is entrusted to Paul by the same grace. The apostle did not climb Mt. Olympus or achieve Nirvana or otherwise coerce the Almighty to unravel his mysteries; God wanted to reveal himself, and by his grace he took the initiative in so doing, entrusting to Paul a message.

We can never have confidence in the Bible as a book about God until we believe it to be a book from God. Many men have compiled opinions about the supreme author of life; these opinions will always be unsatisfying. What we need is no book by man about God, but a book by God about God and man. We need a message from heaven.

Believer, your confidence in the word of God begins here—that God wants you to hear his word. If he does not, then all man’s straining after God is a futile exercise, and we have no reason to be here this morning. But if he does, then our faith is only left with the question, “How does God get his message to us?”

Through people

Paul addresses this question. God may want to reveal himself to us, but how does he do it? We do not hear him speaking from the sky.

Messengers

The answer is that God gets his message to us in the way almost everyone else gets their message to us: through messengers.

See again verses 4 and 5: “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.”

Paul speaks of his own stewardship because he counts himself among the apostles here spoken of, the men of the first century specifically appointed by Christ to carry God’s gospel to mankind. And with them are the New Testament prophets, those persons appointed by God to receive revelation from God and convey it to others in the early church, since there were not enough apostles to do so and Scripture was not yet complete and available. Together, these apostles and prophets were the messengers of God.

But we do not have apostles and prophets in the same way today, who take special revelation from God and give it to us. So how can we, two thousand years removed, know the mysteries God would have us know? See verse 3 onward: “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...”⁴

We have that revelation inscripturated, written down; and to know it, we read what apostles and prophets, or their companions, have written. We read the words of the messengers.

But the claim of Scripture goes even further—for we might question the memory of these apostles. If they made a mistake in what they wrote, our faith is shipwrecked. How can we completely trust that the message of God filtered through human messengers reaches us untarnished?

The end of verse 5 answers: “it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets *by the Spirit*.”⁵ Scripture claims its origin in God, but also claims its preservation in him. The God who gave the message did so through his Spirit, and that Spirit guided the author’s of Scripture so that they accurately conveyed his message. This follows logically from the fact that God wants to communicate with us—if he wants to do so, he must not only give the information but make sure it reaches us intact.

But we need not rely on logic alone, for the apostle Peter explains the process himself. He speaks of Old Testament prophets, but the same applies to the writers of the New: “no prophecy,” he writes, “was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.”⁶ All Scripture, therefore, is breathed out by God, inspired by the Spirit of God.

⁴ Emphasis mine.

⁵ Emphasis mine.

⁶ 2 Peter 1:21.

So then, we have established that what we find in the Bible is mystery, and that if we are to know it, the mystery must be revealed. We have also found that God wants to reveal the mystery to us. And now we find *how* he chose to reveal the mystery to us—by revealing it to select men and guiding them, by his Spirit, to write it down without error. And so we have Bibles.

Why not speak?

You may find fault with this method. “Why,” you ask, “if God wants to speak to us, doesn’t he just speak to us in audible language. Wouldn’t that settle all our doubts? Why speak to us through the writings of other men?”

I do not pretend to know the hidden counsels of God that he has not revealed; but I think from what he has we can guess at the answer.

God speaks to us this way because what he most wants from us is trust. In Romans 8 Paul writes, “hope that is seen is not hope.”⁷ The same applies to faith—one day our faith will be sight, but it is not sight yet, otherwise it would not be faith. And what God wants from us is faith.

Think of Thomas falling before his resurrected Lord; he had doubted that the Savior rose, even though the other apostles told him so. He would not take their word for it. So Jesus kindly showed himself to Thomas’ eyes, and offered himself to Thomas’ touch; but afterward the Savior made this interesting comment: “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”⁸

Those who believe without seeing—or, in our case, those who believe without hearing an audible voice from heaven—are blessed. Why? Because trust is what God demands from the world, and is what God blesses.

Think of Job, crushed by the temptations of the devil. And God allowed it. And when Job asked for an audible answer for his suffering, heaven was long silent. Why? Because every minute that Job refused to blaspheme his God, he showed by his trust, though a weak and wavering trust, that God is trustworthy. His trust, the one thing God wanted of him, gave God glory, showed that God is worth trusting even apart from sight or sound.

And every minute the Christian, even with a weak and wavering faith, clings desperately to the words of God in Scripture, he brings glory to the giver of those words.

⁷ V. 24.

⁸ John 20:29.

In power

But nothing we have said so far can convince the skeptic; nothing we have said proves the truth of the Bible. We find clues toward belief, but no proof.

After all, don't Muslims claim the same for their Quran? Don't they say it came from heaven through a messenger to mankind? Don't Mormons say the same about their extrabiblical books?

This leads us to our final point, and Paul's final point in our passage.

God may want to communicate to us, and we imagine from this fact that he would do so. But the final question is this: Many have claimed to be the mouthpiece of God—how do we know which book contains his words, and which are made up? The Bible is certainly a likely choice for God's communication to man; but so is the Quran. We need more than likelihood; we need some certainty for our trust to stand on.

See how Paul ends our passage, in verse 7: "Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me *by the working of his power.*"⁹

At first we are surprised to see Paul place God's power here. But it is no random addition; it is vital. This power which attends the word of God is our confidence, is the ground of our trust.

This power, by which God gave his message to Paul, is the same power that daily attends that message. It is the power that confirms it, and convinces us of it. Without this power, we would be left with guesses and probabilities; with this power we can die for the faith.

If you are in Christ and can remember your honeymoon in him when you first believed, you will know what I mean by the power of God. You were much of your life content with a nominal or no faith in God. But then God reached out his mighty arm. He touched your heart and his word, the gospel, this mystery, suddenly opened before you, and it was as though ten thousand sunrises occurred together before the eyes of your newborn faith. A veil was lifted from your heart and you saw the glory of God, there in the pages of these ancient writers.

You read or heard of Christ upon the cross, the Son of God with head bowed down bearing upon himself the fuming wine of God's wrath, poured from heaven's chalice. The same scene for so many years looked like mere sentimentality, looked cheap, looked fake; but then the Spirit of God broke into your life in power, and now you gaze through tears,

⁹ Emphasis mine.

as though before your eyes Jesus Christ is publicly portrayed as crucified.

This is the self-attesting witness of the Scriptures, carried to our hearts by the power of the Holy Spirit, and it is the rock on which our trust stands. There are innumerable evidences for the truth of Scripture found in history and archeology and science and philosophy. But none of these will ever be enough—if they were, there would be no need for trust. But as it is, God has given us enough clues to make faith reasonable and right, and kept back enough evidence to make faith faith. God has chosen to reveal his truth to infants, and to give them a complete confidence by the witness of his Spirit within them, to show that he is so trustworthy that he can be trusted, even when he cannot be seen or heard.

And this is more than a passing fanaticism, for this faith matures over time and produces in the life of him or her who bears it a real holiness. It should be the first concern of all peace-loving nations to make their citizens good, and yet this is the one thing that legislation can never do. We see the sexual harassment prominent in high places now coming to the surface, and some have asked, “How do we fix this?” You cannot educate the evil out of society—no, there is only one book that can purge the heart, and I might produce a million biographies to prove it, stories of barbarians transformed into clothed and civilized neighbors by exposure to this mystery, this message. All this because they trusted the God who spoke to them through this book.

Conclusion

I must conclude, and I do so with the admission that I cannot prove to you this book by any scientific method—but which of life’s great questions can be answered by that method anyways?

Love eludes the microscope, and so does friendship and meaning. Yet who will deny any of these three?

My confidence in proclaiming to you the message of life, the gospel of God, is that I serve as no more than an ambassador, a messenger of the messengers of God. It is as though God makes his appeal through me as I plead with you, “Be reconciled to God through the gospel!”

Jesus gave no rational basis for his belief and claim, not as we would demand of him today, but instead he said, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.”¹⁰

¹⁰ John 10:27.

The Spirit of God who has given us his message will enforce that message in the heart of everyone who believes. He is the author of trust.

And so, if you desire to hear the voice of God and to know him, he does not demand of you that you be smart and able to analyze archaic evidence better than others. He does not demand that you be rich enough to leave your place of work and devote yourself entirely to questions of philosophy. He does not demand that you be cleverer than others, or that you be of a sound enough mind to hold the truth without any doubts.

He demands of you no work at all. Rather, he looks at you from his cross, where he accomplished all the work necessary, and extending his hand he says, "Trust me."