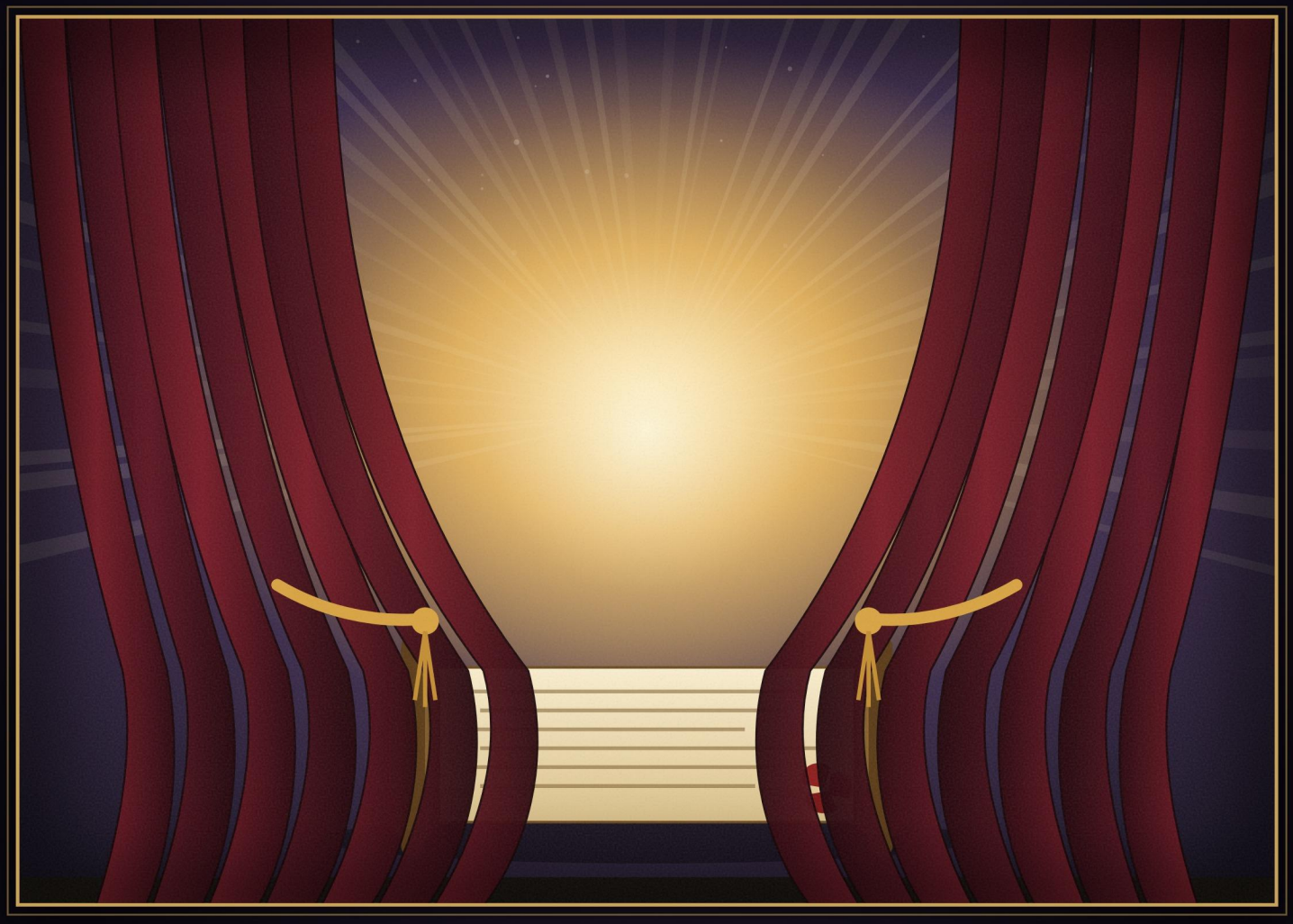
THE SECRET THINGS

Mysteries of the Bible,
Hidden and Revealed



What God has hidden belongs to Him.
What He has revealed belongs to us.

ANDREW DOMINGUEZ

TRINFINITY
Enterprises

The Secret Things

Mysteries of the Bible, Hidden and Revealed

Andrew Dominguez

The Secret Things: Mysteries of the Bible, Hidden and Revealed

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A Note on the Bible Translation Used in This Book

My preferred Bible for personal study, teaching, and research is the Steadfast Literal Bible (SLB). I chose it because it is a word-for-word translation in today's language, built on the ancient Scripture sources: the Hebrew and Aramaic of the Old Testament and the Greek of the New Testament. I prepared the SLB myself, and the Scripture in this book is taken from it.

Where a literal phrase would mislead an English reader, the SLB gives the writer's meaning in plain words. Words added for sense are set in bold italics so you can see what is in the original and what is not.

The complete Steadfast Literal Bible is free to read, search, download, and print at trinfinityenterprises.com/slb. If you want to check a verse in its full setting or read the translation's preface and principles, that is the place to go.

Above all, my desire is not to promote one translation over another, but to faithfully teach the Word of God, encourage careful examination of the Scriptures, and help readers grow in their knowledge, understanding, and relationship with the Lord.

May every page of this book direct attention not to the translation itself, but to the truth of God's Word and the One whom it reveals.

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Before You Begin

> *The hidden **things belong** to the LORD our God, and the revealed **things belong** to us and to our sons forever, to do all the words of this law.*
>
> Deuteronomy 29:29 (SLB)

I love a good mystery. Most people do. Tell a room full of grown adults that the Bible mentions giants, a man who never died, a lost box of gold that once sat between the cherubim, and a woman who called up a dead prophet, and you'll have their attention for the rest of the night. Somebody will always ask, "Is that really in there?" It is. All of it.

I have led many Bible study groups and translated the Steadfast Literal Bible. People are often more curious about what Scripture only hints at than about the commands right in front of them. I wrote this book to look at the Bible's mysteries without getting lost in guesswork. When we separate what God kept to Himself from what He put on the page, our faith gets steadier.

But I've also noticed something over the years. When most people talk about the mysteries of the Bible, they skip right past the way the Bible itself uses the word. They go straight to the puzzles. The puzzles are fun, and we'll get to every one of them. But if we only chase puzzles, we miss the best part.

Two Kinds of Mysteries

When we say "mystery" today, we usually mean something nobody can figure out, like a crime with no suspect or a noise in the attic at two in the morning. That's not quite what the New Testament means. The Greek word is *mysterion*. In the New Testament it nearly always means a truth God kept hidden in earlier ages and has now made known. It isn't a secret you solve. It's a secret God tells.

Paul says it plainly. The mystery was "kept secret in eternal times, but now made manifest" (Romans 16:25-26). It "has been hidden from the ages and from the generations, but now was made manifest to His saints" (Colossians 1:26). So a Bible mystery, in Paul's sense, is something you could never have worked out on your own, but God has opened it up for anyone who will read.

The other kind of mystery is the kind we usually think of: things the Bible mentions and doesn't fully explain. Who were the Nephilim? Where is the Ark of the Covenant? Who was Melchizedek? What did Paul mean by being baptized for the dead? These are real questions, and faithful Bible teachers have argued over some of them for two thousand years.

Moses gave us the verse that holds both kinds together, and it's the verse at the top of this page. The hidden things belong to the LORD our God. The revealed things belong to us. Many Bibles say "the secret things," which is where the title of this book comes from. The Hebrew word means something concealed, something put out of sight. Some things God has chosen to keep to Himself, at least for now. Other things He has told us, and those are ours to know and to live by.

That's why this book has two parts.

- **Part One: Mysteries Revealed.** We walk through the places where the New Testament uses the word "mystery" for something God has now made known: the kingdom, Israel, the church, Christ in you, the Rapture, the man of lawlessness, godliness, and the closing mysteries of Revelation. These are not puzzles. They're gifts.
- **Part Two: Mysteries Still Hidden.** We take the hard questions in the order they appear in the Bible, from the Garden of Eden to the number of the beast. For each one, I'll show you what we know for certain, the main views good Bible teachers hold, and where Scripture simply doesn't say.

The book closes with a chapter on what I call mysteries that are not: popular claims about Bible codes, ancient astronauts, and giant skeletons that don't hold up when you check them.

How Each Chapter Works

In Part One, each chapter shows you what was hidden, how God revealed it, and what it means for your life today.

In Part Two, each chapter follows the same pattern so you can find things quickly when you come back later.

- **The Passage.** We start with the Bible text itself. Read it slowly. Most mistakes about Bible mysteries start with people who never read the verses carefully.
- **The Question.** What exactly is the puzzle?
- **What We Know for Certain.** Before we guess about anything, we nail down what the Bible plainly says.
- **The Main Views.** I lay out the views held by Bible-believing teachers, with their best reasons, as fairly as I can.
- **Where Scripture Is Silent.** I tell you plainly what the Bible does not say, so you know where the solid ground ends.
- **Where I Land.** Where I hold a view, I tell you what it is and why. Where I don't think the Bible settles it, I say so.
- **Study Questions.** For your own time with God or for a small group.

About the Outside Sources

I bring in some sources that are not Scripture: the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, who wrote in the first century; the Dead Sea Scrolls; the Book of Enoch, which Jude quotes; early Christian writers; and a few archaeological finds. I use them as history. They tell us what people believed and what has been found. They are not God's Word, and I'll never treat them as if they were. When I quote one of them, I name the work and the place in it, and I use a public-domain translation so you can look it up yourself.

I don't use stories that come from unnamed sources, or "experts say" claims nobody can trace. If I can't show you where something comes from, it isn't in this book.

Where I Stand and Where I Don't

I'll tell you a few things up front so nobody is surprised.

I believe the Bible is God's Word, true in everything it teaches. When it says something happened, I believe it happened. That doesn't mean every passage is easy, and it doesn't mean I have every answer.

Some of the questions in this book I can answer with confidence. Others I can't, and I'd rather tell you that honestly than pretend.

On the end times, I hold the view I've taught in my other studies: Jesus will catch His church away to be with Him before the seven-year Tribulation, then return visibly to the earth at the end of it to reign. Where that view touches a mystery in this book, I'll say so, and I'll show you how other good teachers see it.

On the questions where Bible-believing Christians disagree and the text doesn't settle it, I lay out the views and let you weigh them. I don't call anyone names. People who love Jesus and believe every word of the Bible have landed in different places on the Nephilim, the spirits in prison, and the witch of Endor. That's fine. None of those questions is a matter of salvation.

How to Read This Book

Read Part One first if you can. It lays the foundation for everything else, because once you see how much God has revealed, the things He hasn't revealed don't feel so unsettling. After that, Part Two works as a reference. If somebody at work asks you about the Nephilim or the Ark of the Covenant, you can turn to that chapter and find the verses, the views, and the history in one place.

If you lead a group, take one chapter a week. Every chapter ends with study questions. In the back you'll find a table of every place the New Testament uses the word "mystery," a summary table of the hidden mysteries and where I land on each, a glossary, a list of sources, and a Scripture index.

And please read with your Bible open. Don't take my word for any of this. Luke said the Bereans were noble because they checked even the apostle Paul against the Scriptures (Acts 17:11). Check me the same way.

Part One: Mysteries Revealed

Chapter 1: What the Bible Means by “Mystery”

> *But there is a God in the heavens **who** reveals mysteries, and He has made known to King Nebuchadnezzar what will be in the latter part of the days. Your dream and the visions of your head on your bed, this **is** it*
>
> Daniel 2:28 (SLB)

Picture a king who can’t sleep. Nebuchadnezzar, the most powerful man on earth in his day, has a dream that shakes him so badly he calls in every wise man in Babylon. Then he does something no king had ever asked. He won’t tell them the dream. They have to tell him what he dreamed and then explain it. If they can’t, they die.

The wise men say what anyone would say. “No man on earth can do that.” They’re right. No man can. But a young Jewish captive named Daniel asks for time, gathers his three friends to pray, and that night God shows him the dream and its meaning.

> *Then the mystery was revealed to Daniel in the vision of the night. Then Daniel blessed the God of the heavens.* (Daniel 2:19)

When Daniel stands before the king, he makes sure the king knows who gets the credit. It isn’t Daniel’s wisdom. It’s that “there is a God in the heavens who reveals mysteries.” By the end of the chapter, Nebuchadnezzar himself is calling Daniel’s God “a revealer of mysteries” (Daniel 2:47).

That story is the best place to start this book, because it shows us what a mystery is in the Bible. It’s something no human being could figure out. Not with brains, not with study, not with research. If anybody is going to know it, God has to tell them.

The Word Itself

The Old Testament word Daniel uses is Aramaic, *raz*, meaning a secret. When the Old Testament was translated into Greek a couple of centuries before Jesus, the translators used the Greek word *mysterion*. That’s the word the New Testament picks up, and it’s where we get our English word “mystery.”

In the Greek world, *mysterion* was often used for the secret rites of pagan religions, the so-called mystery cults. You had to be initiated, and once you were in, you kept your mouth shut. The word itself seems to come from a root meaning to close the mouth. The secret was for insiders only.

The New Testament takes that word and turns it upside down. In the Bible, the mystery is not kept quiet for a select few. It’s announced. Paul calls the mystery something “kept secret in eternal times, but now made manifest” and “made known to all the Gentiles” (Romans 16:25-26). It was hidden. Now it’s public. Anybody who wants to know it can.

> *Now to Him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to **the** revelation of **the** mystery kept secret in eternal times, but now made*

> *manifest, and through prophetic Scriptures, according to **the** commandment of the eternal God, made known to all the Gentiles for obedience of faith* (Romans 16:25-26)

The word appears 27 times in the New Testament. You'll find every one of them in a table at the back of this book. Jesus uses it in one teaching on the parables, which Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record. Paul uses it 20 times. John uses it four times in Revelation. In almost every case, it points to something God planned long ago, kept out of sight for a time, and has now brought into the open.

Hidden Wisdom, Now Revealed

Paul explains this most fully in his first letter to Corinth. The Corinthians were impressed by clever speakers and big ideas. Paul tells them the gospel is a different kind of wisdom altogether.

> *But we speak **the** wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden **wisdom**, which God predestined before the ages for our glory* (1 Corinthians 2:7)

Notice three things. First, God planned this wisdom "before the ages." It wasn't an afterthought. Second, it was hidden. The prophets saw pieces of it, but not the whole. Third, it was planned "for our glory." God kept this secret for our good.

Then Paul quotes Isaiah and adds a line that ought to make every believer stop and say thank you.

> *But just as it has been written, "Things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard, and which have not come up into **the** heart of man, things which God has prepared for those who love Him." But God revealed **them** to us through His Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God.* (1 Corinthians 2:9-10)

People often quote the first half of that passage at funerals, as if it's only about heaven. Heaven is part of it. But read the next line. "God revealed them to us through His Spirit." The things no eye had seen are things God has now shown His people by His Spirit, through the Scriptures. That's the heart of a Bible mystery.

Why Would God Hide Anything?

You might ask, "If God wanted us to know these things, why didn't He just say so from the beginning?" It's a fair question. The Bible gives us a few answers.

- **God reveals things in His own time.** Paul says the mystery was hidden "from the ages and from the generations" (Colossians 1:26). There's a timetable. Some things couldn't be fully understood until Jesus came, died, and rose again. You can't explain a finished house to someone who's only seen the foundation.
- **God's glory is in it.** Solomon wrote, "The glory of God is to conceal a matter, and the glory of kings is to search out a matter" (Proverbs 25:2). God isn't playing games. He's inviting us to seek. Some of the richest things in Scripture are found by those who dig.
- **Some things belong to God alone.** Moses says the hidden things belong to the LORD (Deuteronomy 29:29). We're creatures. He's the Creator. There will always be things He knows and we don't, and that's as it should be.

- **Hearts matter.** Jesus told His disciples that the mysteries of the kingdom were given to them but not to the crowds who had already hardened their hearts (Matthew 13:11). We'll look at that closely in the next chapter. God reveals truth to people who want it.

Stewards of the Mysteries

Paul described himself and the other apostles as "stewards of the mysteries of God" (1 Corinthians 4:1). A steward was a household manager. He didn't own the house or the goods. He looked after them for the master and handed them out as the master directed.

That's a good picture for every teacher of the Bible, including me. I don't own these truths. I didn't make them up, and I don't get to change them. My job is to hand out faithfully what God has already given. That's why this book quotes so much Scripture. My opinion is worth very little. What God has said is worth everything.

It's also a warning. Anyone who claims to have a secret truth that the rest of us don't, some hidden message only he can see, is turning the Bible's idea of mystery back into a pagan one. In Scripture, the mystery has been revealed to the whole church. It's in the Book. You don't need a guru to get it.

What God Has Not Told Us

Not everything has been revealed. Moses was clear that the hidden things still belong to God. Jesus told His disciples that no one knows the day or hour of His return (Matthew 24:36). Paul said that right now we see "through a mirror in an enigma," and only later will we know fully (1 Corinthians 13:12).

So in this book we'll be careful to keep two lists. One list is what God has revealed. We can hold that firmly and build our lives on it. The other list is what God has not revealed. We can wonder about it, study it, and talk it over, but we shouldn't build doctrine on guesses, and we shouldn't fight with other believers over them.

Most trouble in the church over Bible mysteries comes from mixing up those two lists. Some people take what God has clearly said and treat it as open for debate. Others take what God has left unsaid and treat their own guess as gospel truth. Both are mistakes. Deuteronomy 29:29 sorts them out.

What This Means for You

If you belong to Jesus, you've been let in on the greatest secret in history. Prophets and righteous men longed to see what you can read in an afternoon (Matthew 13:17). God planned it before the ages, kept it hidden through thousands of years, and then opened it up in Christ for anyone who will believe.

That should do two things in us. It should make us grateful, because we didn't earn this knowledge or figure it out. God told us. And it should make us humble about the things He hasn't told us. If He kept some things back, He had good reasons, and He can be trusted with them.

Study Questions

1. Before reading this chapter, what came to mind when you heard the phrase "mysteries of the Bible"?

2. How is the Bible's use of the word "mystery" different from the way we use it today?

3. Read Daniel 2:27-28. Why do you think Daniel was so careful to give God the credit?

4. Paul calls the apostles "stewards of the mysteries of God." What does a good steward do, and how does that apply to anyone who teaches the Bible?

5. Deuteronomy 29:29 divides things into what God has hidden and what He has revealed. Can you think of a time you, or someone you know, mixed up those two lists?

6. What is one truth God has revealed in His Word that you are grateful you know?

Chapter 2: The Mysteries of the Kingdom

> *And answering, He said to them, "Because to you it has been given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of the heavens, but to them it has not been given."*
>
> Matthew 13:11 (SLB)

Matthew 13 is a turning point in Jesus' ministry. Up to this point, He had been teaching plainly, healing the sick, and announcing that the kingdom of heaven was near. Crowds followed Him everywhere. But in chapter 12 the religious leaders made up their minds. They saw Him cast out a demon and said He did it by the power of Satan (Matthew 12:24). It was a deliberate, hardened rejection of the plain work of God's Spirit. We'll look at that moment again when we get to the unpardonable sin in Chapter 26.

Then, the same day, Jesus sat in a boat and began to teach in parables. His disciples noticed the change right away and asked Him why. His answer is the first time the word "mystery" appears in the New Testament.

> *And answering, He said to them, "Because to you it has been given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of the heavens, but to them it has not been given."* (Matthew 13:11)

Why Parables?

We usually think of parables as simple stories that make things easy to understand, like a preacher's illustration. And for people who want to understand, they are. But Jesus says here that parables also do something else. They hide truth from people who don't want it.

Jesus quotes Isaiah 6, where God tells the prophet that the people will hear and not understand, see and not perceive, because their hearts have grown dull (Matthew 13:14-15). The parables reveal and conceal at the same time. To a hungry heart, a story about seed and soil opens a door. To a hard heart, it's just a farming story.

That's a sobering thought. The same words can bless one listener and harden another. What made the difference wasn't how smart the listeners were. It was whether they wanted the truth. The disciples were confused plenty of times, but they kept coming back to Jesus and asking, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field" (Matthew 13:36). That's the kind of heart God reveals Himself to.

Matthew also tells us that Jesus' use of parables fulfilled Psalm 78.

> *All these things Jesus spoke to the crowds in parables, and without a parable He was not speaking to them, so that what was spoken through the prophet might be fulfilled, saying, "I will open My mouth in parables; I will utter things hidden from **the** foundation of **the** world."* (Matthew 13:34-35)

"Things hidden from the foundation of the world." That's mystery language. In these parables, Jesus is pulling back a curtain on something God planned from the beginning but had never shown before.

What Was New About the Kingdom?

The Jews of Jesus' day already knew about the kingdom of God. The prophets had promised it. Daniel saw a kingdom set up by the God of heaven that would crush every other kingdom and stand forever (Daniel 2:44). Isaiah saw the wolf lying down with the lamb and the nations streaming to Jerusalem. Everyone expected the Messiah to come, defeat Israel's enemies, and set up that kingdom in glory, all at once.

So what was the mystery? It was this: the kingdom would come in two stages. Before the kingdom arrived in power and glory, there would be a long season when the King was rejected, the message of the kingdom would spread quietly through the world, and good and evil would grow side by side until the harvest at the end of the age. The prophets hadn't spelled that out. Jesus did, in these parables.

Look at what the parables in Matthew 13 show us about this present age.

- **The sower (13:3-23).** The word of the kingdom is scattered widely, and people respond in very different ways. Some never let it in. Some get excited and then fall away. Some let the worries of life choke it out. Some bear fruit. The kingdom grows through a message received, not through an army.
- **The weeds among the wheat (13:24-30, 36-43).** The enemy sows weeds in the same field. God lets both grow together until the harvest, when the angels will separate them. This age will not be a pure kingdom. There will be counterfeits right alongside the real thing.
- **The mustard seed (13:31-32).** The kingdom starts tiny, with a carpenter from Nazareth and a handful of fishermen, and grows into something huge.
- **The leaven (13:33).** It works quietly, from the inside, until it has spread through the whole batch. Bible teachers differ on whether the leaven here pictures the gospel spreading or evil spreading, since leaven usually stands for sin elsewhere in Scripture. Either way, it shows something hidden working its way through the whole.
- **The hidden treasure and the pearl (13:44-46).** The kingdom is worth everything. A man who finds it gladly sells all he has.
- **The net (13:47-50).** Like the weeds and wheat, the net gathers all kinds, and the sorting happens at the end of the age.

> *Again, the kingdom of the heavens is like treasure hidden in the field, which a man, having found, hid; and from his joy he goes and sells all that he has, and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of the heavens is like a man, a merchant, seeking fine pearls, who, having found one very precious pearl, having gone away, has sold all that he had and bought it.* (Matthew 13:44-46)

The Kingdom Now and the Kingdom Coming

Mark adds one more parable that only he records. It's a small one, but it gets at the heart of the mystery.

> *And He was saying, "Thus is the kingdom of God: as if a man should cast the seed on the earth, and should sleep and rise night and day, and the seed should sprout and grow, how, he himself does not know. For the earth bears fruit by itself: first a blade, then a head, then full grain in the head. But when the fruit permits, immediately he sends the sickle, because the harvest has come."* (Mark 4:26-29)

The farmer plants and then goes about his life. The seed grows, "how, he himself does not know." There it is. The growth of God's kingdom in this age is real, but it's quiet and often invisible. You can't always see what God is doing. Then one day the harvest comes, and the sickle goes in.

This is why Christians can be patient. We don't have to force the kingdom into being with politics or power. The King is coming back to set everything right. Until then, our job is to sow the seed, live as citizens of His kingdom, and trust Him with the growth.

I hold that the kingdom in its full, visible form, with Jesus reigning on the throne of David over the whole earth, will come when He returns (Revelation 20:4-6). That's what the prophets saw. The mystery Jesus revealed is the long season in between, the age we're living in now.

The Weeds Are Not a Surprise

One practical thing this mystery teaches is how to think about the mess in the world, and even in the church. Have you ever been shaken because someone who claimed to be a Christian turned out to be a fraud? Or because a church that once preached the gospel now denies it?

Jesus told us it would happen. "A man, an enemy, did this" (Matthew 13:28). The weeds are not a sign that God has lost control. They're part of what He told us to expect. He's letting both grow until the harvest because pulling them up early would damage the wheat. He knows what He's doing. The sorting will be perfect, and it will be His, not ours.

What This Means for You

Jesus said the mysteries of the kingdom were given to those who came to Him wanting to understand. That's still true. If you read the parables with a hungry heart and ask God to show you what they mean, He will.

And if you belong to Him, you're part of a kingdom that started as a mustard seed and will one day fill the earth. You may not see much growth in your own corner right now. The farmer didn't either. Keep sowing. The harvest is coming.

Study Questions

1. What happened in Matthew 12 that seems to have led Jesus to start teaching in parables?
2. How can the same parable reveal truth to one person and hide it from another?
3. What did the Jews of Jesus' day expect the kingdom to look like? What was new in Jesus' teaching?
4. Read the parable of the weeds (Matthew 13:24-30). How does it help you when you see hypocrisy or falsehood in the church?
5. The farmer in Mark 4:27 doesn't know how the seed grows. Where have you seen God at work quietly, in a way you only noticed later?
6. The man in Matthew 13:44 sold everything "from his joy." What does it look like to value the kingdom that way today?

Chapter 3: The Mystery of Israel's Hardening

> *O depth of riches and of wisdom and of knowledge of God! How unsearchable **are** His judgments and untraceable His ways!*
>
> Romans 11:33 (SLB)

If you've ever talked with a Jewish friend about Jesus, you've probably felt the weight of a question Paul felt more than anyone. If Jesus is the Messiah promised to Israel, why have most Jewish people not believed in Him? And what does that mean for God's promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? Has God given up on Israel and moved on to the church?

Paul answers that question in Romans 9 through 11, and near the end he calls the answer a mystery.

> *For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of this mystery, so that you may not be wise in yourselves, that a hardening in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in; and so all Israel will be saved, just as it has been written, "The One who delivers will come out of Zion, and He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob;"* (Romans 11:25-26)

Paul's Broken Heart

Before Paul ever explains the mystery, he tells us how he feels about it. He isn't writing as an outsider looking down on Israel. He's a Jew, from the tribe of Benjamin, and it breaks his heart that his own people have, for the most part, turned away from their Messiah.

> *that I have great grief and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I myself was wishing to be accursed from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to **the** flesh, who are Israelites, whose **is** the adoption as sons, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service, and the promises* (Romans 9:2-4)

Paul says he would be willing to be cut off from Christ himself if it would save his people. That's love. Anyone who reads Romans 11 and comes away with contempt for the Jewish people has completely missed Paul's heart. The church has done terrible things to Jewish people over the centuries, often while claiming that God was finished with them. Paul would have wept over that.

What Was Hidden

The prophets had seen that the Gentiles would one day come to know Israel's God. God told Abraham that in him "all the families of the earth will be blessed" (Genesis 12:3). Isaiah said the Servant of the LORD would be "a light of the nations" (Isaiah 49:6). So the Gentiles coming in was not a secret.

What the prophets had not spelled out was how it would happen. Nobody expected that Israel, as a nation, would reject its Messiah, and that this rejection would open the door wide for the Gentiles, and that after a long season of Gentiles coming to faith, Israel would turn back and be saved. That's the mystery Paul reveals.

He breaks it into three parts.

1. **The hardening is partial.** "A hardening in part has happened to Israel." Not every Jew has rejected Jesus. Paul himself believed. So did Peter, James, John, and thousands in Jerusalem in the early chapters of Acts. "So then also in the present time there has come to be a remnant according to the election of grace" (Romans 11:5). There has always been a believing remnant, and there still is today.
2. **The hardening is temporary.** It lasts "until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in." There's an end date. God knows the number of Gentiles He has chosen to bring in during this age, and when that number is complete, the hardening will lift.
3. **The hardening will end in salvation.** "And so all Israel will be saved." The story doesn't end with Israel set aside. It ends with Israel restored.

Why Would God Allow It?

Paul says Israel's stumbling had a purpose.

> *I say then, did they stumble so that they might fall? May it not be! But by their trespass salvation **has come** to the Gentiles, to provoke them to jealousy. But if their trespass **is the** riches of **the** world, and their failure **the** riches of **the** Gentiles, how much more their fullness?* (Romans 11:11-12)

Think about how the gospel actually spread in the book of Acts. Paul would go into a synagogue first. Usually some believed and many rejected the message. Then he'd turn to the Gentiles, and they'd come in by the hundreds. The rejection of the message by most of Israel sent the apostles out to the nations. In God's plan, that "no" became the world's "yes."

And Paul says it's meant to make Israel jealous. When Jewish people see Gentiles worshiping the God of Abraham, reading the Hebrew prophets, and calling a Jewish man their Lord and Savior, it's meant to stir something. Those are their promises. That's their Messiah.

The Olive Tree

Paul uses a picture that every farmer in his day would understand. Israel is a cultivated olive tree, rooted in the promises God made to the patriarchs. Some of the natural branches were broken off because of unbelief. Gentile believers are like branches from a wild olive tree, grafted in where the broken branches used to be.

> *But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive tree, were grafted in among them and became a fellow partaker of the root and of the richness of the olive tree, do not boast over the branches. But if you boast, **it is** not you **who** support the root, but the root **supports** you.* (Romans 11:17-18)

That's a warning to every Gentile Christian, and that includes most of us reading this book. We didn't bring anything to the tree. We were grafted in by grace. The root supports us, not the other way around. If God was willing to break off natural branches for unbelief, Paul says, we'd better not get proud (Romans 11:20-21). And if God can graft in wild branches, He can certainly graft the natural branches back into their own tree (11:24).

"All Israel Will Be Saved"

Bible teachers have taken this phrase in three main ways.

- **The nation of Israel at the end of this age.** Many believe Paul means that when the fullness of the Gentiles has come in, the Jewish people as a nation will turn to Jesus as their Messiah. Not every single Jew who ever lived, but the nation as a whole, alive at that time. The prophet Zechariah describes a day when the inhabitants of Jerusalem will "look to Me, to Him whom they have pierced; and they will mourn over Him" (Zechariah 12:10).
- **The believing remnant through history.** Some read "all Israel" as the total of believing Jews in every generation. As each one comes to faith, "all Israel" is saved.
- **The church as the new Israel.** Others read "Israel" here as the whole people of God, Jew and Gentile together.

I hold the first view, and I think the passage itself demands it. Paul has used the word "Israel" for the Jewish people all through Romans 9 through 11. He's just contrasted Israel with the Gentiles in the same sentence. And he says of the Jewish people who are still enemies of the gospel, "as regards the election, they are beloved on account of the fathers. For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" (Romans 11:28-29). God made promises to Abraham's descendants, and He doesn't take back His promises.

This fits with what I've taught in my other studies about the end times. After the church is caught up to be with the Lord, God will turn His attention again to Israel during the Tribulation, and at the end of it, when Jesus returns, the nation will see Him and believe.

God said through Jeremiah that Israel would remain a nation before Him as long as the sun, moon, and stars stay in their places (Jeremiah 31:35-36). Last I checked, the sun came up this morning.

Paul's Response: Worship

When Paul finishes laying out this mystery, he doesn't write a footnote or a chart. He breaks into praise.

> *O depth of riches and of wisdom and of knowledge of God! How unsearchable **are** His judgments and untraceable His ways!* (Romans 11:33)

That's the right response to every mystery God reveals. Paul has just explained one of the deepest things in Scripture, and he ends by admitting that God's ways are beyond tracing out. He understood more than most of us ever will, and it made him worship, not brag.

What This Means for You

If you're a Gentile believer, you've been grafted into promises that began with Abraham. Be grateful, and be humble. Pray for the Jewish people. Love your Jewish neighbors. Don't ever let anyone tell you God is finished with Israel.

If you're Jewish and reading this book, I want you to know that the faith I hold is not a foreign religion. It's the faith of your fathers, fulfilled in the One your prophets promised. Paul believed it with all his heart, and so did the first church, which was almost entirely Jewish.

And for all of us, this mystery shows that God keeps His word, even when it takes thousands of years. If He's faithful to Israel through all of that history, He'll be faithful to you.

Study Questions

1. Read Romans 9:1-5. What do you learn about Paul's attitude toward his own people?
2. What three things does Paul say about Israel's hardening in Romans 11:25-26?
3. How did Israel's rejection of the gospel help it spread to the Gentiles in the book of Acts?
4. What warning does the olive tree picture give to Gentile believers?
5. Why does Romans 11:28-29 matter for how Christians think about the Jewish people today?
6. Paul ends this section in worship (Romans 11:33-36). What truth about God moves you to worship?

Chapter 4: One New Body: Christ in You

> *to whom God willed to make known what **is** the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, who is Christ in you, the hope of glory*
>
> Colossians 1:27 (SLB)

If you had walked into the temple in Jerusalem in the days of Jesus, you'd have seen a low stone barrier, about three cubits or four and a half feet high, that ran around the inner courts. Gentiles could go no farther. Signs were posted on it in Greek and Latin warning that any foreigner who went beyond that wall would have only himself to blame for the death that followed. Josephus describes that barrier and its warning signs (*Jewish War* 5.5.2), and in 1871 a French archaeologist named Charles Clermont-Ganneau found one of the actual stone warning signs in Jerusalem. It's now in a museum in Istanbul.

That wall is the backdrop for one of the greatest mysteries Paul ever revealed.

Pastor Jimmy Carter led me to Christ when I was a boy in Victorville. Even so, it took years of drifting and coming back before I understood that Christ did not save me from a distance. In recovery since May 2020, I have had to rely on His presence inside me day by day. Unlike the tabernacle, where God stayed behind a curtain, Christ now lives in every believer.

What Was Hidden

Paul says the mystery of Christ was "not made known to the sons of men" in earlier generations the way it has now been revealed.

> *that by revelation He made known to me the mystery, even as I wrote before in brief, by which, reading **it**, you are able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in **the** Spirit: **that** the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body and fellow partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel* (Ephesians 3:3-6)

Read that last line again. "The Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body and fellow partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel."

The Old Testament said Gentiles would be blessed through Israel. What it never said was that Jew and Gentile would be joined together as equals in one new body, with no wall between them, the Gentiles not as guests or second-class members, but as full heirs. That was new. That was the mystery.

Paul explains it in the chapter just before.

> *that you were at that time apart from Christ, having been alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of the promise, not having hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have become near by the blood of Christ.* (Ephesians 2:12-13)

> *For He Himself is our peace, who made both one and broke down the middle wall of the barrier, having abolished the hostility in His flesh, the law of the commandments in ordinances, so that He might create the two in Himself into one new man, making peace, and might reconcile both in one body to God through the cross, having killed the hostility by it.* (Ephesians 2:14-16)

"The middle wall of the barrier." Paul may well have had the temple wall in mind. He was arrested in Jerusalem because people thought he'd brought a Gentile past it (Acts 21:28-29). He knew exactly what that wall meant. And he says Jesus tore it down at the cross. He didn't make Gentiles into Jews, or Jews into Gentiles. He made "the two in Himself into one new man." That's the church.

The Church Was Not Plan B

Some people talk as if the church was God's backup plan, something He came up with when Israel rejected Jesus. Paul says the opposite. This mystery "has been hidden from the ages in God, who created all things through Jesus Christ" (Ephesians 3:9). It was always in His plan. He simply hadn't revealed it until the right time.

And look at the audience Paul says is watching.

> *To me, the less than the least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach the gospel among the Gentiles, the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to enlighten all* ***as to*** *what* ***is*** *the fellowship of the mystery which has been hidden from the ages in God, who created all things through Jesus Christ, so that now the manifold wisdom of God may be made known to the rulers and to the authorities in the heavenly* ***places*** *through the church* (Ephesians 3:8-10)

The angels are watching the church. When former enemies sit at the same table, when a Jewish believer and a Gentile believer call each other brother, when people from every tribe and language and background worship one Lord together, the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places see the wisdom of God on display. Your local church, with all its flaws, is a classroom for angels.

I believe the church is something distinct in God's plan. It isn't the same as Israel, and it doesn't replace Israel, as we saw in the last chapter. It's a new body, formed at Pentecost (Acts 2), made of Jews and Gentiles alike, that God is calling out of the nations "a people for His name" (Acts 15:14). That distinction matters for how we read prophecy, and it's one reason I believe the church will be caught up before the Tribulation, which we'll look at in Chapter 7.

Christ in You

In Colossians, Paul describes the same mystery from a different angle.

> *the mystery which has been hidden from the ages and from the generations, but now was made manifest to His saints, to whom God willed to make known what* ***is*** *the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, who is Christ in you, the hope of glory* (Colossians 1:26-27)

"Christ in you, the hope of glory." In the Old Testament, God dwelled with His people. His glory filled the tabernacle and later the temple. He came upon certain people at certain times, like prophets, judges, and kings, to empower them for a task. But the idea that the living Christ would dwell inside ordinary

believers, every one of them, Jew and Gentile alike, permanently, was never spelled out. That's the mystery.

Jesus promised it the night before He died.

> *Jesus answered and said to him, "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and will make a dwelling place with him."* (John 14:23)

Paul says the same thing in Romans 8. "If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, this one is not His" (Romans 8:9). Every true believer has Christ living in him by His Spirit. Not some believers. Not the super-spiritual ones. Every one.

What Christ in You Changes

- **It changes who you are.** Paul wrote, "I have been crucified with Christ; and I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me" (Galatians 2:20). The Christian life isn't you trying hard to copy Jesus. It's Jesus living His life through you.
- **It changes how you work.** Paul worked hard, but he said he did it "striving according to His working which works in me in power" (Colossians 1:29). The power is His.
- **It changes your hope.** Christ in you is "the hope of glory." The same Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead lives in you and will one day raise your body too (Romans 8:11). What He has started, He will finish (Philippians 1:6).
- **It changes how you see other believers.** If Christ lives in the brother next to you in the pew, whatever his background, color, or bank account, then you're looking at a temple of the living God. "Christ is all and in all" (Colossians 3:11).

What This Means for You

These two pictures, one body and Christ in you, belong together. Christ lives in each believer, and that's exactly what makes us one body. The wall is gone. We don't need it anymore.

That has teeth. It means racism has no place in the church. It means the rich man and the poor man stand on the same ground at the cross. It means the believer from the other side of town, the other side of the world, or the other side of the political aisle is family. If Jesus tore the wall down with His own blood, we have no business building it back up.

And when you feel weak, remember that you're not alone in there. Christ in you is the hope of glory.

Study Questions

1. What did the wall in the temple courts mean to a Gentile in Jesus' day?
2. According to Ephesians 3:6, what three things are now true of Gentile believers?
3. Why does it matter that the church was part of God's plan from the beginning and not a backup plan?
4. Ephesians 3:10 says the angels learn God's wisdom by watching the church. What would they learn by watching your church?

5. What does “Christ in you” mean, and how is it different from the way God dwelled with His people in the Old Testament?
6. Is there a “wall” you are tempted to rebuild between yourself and other believers? What would it take to tear it down?

Chapter 5: The Mystery of His Will

> *having made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure which He purposed in Him, for **the** administration of the fullness of the times, to sum up all things in Christ, both the **things** in the heavens and the **things** on the earth, in Him*
>
> Ephesians 1:9-10 (SLB)

Have you ever watched someone work on a big jigsaw puzzle without the box? They've got a thousand pieces spread across the table, and they can tell some of the pieces fit together. Here's a patch of blue sky. There's a corner of a barn. But they don't know what the finished picture looks like, so they can't tell how the patches relate to each other.

Then somebody walks in with the box lid. Suddenly everything makes sense. The sky goes at the top, the barn sits in the middle, and that odd brown piece is part of a fence.

In Ephesians 1, Paul hands us the box lid.

The Big Picture

Ephesians 1:3-14 is one long sentence in Greek, one of the longest in the New Testament. Paul piles blessing on blessing: God chose us, predestined us, adopted us, redeemed us, forgave us, and sealed us with His Spirit. And right in the middle of it, he tells us where all of it is headed.

> *having made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure which He purposed in Him, for **the** administration of the fullness of the times, to sum up all things in Christ, both the **things** in the heavens and the **things** on the earth, in Him* (Ephesians 1:9-10)

"To sum up all things in Christ." The Greek word Paul uses means to gather up under one head, the way you might add up a column of numbers and write the total at the top. Everything in the heavens and on the earth will finally be brought together under one Head, and that Head is Jesus.

That's the mystery of God's will. It's the big picture behind all of history. Creation, the fall, the flood, Abraham, Moses, David, the prophets, the cross, the empty tomb, the church, the Tribulation, the return of Christ, the kingdom, the new heavens and new earth. All of it is moving toward one goal: everything summed up in Christ.

What Was Hidden

The Old Testament gave pieces of the puzzle. It promised a Seed of the woman who would crush the serpent's head (Genesis 3:15). It promised a King from David's line whose kingdom would never end (2 Samuel 7:16). It promised a Servant who would suffer for the sins of many (Isaiah 53). It promised new heavens and a new earth (Isaiah 65:17).

But how all those pieces fit together, and that they all point to one Person, wasn't clear until Jesus came. Even His own disciples didn't get it until after the resurrection, when He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures (Luke 24:45). The writer of Hebrews puts it well.

> *In many portions and in many ways God, having spoken long ago to the fathers in the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us in a Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the ages* (Hebrews 1:1-2)

God spoke in pieces before. In Jesus, He has spoken in full.

All Things Were Made for Him

Colossians says the same thing from the side of creation.

> *because in Him all things were created, the **things** in the heavens and the **things** on the earth, the visible and the invisible, whether thrones or lordships or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.* (Colossians 1:16-17)

"Through Him and for Him." The universe isn't an accident, and it isn't about us. It was made by Jesus and for Jesus. He holds it together right now, this minute. And one day everything will be gathered back under Him.

Paul describes what that day will look like in Philippians.

> *so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of **those** in heaven and **those** on earth and **those** under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ **is** Lord, to **the** glory of God **the** Father.* (Philippians 2:10-11)

Every knee. Every tongue. In heaven, on earth, and under the earth. Some will bow in joy and worship. Others will bow because they have no choice. But all will bow.

The Fullness of the Times

Paul says this plan is "for the administration of the fullness of the times." The word translated administration is the Greek *oikonomia*, which means the management of a household. It's where we get our English word "economy." God is running history like a wise master runs a great house, with everything arranged in its order and everything happening at the right time.

That's one reason I'm careful about end-times charts and timelines. I believe God has revealed the main events, and I've laid out the order I see in Scripture in my other studies. But the point of prophecy isn't to give us a schedule to argue about. It's to show us that God is in charge of the schedule and that it all ends with Jesus on the throne.

Your Life in the Big Picture

Here's where this mystery gets personal. Paul goes right on to say that we have a place in this plan.

> *in whom also we were allotted, having been predestined according to **the** purpose of the **One** who works all things according to the counsel of His will* (Ephesians 1:11)

"The One who works all things according to the counsel of His will." All things. Not just the big events of world history. The small things too. Your job loss. Your diagnosis. Your prodigal child. Your answered prayer and your unanswered one.

That doesn't mean every hard thing is good. It isn't. Sin is evil, death is an enemy, and grief is real. But it means none of it is outside His plan. "To those who love God all things work together for good, to those who are called according to His purpose" (Romans 8:28). You may only be able to see one patch of the puzzle right now, and it may be a dark patch. But God has the box lid, and He's told us what the finished picture is.

What This Means for You

When life doesn't make sense, go back to Ephesians 1:10. The world is not spinning out of control. It's being gathered up under Jesus.

And ask yourself an honest question. Is your life being gathered up under Him now? One day every knee will bow. The difference between joy and terror on that day comes down to whether you bowed to Him first, by faith, while there was still time. If you haven't, there's no better day than today. Turn from your sin, trust Jesus, who died for you and rose again, and ask Him to be your Lord.

Study Questions

1. Read Ephesians 1:3-14 in one sitting. List the blessings Paul names.
2. What does it mean that God will "sum up all things in Christ"?
3. Name some Old Testament "puzzle pieces" that point to Jesus. How does knowing Him make them fit together?
4. Colossians 1:16 says all things were created "through Him and for Him." How should that change the way you see the world?
5. How does Ephesians 1:11 comfort you in a situation you're facing right now?
6. Is there any part of your life you haven't yet brought under Jesus as Lord?

Chapter 6: Marriage, Christ, and the Church

> *"Because of this a man will leave his father and mother and will be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." This mystery is great, but I speak with reference to Christ and to the church.*
>
> Ephesians 5:31-32 (SLB)

Anyone who has been around marriage for long knows it's a mystery in the everyday sense of the word. Two very different people, from two different families, with two different ways of loading a dishwasher, promise to spend the rest of their lives together. It's a wonder any of us make it.

But when Paul calls marriage a mystery, he means something much bigger.

The Passage

Paul has just given instructions to husbands and wives. Wives are to submit to their own husbands, as to the Lord. Husbands are to love their wives as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her. Then he quotes the very first words ever spoken about marriage, from Genesis 2, and says something stunning.

> *So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but he nourishes and cherishes it, even as also the Lord* ***does*** *the church, because we are members of His body, from His flesh and from His bones.* (Ephesians 5:28-30)

> *"Because of this a man will leave his father and mother and will be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." This mystery is great, but I speak with reference to Christ and to the church.* (Ephesians 5:31-32)

"This mystery is great, but I speak with reference to Christ and to the church." Paul is saying that marriage, from the very beginning, was designed as a picture. When God made Adam and Eve and joined them as one flesh in the garden, He was drawing a picture of something He hadn't yet revealed: Jesus and His bride, the church.

What Was Hidden

The Old Testament often described God's relationship with Israel as a marriage. "Your Husband is your Maker; the LORD of armies is His name" (Isaiah 54:5). Through Hosea, God promised, "I will betroth you to Me forever" (Hosea 2:19). Israel's idolatry was described as adultery again and again.

So the picture of God as a husband to His people wasn't new. What was new was this: that the eternal Son of God would become a man, give His life for a bride drawn from every nation, and be joined to her so closely that Paul could say "we are members of His body." And that God had this in mind all along, when He first made man and woman in the garden.

John the Baptist saw it. He called Jesus the bridegroom and himself the friend of the bridegroom (John 3:29). Jesus called Himself the bridegroom too (Mark 2:19-20). Paul told the Corinthians, "I betrothed you to one husband, to present a pure virgin to Christ" (2 Corinthians 11:2). And Revelation looks ahead to the wedding day itself.

> *Let us rejoice and exult, and let us give the glory to Him, because the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready.* (Revelation 19:7)

Which Comes First?

Here's something that turns the usual thinking around. We usually assume that God looked at human marriage and said, "That's a good illustration of how Christ loves the church." But Paul's words point the other way. Christ and the church came first, in the mind of God. Human marriage was made to look like it.

That means marriage isn't just a social arrangement or a contract. It's a living picture of the gospel. Every Christian marriage is preaching a sermon, whether we mean it to or not. The question is whether it's preaching the truth.

The Picture in Practice

- **Husbands picture Christ's love.** "Husbands, love your own wives, even as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her" (Ephesians 5:25). The standard isn't how other men treat their wives. It's the cross. A husband's headship, in Paul's sense, is not a license to be a boss. It's a call to lay down his life. Paul says a husband should nourish and cherish his wife the way he takes care of his own body.
- **Wives picture the church's trust.** "Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands, as to the Lord" (Ephesians 5:22). That's a hard word in our culture, and it has been twisted by men who wanted control. But in context, it's a free, willing response of trust, the way the church trusts Christ. It never means a wife must follow her husband into sin or stay in danger.
- **Oneness pictures union with Christ.** "The two will become one flesh." Believers are united with Christ so closely that what is His becomes ours. His righteousness, His standing with the Father, His inheritance.
- **Faithfulness pictures the covenant.** Christ will never leave His bride. That's why faithfulness in marriage matters so much. Adultery doesn't only break a promise between two people. It tells a lie about Christ.

For the Unmarried and the Hurting

I want to say something to readers who aren't married, or whose marriage has been broken. This mystery is not only for married people. Every believer, married or single, is part of the bride of Christ. Paul himself was single, and he said singleness can be a gift that frees a person to serve the Lord without distraction (1 Corinthians 7:7, 32-35).

And if your marriage has been painful, or has ended, please hear this. The picture may have been broken, but the reality it points to never breaks. Christ is the perfect Husband. He has never failed His bride and never will. He will never betray you, never leave you, and never stop loving you.

What This Means for You

If you're married, ask the Lord to make your marriage a clearer picture of the gospel. Husbands, ask yourself whether your wife feels cherished the way Christ cherishes the church. Wives, ask yourself whether your trust and respect point people to how the church honors Christ.

And whether you're married or not, look forward to the wedding. "Blessed are those who have been called to the supper of the marriage of the Lamb" (Revelation 19:9). The best marriage on earth is a shadow of that day.

Study Questions

1. Read Genesis 2:18-25 and Ephesians 5:22-33 side by side. What connections do you see?
2. What does it mean that Christ and the church "came first" and human marriage was made to picture it?
3. How does Ephesians 5:25 define the kind of love a husband should show?
4. How has the idea of submission been misused, and what does Paul actually mean by it in context?
5. How does this mystery speak to those who are single, widowed, or divorced?
6. What would change in your home if your marriage, or your future marriage, were seen as a living picture of the gospel?

Chapter 7: We Will Not All Sleep

> *Look, I tell you a mystery: we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed, in an instant, in **the** blink of an eye, at the last trumpet; for **the** trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we will be changed.*
>
> 1 Corinthians 15:51-52 (SLB)

Most of us have stood at a graveside. Maybe it was a grandparent, a parent, a spouse, or a child. You know the feeling of watching the casket lowered and wondering how you're going to walk away and leave someone you love in the ground.

The believers in Thessalonica knew that feeling too. They had come to faith only months before Paul wrote to them, and some of their number had already died. They wondered whether those believers would miss out when Jesus came back. Paul wrote to comfort them, and in doing so he revealed one of the most hopeful mysteries in the Bible.

The Passage

In 1 Corinthians 15, after a long chapter on the resurrection of the dead, Paul says this.

> *Look, I tell you a mystery: we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed, in an instant, in **the** blink of an eye, at the last trumpet; for **the** trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we will be changed.* (1 Corinthians 15:51-52)

> *For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. And when this corruptible puts on incorruption, and this mortal puts on immortality, then the word that has been written will come to pass: "Death has been swallowed up in victory." "Where, O death, **is** your sting? Where, O Hades, **is** your victory?"* (1 Corinthians 15:53-55)

"We will not all sleep." Sleep is the New Testament's gentle word for the death of a believer. It doesn't mean the soul is unconscious. Paul says elsewhere that to be away from the body is to be at home with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:8). It means death for a Christian is temporary, like sleep. You wake up.

What Was Hidden

The Old Testament taught the resurrection of the dead. Daniel said, "many of those who sleep in the ground of dust will awake" (Daniel 12:2). Job said he knew his Redeemer lived and that in his flesh he would see God (Job 19:25-26). Jesus raised Lazarus and taught that a day was coming when all in the tombs would hear His voice (John 5:28-29).

So the resurrection wasn't the mystery. The mystery was this: that one generation of believers would never die at all. When Jesus comes for His church, the believers who are alive at that moment will be changed in an instant, their mortal bodies transformed into immortal ones, without ever passing through death. That had never been revealed before.

How It Will Happen

Paul gives the most detail in his first letter to the Thessalonians.

> *But I do not want you to be ignorant, brothers, concerning those who have fallen asleep, so that you may not grieve, just as also the rest who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, so also God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep through Jesus. For this we say to you in **the** word of **the** Lord, that we who are living, who remain until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have fallen asleep* (1 Thessalonians 4:13-15)

> *because the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout of command, with **the** voice of an archangel and with **the** trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are living, who remain, will be caught away together with them in **the** clouds to meet the Lord in **the** air; and so we will always be with **the** Lord.* (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17)

Put the two passages together, and here's the order of events.

1. **The Lord Himself descends from heaven.** Not an angel. Not a messenger. Jesus Himself.
2. **There is a shout of command, the voice of an archangel, and the trumpet of God.** Paul calls it "the last trumpet" in 1 Corinthians 15:52.
3. **The dead in Christ rise first.** Their bodies are raised incorruptible and reunited with their souls, which come with Jesus (1 Thessalonians 4:14).
4. **Living believers are changed** "in an instant, in the blink of an eye."
5. **Together they are caught away** in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.
6. **And so we will always be with the Lord.**

The phrase "caught away" translates the Greek word *harpazo*, which means to seize or snatch suddenly. When the Latin Bible translated this verse, it used the word *rapiemur*, from *rapio*. That's where the English word "Rapture" comes from. People sometimes say the Rapture isn't in the Bible because the word isn't there. The word isn't in English Bibles, but the event certainly is. It's right here.

When Will It Happen?

This is where good Bible teachers disagree, and I want to be fair to all of them. Everyone who takes these passages at face value agrees that living believers will be caught up to meet the Lord. The question is when that happens in relation to the Tribulation, the seven-year period of judgment described in Daniel 9 and Revelation 6 through 19.

- **Before the Tribulation (pre-tribulation).** Jesus comes for His church before the Tribulation begins. Seven years later, He comes with His church to the earth to defeat His enemies and set up His kingdom.
- **In the middle of the Tribulation (mid-tribulation), or before the worst of God's wrath (pre-wrath).** The church goes through part of the Tribulation but is caught up before God's wrath is poured out in full.
- **After the Tribulation (post-tribulation).** The church goes through the whole Tribulation, and the catching up and the return to earth happen together at the end. Believers rise to meet the Lord in the air and then come right back down with Him.

I hold the pre-tribulation view, as I've taught in my studies on Daniel, Thessalonians, and Revelation. Here are the main reasons.

- **The church is not appointed to wrath.** "God did not appoint us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thessalonians 5:9). Jesus "is delivering us from the wrath that is coming" (1 Thessalonians 1:10). The Tribulation is described from start to finish as a time of God's wrath poured out on the earth (Revelation 6:16-17).
- **Jesus promised to keep the faithful church from the hour of testing.** "I also will keep you from the hour of testing which is about to come upon the whole inhabited world" (Revelation 3:10). He didn't say He'd keep them through the hour. He said from it.
- **The church disappears from Revelation's description of the Tribulation.** The word "church" appears nineteen times in Revelation 1 through 3. After chapter 3, it doesn't appear again on the earth until the close of the book (22:16). The saints in the Tribulation are there, but the church as such is not.
- **The two comings are described differently.** In 1 Thessalonians 4, Jesus comes in the air for His people, and they go to meet Him. In Revelation 19 and Zechariah 14, He comes to the earth with His people, and His feet stand on the Mount of Olives. One is a gathering. The other is a judgment.
- **It fits the comfort Paul intended.** Paul ends the passage, "Therefore encourage one another with these words" (1 Thessalonians 4:18). It's hard to see how it would comfort the Thessalonians to tell them they'd go through the worst seven years in human history first.
- **It explains the restrainer.** In 2 Thessalonians 2, the man of lawlessness can't be revealed until the restrainer is taken out of the way. We'll look at that in the next chapter.

Those who hold the other views have their reasons. Post-tribulation teachers point out that Jesus spoke of gathering His elect "after the tribulation of those days" (Matthew 24:29-31), and that the word for "meet" in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 was often used for citizens going out to meet a visiting king and escorting him back into their city. Mid-tribulation and pre-wrath teachers connect Paul's "last trumpet" with the seventh trumpet of Revelation 11. Those are serious arguments made by people who love the Lord, and I respect them. But I believe the pre-tribulation view fits all the passages best.

What We Know for Certain

Whatever view you hold, notice how much every Bible-believing Christian agrees on.

- Jesus is coming again, bodily and visibly (Acts 1:11).
- The dead in Christ will be raised with new bodies (1 Corinthians 15:42-44).
- Believers alive at His coming will be changed without dying.
- Our new bodies will be like His glorious body (Philippians 3:21).
- We will always be with the Lord.

That's where Paul puts the weight, and so should we.

What We Don't Know

We don't know the day or the hour. Jesus was clear about that (Matthew 24:36). Every person who has ever set a date for the Rapture has been wrong, every single time. Be very careful of anyone who claims to have figured it out.

What Jesus asks of us is not a date. It's readiness. Paul calls His appearing "the blessed hope" (Titus 2:13). We're meant to live every day as if it could be today.

What This Means for You

If you've buried a believer you love, take this passage to heart. They are with the Lord now, and one day you'll see them again, in bodies that will never get sick, never age, and never die. Paul wrote this so you would not "grieve, just as also the rest who have no hope" (1 Thessalonians 4:13). You can grieve. But you grieve with hope.

And if you're not sure you belong to Jesus, this mystery should give you pause. The catching up is for "the dead in Christ" and "we who are living" in Christ. It happens in the blink of an eye. There won't be time to get ready then. Get ready now.

Study Questions

1. Why were the Thessalonian believers troubled about those who had died?
2. What is the mystery in 1 Corinthians 15:51? How is it different from the resurrection of the dead?
3. List the order of events in 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17.
4. Where does the word "Rapture" come from, and why is the event biblical even though the English word isn't in our Bibles?
5. What are the main reasons given for the pre-tribulation view? Which do you find strongest?
6. How should the hope of Christ's return change the way you live this week?

Chapter 8: Lawlessness and the One Who Restrains

> *For the mystery of lawlessness is already working; only the one restraining now **will restrain** until he is out of the midst.*
>
> 2 Thessalonians 2:7 (SLB)

Not long after Paul wrote his first letter to the Thessalonians, somebody started a rumor in their church. It may have come through a so-called prophecy, a sermon, or even a forged letter claiming to be from Paul. The rumor said the day of the Lord had already come. The Thessalonians were shaken. Had they missed it? Were they in the Tribulation already?

Paul wrote a second letter to set them straight, and in it he revealed a dark mystery and a bright one in the same breath.

For years I was a functioning alcoholic who did well at work, and I convinced myself my drinking was under control. I believed my own lie until May 29, 2020, when my wife caught me. It is easy to believe a lie when we refuse to love the truth (2 Thessalonians 2:10). Today I guard against it by checking my thinking against Scripture every day.

The Passage

> *Now we ask you, brothers, concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, that you not be quickly shaken from the mind nor be troubled, neither through a spirit nor through a word nor through a letter as if through us, as that the day of Christ has come. Let no one deceive you in any way; because **it will not come** unless the apostasy comes first and the man of sin is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he sits down in the temple of God as God, displaying himself that he is God.* (2 Thessalonians 2:1-4)

> *And now you know that which is restraining, for him to be revealed in his own time. For the mystery of lawlessness is already working; only the one restraining now **will restrain** until he is out of the midst. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord will consume with the breath of His mouth and will abolish by the appearing of His coming* (2 Thessalonians 2:6-8)

What We Know for Certain

Paul gives the Thessalonians several clear facts.

- **The day of the Lord has not come yet.** It won't come until two things happen first: the apostasy, a great falling away from the truth, and the revealing of "the man of sin."
- **The man of sin is a real person.** Paul calls him "the son of destruction" and "the lawless one." He opposes God, exalts himself above every god, and sits in the temple of God claiming to be God. This is the same figure John calls the antichrist (1 John 2:18) and Revelation calls the beast (Revelation 13). Jesus spoke of "the abomination of desolation" standing in the holy place (Matthew 24:15), pointing back to Daniel 9:27.

- **He comes with Satan's power.** He will do signs and wonders, but they are "signs and wonders of falsehood" (2 Thessalonians 2:9). Miracles alone prove nothing. Satan can counterfeit.
- **Something is holding him back.** The Thessalonians knew what it was, because Paul had told them in person (2:5-6). We have to work it out from the rest of Scripture.
- **Jesus will destroy him.** The Lord will consume him "with the breath of His mouth" and abolish him "by the appearing of His coming" (2:8). He doesn't need an army. He'll speak, and it'll be over.

The Mystery of Lawlessness

"The mystery of lawlessness is already working." Here's a mystery that isn't good news. Paul means that the same spirit of rebellion against God that will one day come out into the open in the man of sin is already at work in the world, hidden and underground.

John said the same thing: "even now many antichrists have arisen" (1 John 2:18), and the spirit of the antichrist "is already in the world" (1 John 4:3). Every age has had its little antichrists, men who set themselves up in God's place and demanded worship or total loyalty. The twentieth century alone gave us several. But they are previews. The final one is still to come.

Why is it called a mystery? Because it's working in secret, behind the scenes, and because its full shape won't be revealed until God's appointed time. Right now it's held in check.

Who Is the Restrainer?

This is one of the great puzzles of the New Testament. Paul says "that which is restraining" in verse 6, using a neuter word, as if it were a thing or a force. Then in verse 7 he says "the one restraining," using a masculine word, as if it were a person. Whatever it is, it is strong enough to hold back Satan's man until God's time, and it will one day be "out of the midst."

Here are the main views.

- **The Roman Empire and its emperor.** Many early Christian writers took this view, including Tertullian around A.D. 200. Rome kept law and order, and the emperor was its head. That would explain the neuter and the masculine. The problem is that Rome fell long ago, and the man of sin still hasn't appeared.
- **Human government and law in general.** A broader version of the first view. God has ordained government to restrain evil (Romans 13:1-4), and when law and order break down, lawlessness will run free.
- **Paul's preaching, or the preaching of the gospel.** Some have suggested the gospel must go out first. But that doesn't explain how it would be removed "out of the midst."
- **An angel, such as Michael.** Michael is described as the great prince who stands over God's people (Daniel 12:1), and he is shown holding back evil powers in Daniel 10. This is possible, but Scripture never calls Michael a restrainer.
- **The Holy Spirit, working through the church.** The Spirit is God, and only God has the power to hold back Satan. In Greek, the word for Spirit, *pneuma*, is neuter, but the Spirit is a Person, and Jesus refers to Him with both kinds of words in John 14 through 16. The Spirit convicts the world of sin (John 16:8), and He lives in the church, which Jesus called the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Matthew 5:13-14). Salt keeps meat from rotting. Light holds back darkness.

I believe the restrainer is the Holy Spirit, working through the church, as I taught in my study on Thessalonians. That fits the neuter and the masculine. It fits the power required. And it fits the order of events I see in Scripture. When the church is caught up to meet the Lord, the Spirit's restraining work through the church will be taken "out of the midst." He doesn't leave the world entirely; people will still be saved during the Tribulation, and they can only be saved by the Spirit. But His restraint of evil through the presence of the church will be removed, and the lawless one will be revealed.

I want to be honest. Paul doesn't name the restrainer, and good teachers hold the other views. But I think this view explains the passage best.

Why People Will Believe the Lie

Paul gives a sobering reason why so many will follow the man of sin. It isn't that the evidence was too weak. It's that "they did not receive the love of the truth so that they might be saved" (2 Thessalonians 2:10). They didn't want the truth. So God gave them what they wanted (2:11-12).

That's a warning for every age. A person who refuses to love the truth will eventually believe a lie. It happens slowly, and it starts small. The best protection isn't being clever. It's loving the truth, even when it's uncomfortable.

What This Means for You

Don't be shaken. That was Paul's whole point. When you hear rumors, predictions, and wild claims about the end times, go back to the Book. Paul told the Thessalonians the order of events, and that order hasn't changed.

And be salt and light where you are. If the Holy Spirit is restraining evil through God's people, then your faithful life, your prayers, your honesty at work, and your witness to your neighbors matter more than you know. You may be part of what is holding back the dark.

Study Questions

1. What rumor had shaken the Thessalonians, and how did Paul answer it?
2. What two things does Paul say must happen before the day of the Lord comes?
3. What does Paul mean by "the mystery of lawlessness is already working"? Where do you see it today?
4. Review the views on the identity of the restrainer. Which one do you think fits best, and why?
5. Why does Paul say people will believe the lie (2 Thessalonians 2:10)? How can you guard your own heart?
6. How does being "salt and light" relate to holding back evil in your community?

Chapter 9: The Mystery of Godliness

> *And confessedly great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifested in flesh, was justified in spirit, was seen by angels, was proclaimed among **the** Gentiles, was believed on in **the** world, was taken up in glory.*
>
> 1 Timothy 3:16 (SLB)

Paul wrote his first letter to Timothy to help a young pastor set things in order in the church at Ephesus. Most of the letter is practical: how to pray, who can serve as an overseer or deacon, how to care for widows, how to handle money. Then, right in the middle of all that practical instruction, Paul stops and points to the center of everything.

> *but if I delay, **I write** so that you may know how **one** must conduct oneself in **the** household of God, which is **the** church of **the** living God, **the** pillar and foundation of the truth.*
> (1 Timothy 3:15)

> *And confessedly great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifested in flesh, was justified in spirit, was seen by angels, was proclaimed among **the** Gentiles, was believed on in **the** world, was taken up in glory.* (1 Timothy 3:16)

The church is "the pillar and foundation of the truth." And what is that truth? Paul answers with what many scholars believe was an early Christian hymn or creed, six short lines that tell the whole story of Jesus. He calls it "the mystery of godliness."

What Was Hidden

"Confessedly great." That's an unusual phrase. It means something like "beyond all question" or "everyone agrees." Paul is saying that every believer would confess this. It's not a side issue. It's the heart of the faith.

And the heart of the mystery is the first line: "God was manifested in flesh."

The Old Testament promised that God would come to His people. Isaiah said a virgin would bear a son and call His name Immanuel, which means God with us (Isaiah 7:14). He said the child born to us would be called "Mighty God" (Isaiah 9:6). But how could the infinite God become a man without ceasing to be God? Nobody could have imagined it. That's why it's called a mystery. It's still beyond our full understanding, even now that it has been revealed. We can know it's true. We can't fully explain how.

John put it this way.

> *And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of an only begotten from **the** Father, full of grace and truth.* (John 1:14)

And Paul said it from the other side, describing how the eternal Son came down.

> *who, existing in **the** form of God, did not consider being equal with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, having taken **the** form of a slave, having come to be in **the** likeness of men; and having been found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself, having become obedient as far as death, even death of a cross.* (Philippians 2:6-8)

A Note on the Text

You may have a Bible that reads "He who was manifested in flesh" instead of "God was manifested in flesh." That difference comes from the ancient Greek manuscripts. Most of the later manuscripts, and the Received Text that my Steadfast Literal Bible New Testament follows, read "God." Several of the oldest surviving manuscripts read "who," meaning "He who." In the old Greek handwriting, the two words looked very much alike, differing by a small stroke or two.

Either way, the meaning is the same. The "He" who was manifested in flesh can only be Jesus, the One who existed before He took on flesh. The deity of Christ doesn't rest on this one verse. John 1:1, Colossians 2:9, Titus 2:13, and many others teach it plainly.

Six Lines, One Story

Let's walk through the six lines.

1. **"God was manifested in flesh."** The incarnation. The eternal Son of God became a real human being, born of the virgin Mary, fully God and fully man.
2. **"Was justified in spirit."** Jesus was declared righteous, shown to be who He said He was, by the Spirit. Paul says He was "declared Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by the resurrection of the dead" (Romans 1:4). The world condemned Him. God vindicated Him.
3. **"Was seen by angels."** The angels watched every step, from His birth (Luke 2:13-14) to the wilderness (Mark 1:13) to Gethsemane (Luke 22:43) to the empty tomb (Matthew 28:2-6). Peter says these are things "into which angels desire to look intently" (1 Peter 1:12).
4. **"Was proclaimed among the Gentiles."** The message went out to the nations, just as we saw in Chapter 4.
5. **"Was believed on in the world."** People everywhere put their faith in Him. They still do.
6. **"Was taken up in glory."** He ascended to the Father, where He reigns now and from where He will come again (Acts 1:9-11).

Why "Godliness"?

Why would Paul call this the mystery of godliness? Because true godliness, a life that pleases God, grows out of this truth. You can't be godly by trying harder or following more rules. Right after this, Paul warns Timothy about people who forbid marriage and certain foods, as if that made them holy (1 Timothy 4:1-3). That's not godliness. Godliness grows from knowing and trusting the God who came in the flesh for us.

A few verses earlier, Paul said deacons must be men "holding the mystery of the faith with a pure conscience" (1 Timothy 3:9). It's the same idea. The mystery is the truth God has revealed about Jesus, and

holding it isn't only a matter of believing the right things. It's holding them with a clean conscience, living in line with what you confess.

What This Means for You

When people ask what Christians believe, 1 Timothy 3:16 is a good place to start. Not a list of rules. A Person. God came in the flesh, was vindicated, was seen, was preached, was believed, and was taken up in glory.

And when you feel the pull to measure your faith by your performance, come back here. Your godliness doesn't start with you. It starts with Him. Fix your eyes on Jesus, and the godliness will follow.

Study Questions

1. Why do you think Paul placed this short hymn in the middle of a practical letter about church order?
2. Why is the incarnation called a "mystery," even after it has been revealed?
3. How does the textual difference between "God" and "He who" affect the meaning of the verse?
4. Walk through the six lines of 1 Timothy 3:16. Which one means the most to you right now, and why?
5. How does true godliness grow out of the truth about Jesus rather than out of rules?
6. What does it mean to hold "the mystery of the faith with a pure conscience" (1 Timothy 3:9)?

Chapter 10: Seven Stars and Seven Lampstands

> *The mystery of the seven stars which you saw on My right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: the seven stars are **the** angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands which you saw are seven churches.*
>
> Revelation 1:20 (SLB)

The book of Revelation opens with John on the island of Patmos, exiled for his faith. He's an old man by now, the last of the original twelve still living. On the Lord's day, he hears a voice behind him like a trumpet, turns around, and sees Jesus as he had never seen Him before.

> *And I turned to see the voice that spoke with me. And having turned, I saw seven golden lampstands, and in **the** midst of the seven lampstands **One** like a son of man, clothed **in a robe** reaching to the feet, and girded around at the breasts with a golden sash. And His head and hair **were** white, like white wool, like snow; and His eyes **were** like a flame of fire; and His feet **were** like fine bronze, as refined in a furnace; and His voice **was** like **the** sound of many waters; and having in His right hand seven stars, and out of His mouth a sharp two-edged sword going forth; and His face **was** like the sun shining in its strength.* (Revelation 1:12-16)

John falls at His feet as if dead. Jesus lays His right hand on him and tells him not to be afraid. Then He explains part of what John has just seen, and He calls it a mystery.

> *The mystery of the seven stars which you saw on My right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: the seven stars are **the** angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands which you saw are seven churches.* (Revelation 1:20)

What Is Revealed

Here's a case where we don't have to guess. Jesus Himself interprets the symbols.

- **The seven lampstands are seven churches.** They're named in Revelation 1:11 and addressed one by one in chapters 2 and 3: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. These were real congregations in the Roman province of Asia, in what is now western Turkey. You can visit the ruins of every one of these cities today.
- **The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches.** Jesus holds them in His right hand.

That's a beautiful picture. A lampstand doesn't make light. It holds a lamp so the light can be seen. That's what a church is for. And Jesus walks "in the midst of the seven golden lampstands" (Revelation 2:1). He isn't far away. He's among His churches, seeing everything, walking through the aisles.

Who Are the "Angels"?

This is the part that's still debated. The Greek word *angelos* means messenger. It's the normal word for an angel, but it can also be used for a human messenger. John the Baptist is called God's *angelos* in Mark 1:2. Malachi calls a priest "the messenger of the LORD of armies" (Malachi 2:7).

- **Guardian angels over each church.** Daniel speaks of angelic princes over nations (Daniel 10:13, 20-21). Some believe each church has an angel watching over it. The difficulty is that each letter is addressed to the angel and then rebukes him for the church's sins. It's hard to see why Jesus would rebuke a holy angel for a church's lukewarmness.
- **The pastors or leading elders of each church.** On this view, the "angel" is the human messenger responsible for the congregation, the one who would read the letter to the church. This fits the rebukes and the calls to repent.
- **The spirit or character of each church.** Some see the angel as a way of describing the church's inner life, a kind of personification.

I lean toward the second view, that these are the leaders responsible for each church, but I hold it loosely. Either way, the point is the same. The stars are in Jesus' right hand. He holds the leaders of His church, and He holds them accountable.

Can a Lampstand Be Removed?

Jesus tells the church at Ephesus something every church should hear.

> *Remember therefore from where you have fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I am coming to you quickly and will remove your lampstand out of its place, unless you repent.* (Revelation 2:5)

Ephesus was a good church in many ways. It worked hard, endured hardship, and tested false teachers. But it had left its first love. Jesus warns that if they don't repent, He'll remove their lampstand. In other words, they'll stop being a church that shines His light.

History tells a sad story here. Ephesus was a great Christian center for centuries, but the city declined, its harbor silted up, and today it's a ruin with no living church. The same is true of most of the seven cities. Laodicea, the lukewarm church, is now an archaeological site.

A Message for Every Church

Seven is the number of completeness all through Revelation. Many Bible teachers believe that, while these were real churches in John's day, Jesus chose these seven because together they show the kinds of churches that exist in every age. Some go further and see the seven as a preview of church history, from the apostolic church (Ephesus) to the lukewarm church of the last days (Laodicea). That's an interesting idea, but the text doesn't say it, so I don't build on it.

What the text does say is that each letter ends the same way: "The one who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (Revelation 2:7). Churches, plural. Every letter is for every church.

What This Means for You

Think about your own church. Jesus is walking among you. He knows your works, your love, your patience, your compromises, and your coldness. That's either a terrifying thought or a comforting one, depending on where you stand.

If you're a church leader, remember whose hand you're in. You're a star in His right hand, not a celebrity in your own spotlight. And if you're a church member, pray for your leaders, and ask yourself whether your church is still shining. If it's lost its first love, the remedy Jesus gave Ephesus still works: remember, repent, and do the first works.

Study Questions

1. Describe how Jesus appears to John in Revelation 1:12-16. What stands out to you?
2. What do the lampstands and stars represent, according to Revelation 1:20?
3. What does a lampstand do, and how does that picture the purpose of a church?
4. Review the views on the "angels" of the churches. Which do you find most convincing?
5. What warning did Jesus give the church at Ephesus? How might a church "leave its first love" today?
6. If Jesus wrote a letter to your church, what do you think He would commend? What would He correct?

Chapter 11: The Mystery of God Finished

> *but in the days of the voice of the seventh angel, when he is about to sound, then the mystery of God should be finished, as He preached the gospel to His own slaves the prophets.*
>
> Revelation 10:7 (SLB)

Revelation 10 comes at a pause in the action. Six trumpets have sounded, and the judgments on the earth have been terrible. Everyone is waiting for the seventh. Then John sees a mighty angel come down from heaven, wrapped in a cloud, with a rainbow over his head, his face like the sun, one foot on the sea and one on the land.

> *And the angel whom I saw standing on the sea and on the land lifted up his hand to heaven, and swore by the One who lives to the ages of the ages, who created heaven and the things in it, and the earth and the things in it, and the sea and the things in it, that time will be no longer* (Revelation 10:5-6)

> *but in the days of the voice of the seventh angel, when he is about to sound, then the mystery of God should be finished, as He preached the gospel to His own slaves the prophets.* (Revelation 10:7)

"Time will be no longer." That doesn't mean clocks will stop. It means there will be no more delay. The waiting is over. When the seventh angel sounds, "the mystery of God should be finished."

What Is This Mystery?

John doesn't spell out what "the mystery of God" is here, so Bible teachers have offered several answers. They overlap more than they compete.

- **God's whole plan of salvation.** Many see the mystery of God as everything we've looked at in Part One: the gospel, the church, Israel's restoration, Christ in you, all things summed up in Christ. All of it reaches its finish line when the seventh trumpet sounds. My Revelation study puts it this way: many understand this mystery to be salvation itself, how a holy God could love sinful people so much that He sent His only Son to die for them.
- **The mystery of why God allows evil.** Others focus on the question believers have asked for thousands of years: why does God let the wicked prosper and His people suffer? Psalm 73 wrestles with it. The souls under the altar cry out, "Until when, O Master, the Holy and the True, do You not judge and avenge our blood" (Revelation 6:10). At the seventh trumpet, God's patience with evil comes to an end, and His reasons will finally be plain.
- **The setting up of God's kingdom.** When the seventh trumpet does sound, in Revelation 11:15, heaven announces the result.

  > *And the seventh angel sounded, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, "The kingdoms of the world have become **those** of our Lord and of His Christ, and He will reign to the ages of the ages."* (Revelation 11:15)

I think all three belong together. The mystery of God is the whole story of what God has been doing through history, including the hard questions it raises, and it ends with His kingdom set up on the earth.

"As He Preached the Gospel to the Prophets"

John adds an important line. The mystery will be finished "as He preached the gospel to His own slaves the prophets." The word for "preached the gospel" is the same word for announcing good news. God told the prophets this was coming, and it's good news.

That matters, because Revelation can feel like nothing but judgment. Seals, trumpets, bowls, earthquakes, plagues. But underneath it all, the message is good news. God is finishing what He started. The prophets saw the end, and it was good. Amos said, "the Lord GOD does not do a thing unless He has revealed His secret counsel to His servants the prophets" (Amos 3:7). Nothing in Revelation catches God by surprise. It's His plan, announced in advance, carried through to the end.

The Bitter and the Sweet

Right after this, John is told to take a little scroll from the angel's hand and eat it. It tastes sweet as honey in his mouth but turns bitter in his stomach (Revelation 10:9-10). Then he's told he must prophesy again about many peoples, nations, languages, and kings.

I think that's how God's word about the end feels to anyone who really takes it in. It's sweet, because God wins, evil is judged, the King comes, and every tear is wiped away. And it's bitter, because so many people will face that day without Christ. If prophecy only excites you and never breaks your heart, you haven't digested it yet.

What This Means for You

We live in the delay. That's what the church age is. Peter said the Lord isn't slow about His promise, the way some count slowness; He's patient, not wanting any to perish (2 Peter 3:9). Every day the seventh trumpet doesn't sound is another day of mercy for someone who hasn't yet believed.

So use the delay well. Tell someone the good news while there's still time. And when the questions about suffering and evil press hard on you, remember that the mystery of God has an ending. One day, there will be no more delay, and it will all make sense.

Study Questions

1. Describe the scene in Revelation 10:1-7. What does the angel's oath mean?
2. What are the main views on what "the mystery of God" is? Which do you think fits best?
3. Why is it significant that this mystery was announced to the prophets as good news?
4. What does the little scroll that is sweet and then bitter teach about how we should take in God's word about the end?
5. Read 2 Peter 3:9. How should God's patience shape the way we see the time we're living in?

6. What question about suffering or evil would you most like to see answered when the mystery of God is finished?

Chapter 12: Mystery, Babylon the Great

> *And on her forehead a name **was** written, Mystery, Babylon the Great, the mother of the prostitutes and of the abominations of the earth.*
>
> Revelation 17:5 (SLB)

Part One ends with the strangest mystery in the Bible. The others we've looked at were wonderful secrets God revealed for our good. This one is a warning.

In Revelation 17, one of the angels who poured out the seven bowls of wrath takes John into the wilderness and shows him a woman sitting on a scarlet beast. She's dressed in purple and scarlet, glittering with gold, precious stones, and pearls, holding a golden cup full of abominations. And on her forehead is a name.

> *And one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and spoke with me, saying to me, "Come, I will show you the judgment of the great prostitute who sits on the many waters, with whom the kings of the earth committed sexual immorality, and those who dwell on the earth were made drunk with the wine of her sexual immorality."* (Revelation 17:1-2)

> *And on her forehead a name **was** written, Mystery, Babylon the Great, the mother of the prostitutes and of the abominations of the earth.* (Revelation 17:5)

John is stunned. The angel asks him why he's amazed and offers to explain.

> *And the angel said to me, "Why did you marvel? I will tell you the mystery of the woman and of the beast that carries her, which has the seven heads and the ten horns."* (Revelation 17:7)

Why "Mystery"?

The word "Mystery" is part of the name on her forehead, or a label on it. Either way, it tells us the name is symbolic and needs to be interpreted. She isn't an actual woman, and "Babylon" may not mean only the ancient city on the Euphrates. The angel's explanation gives us some clues.

- She sits on "many waters," which the angel says are "peoples and multitudes and nations and tongues" (Revelation 17:15). Her influence is worldwide.
- The seven heads of the beast she rides are "seven mountains, on which the woman sits" (17:9). Rome was famous as the city on seven hills.
- She is "the great city which has kingship over the kings of the earth" (17:18).
- She is drunk "with the blood of the saints and with the blood of the witnesses of Jesus" (17:6).
- The merchants of the earth grow rich from her luxury (Revelation 18:3, 11-19).

Why Babylon?

Babylon runs like a dark thread through the whole Bible. It starts at Babel in Genesis 11, where people said, "let us build for ourselves a city and a tower, and its top will be in the heavens; and let us make for

ourselves a name" (Genesis 11:4). It was the first organized rebellion against God after the flood: man building his own way up to heaven and making his own name great.

Later, Babylon was the empire that destroyed Jerusalem and Solomon's temple in 586 B.C. and carried God's people into exile. Its kings made golden images and demanded worship (Daniel 3). It became the Bible's picture of proud, worldly power set against God.

By the time John wrote, Christians were using "Babylon" as a code word for Rome. Peter closes his first letter with greetings from "She who is in Babylon" (1 Peter 5:13), and most scholars believe he meant Rome.

The Main Views

- **Ancient Rome.** The seven hills, the worldwide power, the wealth, and the blood of the martyrs all fit Rome in John's day. Many believe John was writing about the empire that was persecuting the church right then.
- **A rebuilt city of Babylon in the last days.** Some take the name at face value and expect Babylon in Iraq to be rebuilt as a world capital. Saddam Hussein actually began rebuilding parts of ancient Babylon in the 1980s, which got a lot of attention, but the project never became anything like a world center.
- **An end-times world system of false religion and commerce.** Many see Babylon as the whole system of idolatrous religion and greedy commerce that seduces the nations, centered on a great city in the last days. Revelation 17 seems to focus on her religious side, and Revelation 18 on her economic side.
- **Apostate Jerusalem.** A few teachers believe the great city is Jerusalem, since Revelation 11:8 calls Jerusalem "the great city" where the Lord was crucified.

In my Revelation study, I took the view that Babylon the Great is Rome together with an end-times system of false religion and political power. John's first readers would have thought of Rome, and Rome fit the description. But the full picture reaches past Rome to a final system of spiritual adultery and worldly power that will rise before Christ returns. Whatever its exact form, it will look glamorous, wealthy, and powerful, and it will hate the people of God.

Her End

Babylon looks unbeatable, but her end comes suddenly. The beast and the ten kings turn on her and destroy her (Revelation 17:16-17). Then in chapter 18 an angel cries out:

> *And he cried out in might, with a loud voice, saying, "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great, and she has become a dwelling place of demons and a prison of every unclean spirit and a prison of every unclean and hated bird."* (Revelation 18:2)

The merchants weep because no one buys their goods anymore. The ship captains stand far off and watch the smoke rise. In one hour her wealth is gone (Revelation 18:17). Meanwhile, heaven rejoices, because God has judged her for the blood of His people (18:20, 24). And the very next scene, in chapter 19, is the marriage supper of the Lamb. The prostitute falls; the Bride is honored.

What This Means for You

The warning God gives His people about Babylon is short and clear.

> *And I heard another voice out of heaven, saying, "Come out of her, My people, so that you may not share in her sins, and so that you may not receive of her plagues;"* (Revelation 18:4)

Babylon isn't only a future city. Its spirit is with us now. Every time we're tempted to build our own name, chase wealth for its own sake, trade faithfulness for comfort, or bow to whatever the culture worships, we're feeling Babylon's pull. "Come out of her" is a call to live differently: to hold money loosely, to refuse the idols of our age, and to keep our first love for Jesus.

I spent about 35 years at a public utility, from field work in 1987 to running technical training programs. A steady career can quietly become its own kind of security. Work, money and status cannot carry the weight only God should hold. Babylon always promises comfort and control, so believers keep their loyalty anchored in Christ.

And take heart. Babylon looks strong, but "the Lamb will overcome them, because He is Lord of lords and King of kings" (Revelation 17:14). That's where Part One ends: not with a mystery that frightens us, but with a King who wins.

Study Questions

1. What does the word "Mystery" on the woman's forehead tell us about how to read her name?
2. Trace Babylon through the Bible, from Genesis 11 to Revelation 18. What does it stand for?
3. What details in Revelation 17 point to Rome? What details point beyond it?
4. Which view of Babylon the Great do you find most convincing, and why?
5. Where do you feel the "pull of Babylon" in your own life?
6. What does it look like to "come out of her" in practical terms today?

Part Two: Mysteries Still Hidden

Chapter 13: Where Was the Garden of Eden?

> *And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and He put there the man whom He had formed.*
>
> Genesis 2:8 (SLB)

Part Two begins where the Bible begins, in a garden. And it opens with a question people have asked for thousands of years. If Eden was a real place, and the Bible plainly treats it as one, where was it? Could we find it today?

In my work, people want exact maps and coordinates for everything. God never gave coordinates for the Garden of Eden or told anyone to go find it. The point is not a spot on a map. He wants us looking forward to the restoration He promised in Christ.

The Passage

> *And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and He put there the man whom He had formed. And the LORD God caused to sprout from the ground every tree desirable in appearance and good for food, and the tree of life in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And a river was going out from Eden to water the garden, and from there it was divided and became four heads. The name of the one **is** Pishon; it **is** the one that goes around all the land of Havilah, where the gold **is**. And the gold of that land **is** good; the bdellium and the onyx stone **are** there.* (Genesis 2:8-12)

> *And the name of the second river **is** Gihon; it **is** the one that goes around all the land of Cush. And the name of the third river **is** Tigris; it **is** the one that goes east of Assyria. And the fourth river, it **is** Euphrates.* (Genesis 2:13-14)

The Question

Moses gives us real geography. He names four rivers and three lands. Two of the rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates, still flow today through Iraq and down to the Persian Gulf. So it seems simple. Find where those rivers meet the other two, and you've found Eden.

The trouble is that the description doesn't match the map as it stands now. Moses says one river went out from Eden and divided into four heads. Today, the Tigris and Euphrates don't split off from a single river. They start in separate springs in the mountains of eastern Turkey and join near the end of their course, not the beginning. And nobody knows for certain which rivers the Pishon and Gihon were.

What We Know for Certain

- **Eden was a real place.** Genesis presents it as history, not myth. It has a direction ("in the east"), rivers, lands, and minerals. Later Scripture treats it the same way (Ezekiel 28:13; Joel 2:3).
- **The garden was in Eden, not the same as Eden.** "The LORD God planted a garden in Eden." Eden was a region; the garden was a place within it.

- **It was guarded after the fall.** God placed the cherubim and a flaming, whirling sword at the east of the garden "to guard the way to the tree of life" (Genesis 3:24). Mankind was shut out.
- **The Tigris and Euphrates are named.** The Hebrew names are *Hiddekel* and *Perath*. The Hiddekel is identified as the Tigris in Daniel 10:4, and Perath is the normal Old Testament word for the Euphrates.
- **Paradise will be restored.** The Bible ends where it began, with a river of life and the tree of life, now open to God's people forever (Revelation 22:1-2).

The Main Views

- **Southern Mesopotamia, near the Persian Gulf.** Many scholars place Eden near where the Tigris and Euphrates come together in southern Iraq. Some have suggested the Pishon and Gihon were rivers that once flowed into the same area. In the 1980s, archaeologist Juris Zarins proposed that the Pishon was a now-dry riverbed running across Arabia, which satellite images had revealed, and that the Gihon was the Karun River in Iran. On that theory, Eden may now lie under the waters of the Persian Gulf, which was dry land before sea levels rose.
- **The mountains of Armenia and eastern Turkey.** Others point out that rivers divide going downstream only in a delta, and that the Tigris and Euphrates both begin in the highlands of eastern Turkey. On this view, Eden sat in that high country, where four rivers once flowed out in different directions.
- **A world reshaped by the flood.** Many who believe the flood of Noah's day covered the whole earth think Eden's geography was wiped out. "All the springs of the great deep were split open, and the floodgates of the heavens were opened" (Genesis 7:11). A catastrophe like that would have reshaped mountains, rivers, and coastlines. On this view, Noah's descendants gave old names to new rivers, the way settlers named places in America after towns back home. That would explain why the Tigris and Euphrates of today don't match the description exactly.
- **Other proposals.** People have placed Eden in Ethiopia (because the Gihon "goes around all the land of Cush," and Cush often means the region south of Egypt), in Israel, and even in places as far off as Missouri. None of these has much support.

Where Scripture Is Silent

The Bible never tells us to look for Eden. It never says the garden still exists on earth, and it never says the cherubim are still standing guard somewhere in Iraq. Nobody in Scripture after Adam is ever said to have visited it. The point of Genesis 2 and 3 is not to give us a treasure map. It's to show us what we lost and why.

Where I Land

I believe Eden was a real place, probably somewhere in the region of Mesopotamia, since Moses tied it to the Tigris and Euphrates. But I also believe the flood changed the face of the earth so much that we can't pin down the spot today. That isn't a problem for the Bible. Moses wrote for people who lived after the flood, and he used the river names they knew to tell them, roughly, where it all started.

Honestly, I think God is in no hurry for us to find it. We weren't sent out of Eden so we could find our way back by digging. We were sent out so we would look for the Redeemer God promised in Genesis 3:15. The way back to the tree of life isn't through a garden in Iraq. It's through the cross.

What This Means for You

Every human heart remembers Eden somehow. We long for a world without death, without shame, without tears, where we walk with God in the cool of the day. That longing is real, because the place was real.

And the good news is that it's coming back. John saw "a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, flowing out of the throne of God and of the Lamb," and the tree of life on either side (Revelation 22:1-2). What Adam lost, Jesus restores. Better still, the new Eden will never be lost again.

Study Questions

1. What details in Genesis 2:8-14 show that Moses meant Eden to be understood as a real place?
2. Why doesn't the description of the four rivers match today's map exactly?
3. Review the main views on Eden's location. Which do you think is most likely?
4. How might the flood of Noah's day explain the differences in geography?
5. Why do you think God never told anyone to go looking for Eden?
6. Compare Genesis 2 with Revelation 22:1-5. What is restored, and what is better?

Chapter 14: Cain's Wife and the Mark of Cain

> *And the LORD said to him, "Therefore, anyone who kills Cain, sevenfold he shall be avenged." And the LORD put a sign for Cain, so that anyone who found him would not strike him.*
>
> Genesis 4:15 (SLB)

If you've ever talked about the Bible with a skeptic, you've probably heard this one. "If Adam and Eve were the first people, and Cain killed Abel, where did Cain get his wife?" It gets asked as if it's a knockout punch. It isn't. But it's a fair question, and so is the one that goes with it: what was the mark God put on Cain?

The Passage

> *And Cain said to the LORD, "My iniquity **is** too great to bear. Look, You have driven me today from the face of the ground, and from Your face I shall be hidden; and I shall be a wanderer and a fugitive on the earth, and it will be **that** everyone who finds me will kill me." And the LORD said to him, "Therefore, anyone who kills Cain, sevenfold he shall be avenged." And the LORD put a sign for Cain, so that anyone who found him would not strike him. And Cain went out from before the LORD and dwelt in the land of Nod, east of Eden. And Cain knew his wife, and she conceived and bore Enoch. And he was building a city, and he called the name of the city according to the name of his son, Enoch.* (Genesis 4:13-17)

The Question

Genesis 4 tells us Cain was afraid that "everyone who finds me will kill me." Who was everyone? Then it says "Cain knew his wife." Where did she come from? And what was the "sign" God put on Cain so that no one would kill him?

What We Know for Certain

- **Adam and Eve had many children.** Genesis names only three sons, Cain, Abel, and Seth, because they matter to the story. But it tells us plainly that Adam "fathered sons and daughters" (Genesis 5:4), and that he lived 930 years (5:5). That's a lot of time for a lot of children.
- **All people come from Adam and Eve.** "The man called the name of his wife Eve, because she was the mother of every living one" (Genesis 3:20). Paul told the Athenians God "made from one blood every nation of men" (Acts 17:26).
- **Cain married before his son Enoch was born.** The text doesn't say when he married. It may have been before he killed Abel. Genesis doesn't tell events in strict time order.
- **God protected Cain.** The sign wasn't a curse. It was mercy. God promised sevenfold vengeance on anyone who killed him.

Cain's Wife

If every human being came from Adam and Eve, then the only answer is that Cain married a sister, or possibly a niece. That makes modern readers uncomfortable, and it should, because God later forbade it. But think it through.

The law against marrying a close relative came much later, in the time of Moses (Leviticus 18:9). Before then, it wasn't forbidden. Abraham married his half-sister Sarah: "she truly is my sister, the daughter of my father, only not the daughter of my mother" (Genesis 20:12). Nobody in Genesis treats that as sin.

Why did God later forbid it? One reason is genetic. Children of close relatives are more likely to inherit harmful traits, because both parents may carry the same defective genes. At the beginning, the human race had been created very good and had not yet built up the load of genetic mistakes that comes with generations of a fallen world. Over time, those mistakes added up, and the risk grew. By Moses' day, God's law protected families from it. The law also protected families from abuse and confusion, which is the main reason Leviticus gives.

So the answer to the skeptic's question is simple. Cain married one of Adam's daughters. And the people Cain feared were other descendants of Adam, either already born or soon to be. By the time Cain built a city, the population had had plenty of time to grow.

The Mark of Cain

This one is harder, because the Bible doesn't describe the sign at all. The Hebrew word is *'ot*, the same word used for the rainbow as a sign of God's covenant (Genesis 9:12-13) and for the miraculous signs in Egypt. It means a sign, a token, something that points beyond itself.

Here are the main ideas people have had.

- **A visible mark on his body,** perhaps on his forehead, warning others to leave him alone. Many Jewish and Christian writers have assumed this.
- **A sign given to Cain**, rather than placed on him, to assure him that God would protect him. The SLB reads "the LORD put a sign for Cain," which allows this reading, much like the rainbow was a sign for Noah.
- **A name, a protective word, or something else** that marked him as under God's protection.

We simply don't know which is right. The text doesn't say.

A Lie That Must Be Named

I have to say something here plainly. For centuries, some people taught that the mark of Cain was dark skin, and used that idea to defend slavery and racism. Some also claimed the "curse of Ham" in Genesis 9 did the same thing. Both teachings are lies.

The Bible never says what the mark was, and it never connects it with skin color. The curse in Genesis 9:25 was on Canaan, not on Ham's other sons, and the Canaanites were not Africans. And besides all that, Cain's line, as far as we know, was wiped out in the flood. Every person alive today descends from Noah. Acts 17:26 says God made every nation from one blood. There is one human race. Anyone who uses

the Bible to look down on people because of their skin is twisting Scripture, and God will hold him accountable for it.

Where Scripture Is Silent

We aren't told the name of Cain's wife, which sister she was, or when they married. We aren't told what the mark looked like. And we aren't told what became of Cain in the end.

Where I Land

I believe Cain married his sister, or possibly a niece, before God forbade such marriages, and that the people he feared were his own relatives. On the mark, I don't know, and I don't think anyone does. What matters is that God showed mercy to a murderer.

What This Means for You

That's the part of this story that gets me. Cain killed his own brother out of jealousy, lied to God about it ("Am I my brother's keeper?"), and then complained that his punishment was too hard. And God still protected him.

That doesn't mean Cain got away with it. He lost his home, his work, and his place before the LORD. But God's mercy reached even him. If God was that patient with Cain, don't ever think you've gone too far for Him. The difference is that Cain "went out from before the LORD" (Genesis 4:16). You don't have to. You can come in.

Study Questions

1. Why do skeptics ask "Where did Cain get his wife?" How would you answer them?
2. What does Genesis 5:4 tell us about Adam's family?
3. Why was marrying a close relative not forbidden at first, and why did God forbid it later?
4. What are the main views on what the "mark of Cain" was?
5. How has this passage been misused to support racism, and what does Scripture actually teach about the human race?
6. What does God's protection of Cain teach you about His mercy?

Chapter 15: The Sons of God and the Nephilim

> *The Nephilim were on the earth in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God went in to the daughters of mankind and they bore **children** to them. Those **were** the mighty **men** who **were** from long ago, the men of renown.*
>
> Genesis 6:4 (SLB)

If there's one Bible mystery that comes up more than any other, it's this one. Four short verses in Genesis 6 have produced more books, sermons, arguments, and late-night debates than almost any passage in the Old Testament. They mention "the sons of God," "the daughters of mankind," and a group called the Nephilim. Then the story moves on to the flood and never fully explains them.

The Passage

> *And it came about, when mankind began to become many on the face of the ground, and daughters were born to them, and the sons of God saw the daughters of mankind, that they **were** good, and they took for themselves wives from all whom they chose. And the LORD said, "My Spirit shall not remain in mankind forever, in that he also **is** flesh; and his days shall be one hundred and twenty years." The Nephilim were on the earth in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God went in to the daughters of mankind and they bore **children** to them. Those **were** the mighty **men** who **were** from long ago, the men of renown.* (Genesis 6:1-4)

The Question

Who were "the sons of God"? Who were the Nephilim? Were they giants? Were they the children of angels and human women? And how could Nephilim show up again in Canaan after the flood, if the flood wiped out everyone but Noah's family?

What We Know for Certain

- **Something deeply wrong was happening before the flood.** Right after these verses, "the LORD saw that the evil of mankind was great on the earth, and every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the day" (Genesis 6:5). Whatever Genesis 6:1-4 describes, it's part of the reason for the flood.
- **God set a limit.** "His days shall be one hundred and twenty years." Many read this as a countdown to the flood: 120 years until judgment. Others read it as a new limit on the length of human life. The first fits the context best, though human lifespans did drop sharply after the flood.
- **The Nephilim were known as mighty men.** They were "the mighty men who were from long ago, the men of renown." People told stories about them.
- **The word Nephilim reappears once.** When the twelve spies came back from Canaan, ten of them reported, "there we saw the Nephilim, the sons of Anak, from the Nephilim; and we were in our own eyes like grasshoppers" (Numbers 13:33).
- **Giants were real.** Whatever we think of the Nephilim, the Bible clearly describes very tall people groups in Canaan: the Anakim, the Emim, and the Rephaim (Deuteronomy 2:10-11). King Og of Bashan had an

iron bed about 13.5 feet long (Deuteronomy 3:11). Goliath was a giant of a man (1 Samuel 17:4). We'll follow these giants below.

What Does "Nephilim" Mean?

Nobody is completely sure. The most common explanation is that it comes from the Hebrew verb *naphal*, to fall. On that reading, the Nephilim are "fallen ones," either because they fell upon others in violence or because they came from fallen beings. When the Old Testament was translated into Greek, the translators used the word *gigantes*, giants, and that's how the King James Version came to say "There were giants in the earth in those days." The word may point to size, or to might, or both.

The Main Views on "the Sons of God"

View One: Fallen Angels

On this view, the sons of God were angels who rebelled against God, took human women as wives, and fathered the Nephilim, a race of violent giants.

- **The phrase "sons of God" means angels elsewhere in the Old Testament.** In Job, "the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came in their midst" (Job 1:6). At creation, "the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy" (Job 38:7).
- **Jude and Peter seem to point to it.** Jude speaks of "angels who did not keep their own domain, but left their own dwelling," whom God has kept in chains for judgment. Then he says Sodom and Gomorrah "in the same manner as these" indulged in sexual immorality and went "after other flesh" (Jude 6-7). Peter mentions angels who sinned and were cast into Tartarus, right before he mentions Noah and the flood (2 Peter 2:4-5).
- **It explains the "mighty men."** Children of an unnatural union would explain why the Nephilim were so remarkable and why the judgment was so severe.
- **It's the oldest view we know of.** The Book of Enoch, a Jewish writing from the centuries before Christ, tells this story in detail. Jude quotes from Enoch (Jude 14-15), which shows the book was known to him, though quoting it doesn't make the whole book Scripture. Josephus, writing in the first century, also took this view, and so did many early Christian writers, such as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Tertullian.

Here's how the Book of Enoch tells it, in the translation of R. H. Charles (1917):

> "And it came to pass when the children of men had multiplied that in those days were born unto them beautiful and comely daughters. And the angels, the children of the heaven, saw and lusted after them, and said to one another: 'Come, let us choose us wives from among the children of men and beget us children.' ... And they were in all two hundred; who descended in the days of Jared on the summit of Mount Hermon." (1 Enoch 6:1-2, 6)

And Josephus writes:

> "For many angels of God accompanied with women, and begat sons that proved unjust, and despisers of all that was good, on account of the confidence they had in their own strength; for the tradition is, that these men did what resembled the acts of those whom the Grecians call giants." (*Antiquities of the Jews* 1.3.1, Whiston translation)

The main objection is Jesus' statement that in the resurrection people "neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels of God in heaven" (Matthew 22:30). Doesn't that mean angels can't marry? Those who hold this view answer that Jesus was talking about angels "in heaven," the holy angels who kept their place, not about fallen angels who left it. Jesus says angels don't marry. He doesn't say fallen angels couldn't do something unnatural.

View Two: The Line of Seth

On this view, the sons of God were the godly descendants of Adam's son Seth, and the daughters of mankind were the ungodly descendants of Cain. The sin of Genesis 6 was that God's people married unbelievers for their looks, and the family of faith was swallowed up by the world.

- **The context is about two family lines.** Genesis 4 traces the line of Cain. Genesis 5 traces the line of Seth, the line in which "calling on the name of the LORD was begun" (Genesis 4:26). Genesis 6 brings them together.
- **God's people are called His sons.** Israel is called God's son (Exodus 4:22), and Hosea says they will be called "Sons of the living God" (Hosea 1:10).
- **The judgment falls on mankind.** God judges humans in the flood, not angels.
- **It avoids the problem of angels having children.** Angels are spirits (Hebrews 1:14).

This view became common in the church from the 200s and 300s on, through writers like Julius Africanus and later Augustine (*The City of God* 15.23), and it was the view of many Reformers. The main objection is that Genesis never calls the Sethites "sons of God," and that it doesn't explain why their children would be "mighty men" or Nephilim. Godly men marrying ungodly women produces ungodly children, not giants.

View Three: Kings and Rulers

On this view, the sons of God were powerful rulers, kings who claimed to be divine or who were called "gods" in the ancient world. They took as many women as they pleased, building harems by force. Psalm 82:6 uses "gods" and "sons of the Most High" for human judges. Some ancient Jewish translations of Genesis took the phrase this way, as "sons of the great ones" or "sons of the nobles." The objection is that "sons of God" never clearly means kings anywhere else in the Old Testament.

The Giants After the Flood

Whatever you decide about Genesis 6, the Bible is clear that unusually tall people lived in Canaan after the flood. It's worth following their trail, because it runs right through Israel's history.

- **The sons of Anak at Hebron.** When the spies went up into the land, they came to Hebron, "and there were Ahiman, Sheshai, and Talmai, the descendants of Anak" (Numbers 13:22). Their size became a proverb. Moses reminded Israel of the saying, "Who can stand before the sons of Anak?" (Deuteronomy 9:2).
- **Other tall peoples.** The Ammonites called the earlier people of their land Zamzummim, "a people great and numerous and tall like the Anakim; and the LORD destroyed them from before them" (Deuteronomy 2:21). Amos says of the Amorites, "whose height was like the height of cedars" (Amos 2:9). That may be poetry, but it shows how Israel remembered them.

- **Og, the last of the Rephaim.** Og, king of Bashan, "remained of the remnant of the Rephaim." His iron bed was about 13.5 feet long and 6 feet wide (Deuteronomy 3:11). A bed is usually longer than the man, so we shouldn't assume Og was 13 feet tall, but he was clearly huge.
- **Caleb finishes the job.** Forty-five years after the spies' report, the same Caleb who had trusted God drove out "the three sons of the Anak: Sheshai and Ahiman and Talmai" from Hebron (Joshua 15:14). The giants who frightened ten spies were beaten by one old man who believed God.
- **A few were left in Philistia.** Joshua cut off the Anakim from the hill country. "There were not left Anakim in the land of the sons of Israel; only in Gaza, in Gath, and in Ashdod did they remain" (Joshua 11:22). Notice the name Gath.
- **Goliath of Gath.** Centuries later, the champion who came out against Israel was "Goliath, from Gath" (1 Samuel 17:4). He came from one of the very towns where the last Anakim survived.
- **The last of them.** David's men killed four more giants from Gath, one of them "a man of stature, and the fingers of his hands and the toes of his feet were six and six, twenty-four in number." The text says, "These four were born to the Rapha in Gath, and they fell by the hand of David and by the hand of his servants" (2 Samuel 21:20, 22). After that, the giants disappear from the Bible.

So from Moses to David, Scripture tracks a group of very large people from Hebron to Gath until they're gone. Josephus says that in his day the bones of the giants of Hebron were still being shown to visitors (*Antiquities of the Jews* 5.2.3). We'll come back to modern claims about giant skeletons in Chapter 35.

How Tall Was Goliath?

Here's one detail most people don't know. The standard Hebrew text, which the SLB follows, gives Goliath's height as "six cubits and a span," about 9 feet 9 inches. But the oldest copy of 1 Samuel we have, a Dead Sea Scroll from Qumran, and the ancient Greek translation both read "four cubits and a span," about 6 feet 9 inches. Josephus gives the same shorter number: "he was of four cubits and a span in tallness" (*Antiquities of the Jews* 6.9.1). Faithful scholars disagree about which reading is original. Either way, Goliath towered over the ordinary soldiers of his day, and his body armor alone weighed five thousand shekels, about 125 pounds (1 Samuel 17:5). The point of the story doesn't change. A young man with a sling and faith in the living God brought him down.

How Did Nephilim Survive the Flood?

If the flood destroyed everyone except Noah's family, how did the spies see Nephilim in Canaan? There are a few answers.

- **The spies exaggerated.** The ten spies "brought out a bad report" (Numbers 13:32). They were trying to scare the people out of going in. Calling the Anakim "Nephilim" may have been their way of saying, "These are the monsters from the old stories." Notice that Moses doesn't repeat the word in his own narration.
- **It happened again after the flood.** Genesis 6:4 says the Nephilim were on the earth "in those days, and also afterward." Some take "afterward" to mean that the same thing happened again after the flood.
- **"Nephilim" became a general word for giants.** The Anakim may simply have been very large people, called Nephilim because of their size, not because of their ancestry.

I think the first answer is the most likely. The report came from men God judged for their unbelief.

Why It Mattered: The Promised Seed

Those who hold the fallen-angel view often point to the big picture. Right after the fall, God promised that the woman's seed would crush the serpent: "he shall bruise you on the head, and you shall bruise him on the heel" (Genesis 3:15). From then on, the Bible follows a family line all the way to Jesus.

On this view, Genesis 6 was an attack on that line. If Satan could corrupt the human race itself, there would be no truly human Savior to be born. And it's interesting how Genesis describes Noah right after the Nephilim passage: "Noah was a righteous man; blameless he was in his generations; with God Noah walked" (Genesis 6:9). The word "blameless" is used elsewhere for animals without defect for sacrifice. Some take "blameless he was in his generations" to mean his family line was untouched by the corruption around him. That's possible, but the plain sense is that Noah lived a blameless life among his generation. I mention this view because many teachers hold it, not because the text requires it.

What the Bible does show plainly is that God protected the line of promise through the flood, through Abraham, through David, and all the way to Bethlehem. Nothing could stop it.

"As the Days of Noah Were"

You'll hear some teachers say that the Nephilim will return in the last days, because Jesus said, "just as the days of Noah were, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be." Read the next verses, though. Jesus explains what He means: "in the days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered into the ark, and they did not know until the flood came and took all away" (Matthew 24:37-39).

Jesus' point is that people will be going on with ordinary life, unready and unconcerned, right up until judgment falls. He doesn't mention giants or angels. Be careful with anyone who builds a whole end-times system on Nephilim from that verse. Jesus told us what He meant.

Where Scripture Is Silent

The Bible never describes the Nephilim's size. It never names the sons of God. It never says how angels could father children, or even plainly that they did. Every view above has to fill in some gaps. The Book of Enoch fills in many details, but it isn't Scripture, and we can't build doctrine on it.

Where I Land

Faithful, Bible-believing teachers hold each of these views, and I'm not going to pretend the question is simple. The fallen-angel view has the strongest support from the way "sons of God" is used elsewhere in the Old Testament, from Jude and Peter, and from the oldest Jewish and Christian readers. The Sethite view has the advantage of keeping the focus on human sin, which is where Genesis 6:5 puts it. I find the fallen-angel view the most convincing, but I hold it with an open hand, and I don't think anyone should break fellowship over it.

What This Means for You

Whatever the sons of God were, Genesis 6 shows how far corruption can spread when people throw off God's boundaries. And it shows that God sees it, grieves over it (Genesis 6:6), and will judge it.

But don't miss the last word in the passage. "And Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD" (Genesis 6:8). In the middle of the darkest generation in history, one man walked with God. You can too, no matter how dark things get around you.

Study Questions

1. What do we know for certain from Genesis 6:1-4 and the verses that follow?
2. What does the word "Nephilim" probably mean, and why did older English Bibles say "giants"?
3. Lay out the three main views of "the sons of God." What is the strongest point for each?
4. How do Jude 6-7 and 2 Peter 2:4-5 affect your view?
5. How would you explain the Nephilim in Numbers 13:33?
6. Trace the giants from Hebron to Gath. What does Caleb's victory teach about faith and fear?
7. What did Jesus mean by "as the days of Noah were" in Matthew 24:37-39?
8. What does Genesis 6:8-9 teach about living faithfully in a corrupt generation?

Chapter 16: The Men Who Did Not Die

> *By faith Enoch was taken up so as not to see death, and he was not found, because God had taken him up; for before his taking up he has been commended **as** having pleased God.*
>
> Hebrews 11:5 (SLB)

"It is appointed to men to die once, and after this judgment" (Hebrews 9:27). That's the rule for every human being. But the Bible names two men who never died at all, and a third whose burial was handled by God Himself and whose body became the subject of an argument between an archangel and the devil. Their stories are short, and they leave us with a lot of questions.

The Passage: Enoch

> *And Enoch lived sixty-five years, and he fathered Methuselah. And Enoch walked with God after he fathered Methuselah three hundred years, and he fathered sons and daughters. And all the days of Enoch were three hundred and sixty-five years. And Enoch walked with God, and he **was** not, for God took him.* (Genesis 5:21-24)

Genesis 5 is a list of funerals. Over and over it says the same thing: so-and-so lived this many years, fathered sons and daughters, "and he died." Eight times in that chapter. Then we get to Enoch, the seventh generation from Adam, and the pattern breaks. "And Enoch walked with God, and he was not, for God took him."

> *By faith Enoch was taken up so as not to see death, and he was not found, because God had taken him up; for before his taking up he has been commended **as** having pleased God.*
> (Hebrews 11:5)

The Passage: Elijah

> *And it was, they **were** walking, walking on, and speaking; and look, a chariot of fire and horses of fire, and they separated between the two of them; and Elijah went up in the whirlwind to the heavens. And Elisha **was** seeing, and he **was** crying out, "My father, my father, the chariotry of Israel and its horsemen!" And he did not see him again. And he took hold of his clothes and tore them into two pieces.* (2 Kings 2:11-12)

Notice what the text actually says. The chariot of fire and horses of fire came between Elijah and Elisha, separating them. Then "Elijah went up in the whirlwind to the heavens." The old spiritual sings about a chariot swinging low to carry Elijah home, and paintings show him riding it. The text says the whirlwind took him up. The chariot may have carried him, but Scripture puts the weight on the whirlwind (2 Kings 2:1, 11).

The prophets in Jericho didn't believe he was gone. They thought the Spirit of the LORD might have dropped him on a mountain somewhere.

> *And they said to him, "Look, please, there are with your servants fifty men, sons of valor. Please let them go and search for your master, lest the Spirit of the LORD has carried him off and cast him on one of the mountains or into one of the valleys." And he said, "You shall not send." And they urged him until **he was** ashamed, and he said, "Send." And they sent fifty men, and they searched three days and did not find him.* (2 Kings 2:16-17)

The Passage: Moses

Moses did die. But what happened afterward is a mystery of its own.

> *And Moses the servant of the LORD died there in the land of Moab, according to the mouth of the LORD. And He buried him in the valley in the land of Moab opposite Beth-peor, and no man knows his burial place until this day.* (Deuteronomy 34:5-6)

> *But Michael the archangel, when he was disputing with the devil, arguing about the body of Moses, did not dare to bring against **him** a judgment of blasphemy, but said, "May **the** Lord rebuke you!"* (Jude 1:9)

The Questions

Where did Enoch and Elijah go? Are they in heaven now, in bodies, or something else? Why did God bury Moses Himself, and why would Michael and the devil argue about his body? And if Hebrews 9:27 says all men die once, will Enoch and Elijah still have to die someday?

What We Know for Certain

- **Enoch walked with God.** The phrase is used twice in four verses. He pleased God by faith (Hebrews 11:5-6). He was also a prophet; Jude says he "prophesied" about the Lord coming with His holy myriads to judge the ungodly (Jude 14-15).
- **Enoch and Elijah did not die.** Hebrews says Enoch was taken up "so as not to see death." Elijah was taken up while walking and talking with Elisha. No one found either body.
- **Moses died, and God buried him.** No one knows the place.
- **Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus.** On the mountain of transfiguration, "Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him" (Matthew 17:3). Luke says they spoke "of His departure which He was about to fulfill in Jerusalem" (Luke 9:31). Both were alive and conscious, more than 800 years after Elijah was taken and well over 1,200 years after Moses died.
- **Elijah's return was promised.** "Look, I am sending to you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and awesome day of the LORD" (Malachi 4:5). The angel Gabriel said John the Baptist would go "in the spirit and power of Elijah" (Luke 1:17), and Jesus said John was the Elijah who was to come (Matthew 11:14; 17:11-13). Yet Jesus also said "Elijah indeed comes first, and will restore all things" (Matthew 17:11).

Where Did They Go?

The Hebrew word for heaven, *shamayim*, is used for the sky, outer space, and the dwelling place of God. Elijah went up "to the heavens." Jesus told Nicodemus, "no one has gone up into heaven except the One who came down out of heaven, the Son of Man" (John 3:13). Some take that to mean Enoch and Elijah

went somewhere other than God's throne room. Others take Jesus to mean that no one had gone up to heaven to bring back knowledge of heavenly things, the way He had come down with it. The context, Jesus explaining heavenly things to Nicodemus, fits the second reading better.

What kind of body do they have? We're not told. Paul says "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Corinthians 15:50). Most likely, Enoch and Elijah were changed, the way living believers will be changed at the Rapture (1 Corinthians 15:51-52). In fact, many see them as a preview of that very thing: believers taken up to God without dying.

Will They Die Someday?

This is where Revelation 11 comes in. Two witnesses will prophesy in Jerusalem during the Tribulation. They'll be killed, lie dead in the street for three and a half days, and then rise and go up to heaven. Many teachers, from the early church on, have believed the two witnesses will be Enoch and Elijah, coming back to die the death Hebrews 9:27 says every man must die. Others think they'll be Moses and Elijah. We'll look at that in Chapter 31.

I'll say this much. Hebrews 9:27 states the general rule. It isn't meant to rule out exceptions God Himself makes. The generation of believers caught up at the Rapture will never die either (1 Corinthians 15:51). So I don't think Enoch and Elijah must come back to die. They may, but Hebrews 9:27 doesn't require it.

What Josephus Says

Josephus, writing in the first century, summed up what the Jewish people of his day believed about both men:

> "Now at this time it was that Elijah disappeared from among men, and no one knows of his death to this very day ... And indeed, as to Elijah, and as to Enoch, who was before the deluge, it is written in the sacred books that they disappeared, but so that nobody knew that they died." (*Antiquities of the Jews* 9.2.2, Whiston translation)

About Moses, Josephus tells a curious tradition: that as Moses was saying goodbye to Eleazar and Joshua, "a cloud stood over him on the sudden, and he disappeared in a certain valley," and that Moses wrote in the holy books that he died so that no one would say he had been taken to God (*Antiquities* 4.8.48). That's Josephus, not Scripture. Deuteronomy says plainly that Moses died.

Michael and the Body of Moses

Jude's little verse about Michael arguing with the devil over Moses' body is found nowhere else in the Bible. The early church writer Origen, around A.D. 230, said it came from a Jewish writing called the *Ascension of Moses* (*On First Principles* 3.2.1). Only pieces of that writing survive, and the part about Michael and the devil is lost.

Why would they argue over a body? Here are a few suggestions.

- **The devil wanted to make Moses' grave a shrine.** Israel had a weakness for idolatry. Later, they even burned incense to the bronze serpent Moses had made (2 Kings 18:4). If the people had known where

Moses was buried, his tomb might have become a place of worship. God buried him in secret, and the devil may have wanted to expose it.

- **The devil claimed Moses as his own.** Moses had killed an Egyptian and had sinned at Meribah. The accuser may have argued that Moses didn't deserve honor.
- **God was preparing Moses for the transfiguration.** Some suggest God raised Moses' body, and the devil objected. That would explain how Moses could appear on the mountain. But the transfiguration doesn't require a resurrected body, and Scripture doesn't say Moses was raised.

We don't know which, if any, is right. Jude's point isn't the details of the argument. His point is how Michael spoke. Even the archangel didn't dare bring a slanderous judgment against the devil, but said, "May the Lord rebuke you!" Jude is rebuking false teachers who speak arrogantly about spiritual powers they don't understand (Jude 8-10).

Where Scripture Is Silent

We aren't told where Enoch and Elijah are now, what kind of bodies they have, or whether they'll return. We aren't told what Michael and the devil said, or why they disputed. And no one, to this day, knows where Moses is buried.

Where I Land

I believe Enoch and Elijah were taken bodily into God's presence without dying, changed in a way that fit them for heaven, as a picture of what God will do for His church at the Rapture. On the two witnesses, I'll lay out the views in Chapter 31. On Moses' body, I think the most likely reason God buried him in secret was to keep Israel from turning his grave into an idol, and the devil may well have wanted exactly that.

What This Means for You

The most important line in these stories isn't about whirlwinds or archangels. It's this: "Enoch walked with God." He didn't do anything flashy that we know of. He walked with God for three hundred years, through a world that was getting more wicked by the day, and he pleased God by faith.

You can do that. Walking with God means going His direction, at His pace, day after day. And here's the promise for everyone who walks with Him. Whether we die and are raised, or we're alive when He comes and are changed, we'll be taken up to be with Him. Enoch was just the first.

Study Questions

1. How does Enoch's story break the pattern of Genesis 5?
2. What does Hebrews 11:5-6 say about why Enoch was taken?
3. Read 2 Kings 2:1-12 carefully. What took Elijah up to heaven, according to the text?
4. Why do you think God buried Moses Himself and kept the place hidden?
5. What was Jude's point in mentioning Michael's dispute with the devil?
6. What would it look like for you to "walk with God" this week?

Chapter 17: Melchizedek, King of Salem

> *The LORD has sworn, and He will not relent: "You **are** a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek."*
>
> Psalm 110:4 (SLB)

He appears in three verses of Genesis, then vanishes. A thousand years later, David mentions him once in a psalm. A thousand years after that, the writer of Hebrews spends most of three chapters on him. Melchizedek is one of the most mysterious people in the Bible, and he matters far more than his three verses would suggest.

The Passage

Abram has just rescued his nephew Lot by defeating four kings who had raided Sodom. As he comes home, two kings come out to meet him: the king of Sodom and a king nobody has heard of before.

> *And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; and he **was** a priest of God Most High. And he blessed him and said, "Blessed **be** Abram by God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth; and blessed **be** God Most High, who has delivered your adversaries into your hand." And he gave him a tenth of everything.* (Genesis 14:18-20)

> *For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of God Most High, who met Abraham returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him, to whom also Abraham apportioned a tenth of all, **being** first, when translated, king of righteousness, and then also king of Salem, which is king of peace, without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but made like the Son of God, remains a priest perpetually.* (Hebrews 7:1-3)

The Question

Who was Melchizedek? Where did he come from? How was there a priest of God Most High in Canaan before Israel, before the law, before the tabernacle? And what does Hebrews mean when it says he was "without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life"? Was he an ordinary man, an angel, or the Son of God Himself?

What We Know for Certain

- **He was a king and a priest at the same time.** That's unusual. In Israel, the two offices were kept separate. Kings came from Judah, priests from Levi. When King Uzziah tried to burn incense in the temple, God struck him with leprosy (2 Chronicles 26:16-21).
- **He worshiped the true God.** He was "a priest of God Most High," and he blessed Abram in the name of "God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth." Abram used the same title when he spoke to the king of Sodom right afterward (Genesis 14:22).
- **Abram honored him.** Abram gave him a tenth of everything, and Melchizedek blessed Abram. Hebrews points out that "the lesser is blessed by the better" (Hebrews 7:7). Abraham, the father of Israel, bowed to this priest.

- **His name and city have meaning.** "Melchizedek" means "king of righteousness." Salem means "peace," and it is almost certainly the early name of Jerusalem. Psalm 76:2 puts Salem in parallel with Zion: "And His lair was in Salem, and His den in Zion." Josephus says the same.
- **The Messiah would be a priest in his order.** In Psalm 110, God swears to David's Lord, "You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek." Jesus quoted the opening of this psalm about Himself (Matthew 22:41-45), and Hebrews applies verse 4 to Him again and again.

What Josephus Says

> "Now the king of Sodom met him at a certain place, which they called The King's Dale, where Melchisedec, king of the city Salem, received him. That name signifies, the righteous king: and such he was, without dispute, insomuch that, on this account, he was made the priest of God: however, they afterward called Salem Jerusalem." (*Antiquities of the Jews* 1.10.2, Whiston translation)

Among the Dead Sea Scrolls, found starting in 1947, is a short and badly damaged text scholars call 11QMelchizedek. It pictures Melchizedek as a heavenly figure who brings release to captives and judgment on evil in the last days, using language from Isaiah 61 and Leviticus 25. It shows that some Jews in the century before Jesus already saw Melchizedek as more than a minor character. It isn't Scripture, but it's a window into what people were thinking when Hebrews was written.

What Does "Without Father, Without Mother" Mean?

This is the heart of the mystery. There are two main ways to read Hebrews 7:3.

View One: A Real Man Whose Record Is a Picture of Christ

Most Bible teachers believe Melchizedek was a real human king of Salem, a Canaanite who still worshiped the true God, like Job outside Israel or Jethro in Midian. Hebrews isn't saying he had no parents at all. It's saying Scripture records none. In a book like Genesis, where genealogies matter so much, he appears with no father named, no ancestors, no birth, no death. The writer of Hebrews says that silence was by design. He was "made like the Son of God," a picture painted in history, so that later readers would see in him a priest whose priesthood didn't depend on family line.

That matters because the Levitical priests had to prove their descent from Aaron (Ezra 2:61-62). Jesus came from Judah, not Levi. So how could He be a priest? Hebrews answers: He's a priest of a different order, the order of Melchizedek, which rests "not according to a law of a fleshly commandment, but according to the power of an indestructible life" (Hebrews 7:16).

View Two: An Appearance of Christ Himself

Others believe Melchizedek was the Son of God appearing in human form before His birth in Bethlehem, as He may have done when He appeared to Abraham in Genesis 18. On this view, "without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life" is literal, because only God has no beginning.

The main problem with this view is that Hebrews says Melchizedek was "made like the Son of God." You don't say someone is like himself. And Jesus is a priest "according to the order of Melchizedek"

(Hebrews 5:10), which means Melchizedek's priesthood came first as a pattern, and Christ's priesthood followed it. If Melchizedek were Christ, the comparison would collapse.

Other Views

Some ancient Jewish writers identified Melchizedek with Shem, the son of Noah, who would still have been alive in Abram's day according to the numbers in Genesis 11. That's an interesting idea, but if it were true, Hebrews' point about his having no recorded genealogy wouldn't work, since Shem's genealogy is recorded. Others have suggested he was an angel. Hebrews spends its first two chapters showing that Jesus is greater than angels and never hints that Melchizedek was one.

Where Scripture Is Silent

We aren't told how Melchizedek came to know the true God, how long he reigned, who his people were, or what happened to him. That silence is part of the point.

Where I Land

I believe Melchizedek was a real man, the king of early Jerusalem and a true priest of God Most High, and that God deliberately left his origins and end out of the record so that he would stand as a picture of Jesus. He was a king of righteousness and peace, a priest without a family line, who blessed the father of the faithful with bread and wine. That's a portrait of Christ painted two thousand years before the original sat for it.

What This Means for You

Here's why this matters more than trivia. Your High Priest isn't a man who served a few years and died. He's a priest "forever," with "an indestructible life." Hebrews says, "He is also able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through Him, always living to intercede for them" (Hebrews 7:25).

The Levitical priests had to offer sacrifices every day, for their own sins and the people's. Jesus offered Himself once, and He lives forever to pray for you. Right now, today, your King of righteousness and peace is praying for you by name.

And notice what Melchizedek brought out to Abram after the battle: bread and wine. I don't want to push that too far, since Genesis doesn't make anything of it. But it's hard to read that today and not think of the table Jesus set for us the night before He died.

Study Questions

1. What do we know for certain about Melchizedek from Genesis 14:18-20?
2. Why was it unusual for one man to be both king and priest?
3. What do the names "Melchizedek" and "Salem" mean, and why do they matter?
4. What are the two main ways of reading "without father, without mother" in Hebrews 7:3? Which do you find more convincing?

5. Why does it matter that Jesus is a priest “according to the order of Melchizedek” and not the order of Aaron?

6. Read Hebrews 7:23-25. How does it encourage you to know that Jesus “always” lives to intercede for you?

Chapter 18: The Angel of the LORD and the Man Who Wrestled Jacob

> *And Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: "For I have seen God face to face, and my life has been delivered."*
>
> Genesis 32:30 (SLB)

All through the Old Testament, a figure shows up who is called "the angel of the LORD." He speaks to Hagar in the wilderness, stops Abraham's knife on Mount Moriah, calls to Moses from the burning bush, and appears to Gideon and to Samson's parents. And here's the strange part. Again and again, the people who meet him say they have seen God. Sometimes he speaks as if he is God. Then, after the Old Testament closes, he seems to disappear.

In this chapter we'll look at him, at the night Jacob wrestled with a man until dawn, and at one of the most puzzling stories in Exodus.

I drifted from God more than once through my own bad choices and tried to run things my way. In May 2020 it came to a head when my wife caught me, and I had to stop fighting and admit I needed help. Like Jacob wrestling until daybreak (Genesis 32), I did not win by being strong. I won when I surrendered.

The Passages

> *And she called the name of the LORD who spoke to her, "You **are** a God of seeing," for she said, "Have I also here seen after Him who sees me?"* (Genesis 16:13)

That's Hagar, after the angel of the LORD found her by a spring. Moses, telling the story, says she called "the name of the LORD who spoke to her." The angel was the LORD.

> *And the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second **time** from the heavens, and said, "By Myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, that because you have done this thing and have not withheld your son, your only **son**,"* (Genesis 22:15-16)

The angel swears "by Myself" and speaks as the LORD.

> *And the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire from the midst of the bush; and he looked, and look, the bush **was** burning with fire, and the bush **was** not consumed. And Moses said, "Let me turn aside, please, and see this great sight, why the bush does not burn." And the LORD saw that he had turned aside to look, and God called to him from the midst of the bush, and He said, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I **am**." And He said, "Do not draw near here; take off your sandals from on your feet, for the place on which you **are** standing, it **is** ground of holiness." And He said, "I **am** the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.* (Exodus 3:2-6)

"The angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire." Two verses later, "God called to him from the midst of the bush" and said, "I am the God of your father." Same speaker.

> *And Manoah said to the angel of the LORD, "What **is** your name, that when your word comes **to pass**, we may honor you?" And the angel of the LORD said to him, "Why **is** this **that** you ask for my name? And it **is** wonderful." And Manoah took the kid of the goats and the grain offering, and offered **it** up on the rock to the LORD; and **He was** doing a wonder, and Manoah and his wife were looking on. And it was, when the flame went up from on the altar toward the heavens, and the angel of the LORD went up in the flame of the altar, and Manoah and his wife were looking on; and they fell on their faces to the ground. And the angel of the LORD did not again appear to Manoah and to his wife. Then Manoah knew that he **was** the angel of the LORD. And Manoah said to his wife, "We shall surely die, for we have seen God."* (Judges 13:17-22)

The Question

Who is the angel of the LORD? Is he an ordinary angel speaking for God, the way an ambassador speaks for a king? Or is he God Himself? And if he is God, how can he also be sent by God?

What We Know for Certain

- **He speaks as God.** He promises things only God can promise (Genesis 16:10; 22:16-17). He says "I am the God of your father" (Exodus 3:6).
- **People who see him say they have seen God.** Hagar, Jacob, Moses, Gideon, and Manoah all do. Gideon cried out, "Alas, Lord GOD! For therefore I have seen the angel of the LORD face to face" (Judges 6:22).
- **He accepts worship.** Moses is told to take off his sandals because the ground is holy. Joshua falls on his face before "the commander of the army of the LORD" and is told the same thing (Joshua 5:13-15). Ordinary angels refuse worship. When John fell at an angel's feet, the angel said, "See that you do not! I am a fellow slave of yours" and told him, "Worship God!" (Revelation 19:10; 22:8-9).
- **God's name is in him.** God told Israel, "Look, I am sending an angel before you ... listen to his voice; do not embitter him, for he will not forgive your transgression; for My name is in him" (Exodus 23:20-21). Only God forgives sin, or refuses to.
- **Yet he is distinct from the LORD.** He's sent by the LORD and speaks of the LORD. He calls to Abraham "from the heavens" as someone other than the God who is being feared.
- **His name is "wonderful."** When Manoah asked his name, he said, "Why is this that you ask for my name? And it is wonderful" (Judges 13:18). Isaiah used a related word for the coming Messiah: "His name Wonder, Counselor, Mighty God" (Isaiah 9:6).

The Main Views

- **A created angel who represents God.** On this view, the angel speaks God's words in the first person, the way a herald reads a king's decree as "I." People said they had seen God because they had seen His representative. This takes seriously that the word *mal'ak* means messenger and is used of ordinary angels.
- **A visible appearance of God in a form people could see**, without saying which Person of the Trinity.
- **The Son of God before He became a man.** On this view, the angel of the LORD is Christ appearing before Bethlehem, what theologians call a *Christophany*. Jesus said, "No one has ever seen God; the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has made Him known" (John 1:18). If no one has seen the Father, then when people in the Old Testament saw God, they saw the Son. This explains how the angel can be God and yet be sent by God. It explains why he accepts worship. And it explains why "the angel of the LORD," with that particular role, is not clearly seen again in the New Testament once the Son has come

in the flesh. This view goes back to the early church; Justin Martyr argued it at length around A.D. 155 (*Dialogue with Trypho*, chapters 56-60).

Where I Land

I believe the angel of the LORD was the Son of God, appearing in the Old Testament before He took on flesh. That's the view that best explains all the evidence: he speaks as God, is worshiped as God, forgives or refuses to forgive sin as God, and yet is sent by God. It fits the way the New Testament shows Jesus as the One who makes the invisible God known. I hold this with confidence, but I'll admit honestly that the Old Testament never says it in so many words, and I've marked it as my conclusion in the notes for this book.

Jacob Wrestles With God

Twenty years after cheating his brother Esau, Jacob is on his way home. Esau is coming to meet him with four hundred men. Jacob sends his family across the river and stays behind alone.

> *And Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until the going up of the dawn. And he saw that he had not prevailed against him, and he touched the socket of his thigh; and the socket of the thigh of Jacob was dislocated as he wrestled with him. And he said, "Let me go, for the dawn has come up." And he said, "I will not let you go unless you have blessed me." And he said to him, "What **is** your name?" And he said, "Jacob." And he said, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel; for you have striven with God and with men, and you have prevailed." And Jacob asked and said, "Please tell **me** your name." And he said, "Why **is** this, **that** you ask for my name?" And he blessed him there. And Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: "For I have seen God face to face, and my life has been delivered."* (Genesis 32:24-30)

Who was the man? The text calls him "a man." But Jacob says, "I have seen God face to face." The man changed Jacob's name to Israel, "for you have striven with God and with men." Centuries later, Hosea looked back on that night.

> *In the womb he took his brother by the heel, and in his vigor he struggled with God. And he struggled with **the** angel and prevailed; he wept and sought His favor; at Bethel He found him, and there He spoke with us.* (Hosea 12:3-4)

Hosea calls him both God and "the angel." So the man at the Jabbok was the angel of the LORD, the same One who would later speak from the bush. Jacob really did wrestle with God in human form.

Here's what gets me about this story. The man could have ended the fight any time he wanted. One touch, and Jacob's hip was out of joint. So why wrestle all night? Because God wasn't trying to beat Jacob. He was trying to break him. Jacob had spent his whole life grabbing, scheming, and wrestling with everyone to get his way. That night, he finally ended up clinging to God, crippled, refusing to let go until God blessed him. He limped for the rest of his life. But he walked away with a new name.

The Bridegroom of Blood

One of the hardest stories in the Bible comes right after God calls Moses from the burning bush. Moses is on his way back to Egypt with his wife Zipporah and their sons.

> *And it was on the way, at the lodging place, and the LORD met him, and He sought to kill him. And Zipporah took a flint, and she cut off the foreskin of her son, and she made **it** touch his feet; and she said, "Surely a bridegroom of blood you **are** to me." And He withdrew from him. Then she said, "A bridegroom of blood," because of the circumcision.* (Exodus 4:24-26)

What in the world is happening here? The LORD has just sent Moses on a mission, and now He seeks to kill him? Here's what most teachers believe.

Moses had not circumcised his son. Circumcision was the sign of God's covenant with Abraham, and God had said that any male who wasn't circumcised "that soul shall be cut off from its kinsmen; he has broken My covenant" (Genesis 17:14). Moses was about to lead Israel as God's covenant people, and he hadn't kept the covenant in his own home. Perhaps Zipporah, a Midianite, had objected. Whatever the reason, God took it seriously. Zipporah understood what was wrong, did it herself, and touched the foreskin to "his feet" (probably Moses' feet, though the Hebrew isn't clear). Her words, "a bridegroom of blood," seem to mean that she had her husband back, saved by blood.

We don't know how God "sought to kill him." It may have been a sudden illness. We don't know whose feet were touched. But the lesson is plain enough. A man can't lead God's people in obedience while ignoring God's word in his own house.

Where Scripture Is Silent

The Old Testament never says outright that the angel of the LORD is the Son. It never tells us the name of the man who wrestled Jacob. And Exodus 4 leaves many details unexplained.

What This Means for You

If I'm right that the angel of the LORD was the Son of God, then Jesus has been coming to His people all along. He found a runaway servant girl crying by a spring and told her He saw her. He stopped Abraham's knife and provided a ram. He called a shepherd from a bush. He wrestled a scheming man all night until the man finally held on and asked for a blessing.

He still does all of that. He sees you when nobody else does. He provides what you can't. And sometimes He wrestles with you, not to destroy you, but to break your self-reliance until you cling to Him. If you're limping today, that may be exactly where the blessing starts.

Study Questions

1. List the people who met the angel of the LORD. What did they say afterward?
2. What evidence shows that the angel of the LORD speaks and acts as God?
3. How does John 1:18 help explain these appearances?

4. Why do you think God wrestled with Jacob all night instead of ending it quickly?

5. What lesson does the strange story of Exodus 4:24-26 teach about leadership and obedience at home?

6. Has God ever “wrestled” with you? What did you learn?

Chapter 19: The Urim and Thummim and the Lost Ark

> *And I will meet with you there, and I will speak with you from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim which **are** on the ark of the testimony, all that I will command you concerning the sons of Israel.*
>
> Exodus 25:22 (SLB)

The most sacred object in Israel was a wooden box, about four feet long, covered inside and out with gold. On top sat a slab of pure gold called the mercy seat, with two golden cherubim facing each other, their wings spread over it. Once a year, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest went behind the veil and sprinkled blood on that mercy seat. God said, "I will meet with you there."

Today, nobody knows where it is.

In this chapter we'll look at that famous mystery, along with a smaller one that sat right on the high priest's chest: the Urim and Thummim.

The Passages

> *And you shall put into the breastpiece of judgment the Urim and the Thummim, and they shall be over the heart of Aaron when he goes in before the LORD; and Aaron shall bear the judgment of the sons of Israel over his heart before the LORD continually.* (Exodus 28:30)

> *And you shall put the mercy seat on the ark from above, and into the ark you shall put the testimony which I will give to you. And I will meet with you there, and I will speak with you from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim which **are** on the ark of the testimony, all that I will command you concerning the sons of Israel.* (Exodus 25:21-22)

The Urim and Thummim

The Question

What were the Urim and Thummim? How did they work? And what happened to them?

What We Know for Certain

- **They were kept in the high priest's breastpiece**, the square pouch on his chest that held twelve precious stones engraved with the names of the tribes (Exodus 28:15-30).
- **They were used to learn God's will.** When Joshua took over from Moses, he was to stand before Eleazar the priest, who would "inquire for him by the judgment of the Urim before the LORD" (Numbers 27:21).
- **God could refuse to answer through them.** When Saul turned from God, "the LORD did not answer him, neither by dreams, nor by Urim, nor by prophets" (1 Samuel 28:6).
- **They were missing after the exile.** When some men returning from Babylon couldn't prove they were priests, the governor ruled that they couldn't eat the holy food "until a priest stood up for Urim and for Thummim" (Ezra 2:63; Nehemiah 7:65). That's the last mention of them in the Bible.

What Do the Names Mean?

Urim is usually connected with the Hebrew word for light, and *Thummim* with the word for completeness or perfection. So the pair may mean "lights and perfections." Urim begins with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet and Thummim with the last, which some see as meaning God's answer covered everything, from A to Z. That's possible, but it's a guess.

How Did They Work?

The Bible doesn't explain. Here are the main ideas.

- **Sacred lots.** Most scholars believe they were two objects, perhaps stones or sticks, that gave a yes or no answer, or no answer at all. In 1 Samuel 14:41, when Saul asks God to show who sinned, the Hebrew says "Give perfect," using a word close to Thummim. The ancient Greek translation of that verse is longer and mentions both Urim and Thummim, as if one meant one answer and the other meant the other. "Into the lap the lot is thrown, and from the LORD is its every judgment" (Proverbs 16:33).
- **Light shining from the stones.** Josephus believed the stones on the high priest's garments shone when God was present. He wrote that before a battle, "so great a splendor shone forth from them before the army began to march, that all the people were sensible of God's being present for their assistance," and that the stones "left off shining two hundred years before I composed this book" (*Antiquities of the Jews* 3.8.9, Whiston translation). Josephus isn't Scripture, and he's describing a tradition, not something he saw.
- **A way for the priest to hear God directly**, with the objects as a sign of his office rather than a device.

Why Don't We Need Them?

The last time God's people used lots to make a decision in the Bible was when the apostles chose Matthias to replace Judas (Acts 1:24-26). That was before Pentecost. After the Holy Spirit came, the church never cast lots again. Now every believer has the Spirit living in him, the completed Scriptures, and direct access to God through our High Priest, Jesus. We don't need a box of stones on a priest's chest. We have the Spirit of truth and the Word of God.

The Ark of the Covenant

What Was Inside?

Hebrews says the ark held "a golden jar having the manna, and the staff of Aaron which budded, and the tablets of the covenant" (Hebrews 9:4). By Solomon's day, only the tablets were left: "There was nothing in the ark except the two tablets of the stones which Moses placed there at Horeb" (1 Kings 8:9).

The Ark's Story

Before we ask where the ark went, it helps to see what it did. No object in the Bible has a history like it.

- **It led the way.** Whenever the ark set out in the wilderness, Moses would say, "Rise up, LORD, and let Your enemies be scattered" (Numbers 10:35).
- **It could not be handled casually.** Even the Levites who carried it were not to touch the holy things, "and die" (Numbers 4:15). It was carried on poles, covered, by the right people.
- **It parted the Jordan.** When the priests carrying the ark stepped into the flooded river, "the waters which were coming down from above stood still; they rose up in one heap" (Joshua 3:16).

- **It circled Jericho.** Seven priests with rams' horns walked before the ark around the city, and on the seventh day the walls fell (Joshua 6).
- **It was captured.** When Israel took the ark into battle like a lucky charm, God let the Philistines take it (1 Samuel 4:11). Eli's daughter-in-law named her son Ichabod, saying, "Glory has gone into exile from Israel" (1 Samuel 4:21).
- **It humbled a false god.** The Philistines set it in the temple of their god Dagon. Two mornings in a row, Dagon was found "fallen on its face to the ground before the ark of the LORD," the second time with its head and hands broken off (1 Samuel 5:3-4). Plagues followed it from city to city until the Philistines sent it back.
- **It judged the careless.** Men of Beth-shemesh were struck down "because they had looked into the ark of the LORD" (1 Samuel 6:19). Years later, when David moved it on a cart instead of on the priests' shoulders, Uzzah reached out to steady it, "and God struck him down there for the error" (2 Samuel 6:7).
- **It blessed the faithful.** While it stayed three months in the house of Obed-edom, "the LORD blessed Obed-edom and all his household" (2 Samuel 6:11).
- **It came to rest in Solomon's temple.** The poles were left in place, and the writer of Kings adds, "they have been there to this day" (1 Kings 8:8). Whoever first wrote that sentence wrote it while the ark was still in the temple.

The lesson running through the whole story is that the ark wasn't magic. When Israel treated it like a charm, it did them no good. When people treated it carelessly, it was dangerous. What mattered was the God whose throne it was. That's worth remembering when people get excited about finding it.

The Last Sighting

The last time the ark is clearly mentioned in Israel's history is in the days of King Josiah, around 622 B.C. He told the Levites, "Put the ark of holiness in the house which Solomon the son of David, the king of Israel, built" (2 Chronicles 35:3). That suggests it had been moved out of the temple, perhaps during the evil reign of Manasseh, and Josiah had it brought back.

After that, silence. When the Babylonians destroyed the temple in 586 B.C., the Bible lists the bronze pillars, the stands, the bronze sea, and the bowls and firepans they carried off (2 Kings 25:13-17; Jeremiah 52:17-23). It never mentions the ark. Eleven years earlier, Nebuchadnezzar had "cut in pieces all the articles of gold" that Solomon had made (2 Kings 24:13). Was the ark among them? The Bible doesn't say.

What the Ancient Writers Say

- **It was empty in the second temple.** When the temple was rebuilt after the exile, the Most Holy Place had no ark in it. Josephus, who came from a priestly family in Jerusalem, wrote of it, "In this there was nothing at all. It was inaccessible and inviolable, and not to be seen by any; and was called the Holy of Holies" (*Jewish War* 5.5.5, Whiston translation). The Roman historian Tacitus wrote that when the general Pompey entered it in 63 B.C., he found it empty (*Histories* 5.9). Jewish tradition in the Mishnah says the high priest set the incense on a bare stone where the ark used to be (*Yoma* 5:2).
- **Jeremiah hid it.** The book of 2 Maccabees, written in the second century B.C. and not part of the Hebrew Bible, says the prophet Jeremiah, warned by God, took the tent, the ark, and the altar of incense to the mountain where Moses had viewed the promised land, hid them in a cave, and sealed the entrance, saying the place would stay unknown until God gathers His people again (2 Maccabees 2:4-8).

- **Josiah hid it under the temple.** Some rabbis in the Talmud said King Josiah hid the ark in a secret chamber beneath the temple mount, knowing the Babylonians were coming.

The Modern Claims

- **Ethiopia.** The Ethiopian Orthodox Church says the ark is kept in a chapel at the Church of Our Lady Mary of Zion in Aksum, guarded by a single monk who is the only one allowed to see it. Their tradition, written down in a work called the *Kebra Nagast* in the 1300s A.D., says Menelik, a son of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, brought it there. No outsider has ever been allowed to examine it.
- **Under Calvary or the temple mount.** Various explorers have claimed to have found the ark in caves under Jerusalem. The best known is Ron Wyatt, an American amateur explorer who said in the 1980s that he had found it in a cave beneath the place of the crucifixion, with Christ's blood on the mercy seat. He never produced a photograph, a sample, or anything anyone else could examine. Neither has anyone else who has made a similar claim.
- **The Copper Scroll.** Among the Dead Sea Scrolls is one written on sheets of copper, found in 1952, that lists dozens of places where treasure was hidden. Some have hoped it points to the ark. It doesn't name the ark, and none of its treasure has ever been found.
- **Destroyed or carried to Babylon.** Many scholars think it was simply taken and melted down, either by Pharaoh Shishak, who carried off the treasures of the temple around 925 B.C. (1 Kings 14:25-26), or by the Babylonians.

Will a Future Temple Need the Ark?

Many Christians, including me, believe a temple will stand again in Jerusalem during the Tribulation. Paul says the man of lawlessness will sit "in the temple of God as God" (2 Thessalonians 2:4), and Daniel says he will make "sacrifice and grain offering to cease" in the middle of the seven years (Daniel 9:27). Revelation 11:1 speaks of measuring "the temple of God and the altar." So people ask whether the ark has to be found first.

It doesn't. The second temple, the one Jesus taught in, ran for centuries with an empty Most Holy Place. Sacrifices were offered and the Day of Atonement was kept, with the high priest setting the incense on a bare stone. A future temple could do the same.

And when Ezekiel describes the temple of the coming kingdom over nine chapters (Ezekiel 40-48), he never mentions an ark. He doesn't need to. God says of the temple itself, "this is the place of My throne and the place of the soles of My feet, where I will dwell there in the midst of the sons of Israel forever" (Ezekiel 43:7). The ark was God's throne on earth. In the kingdom, the King Himself will be there.

Where Scripture Is Silent

The Bible never tells us what happened to the ark or to the Urim and Thummim. Not one verse.

But it does tell us something remarkable about the ark's future. Jeremiah, prophesying of the days when God restores His people, said: "they will not say again, 'The ark of the covenant of the LORD,' and it will not come up on a heart, and they will not remember it, and they will not miss it, and it will not be made again" (Jeremiah 3:16). In the coming kingdom, nobody will miss it. Why? Because, as Jeremiah says in

the next verse, Jerusalem itself will be called “the throne of the LORD.” The real presence of God will be there, and the box that pictured it won’t be needed.

And John saw something in heaven: “the temple of God in heaven was opened, and the ark of His covenant was seen in His temple” (Revelation 11:19). Whether that is the earthly ark taken up, or the heavenly reality the earthly ark was copied from (Hebrews 8:5), the point is the same. God’s covenant is safe in heaven.

Where I Land

I don’t know where the ark is, and I’m suspicious of anyone who says he does. My best guess is that it was destroyed or carried off by the Babylonians, though it’s possible it was hidden. I’m not expecting it to turn up, and I don’t need it to. Jeremiah 3:16 tells me God’s people won’t miss it.

What This Means for You

Here’s what I want you to see. The ark was God’s throne on earth, and its lid was called the mercy seat, where the blood was sprinkled once a year. Only one man could go near it, on one day a year, and only with blood.

Then Jesus died, and “the veil of the temple was torn into two from top to bottom” (Matthew 27:51). Christ, “through His own blood, entered once for all into the holy places, having obtained eternal redemption” (Hebrews 9:12). The way into God’s presence is open, not to one priest once a year, but to every believer, every day.

You don’t need to find a lost box to meet with God. You need to come to Jesus. He is the mercy seat now.

Study Questions

1. What were the Urim and Thummim used for? What are the main ideas about how they worked?
2. Why don’t believers today need sacred lots to know God’s will?
3. Trace the history of the ark from Moses to Josiah. When does it disappear from the record?
4. What do Josephus, Tacitus, and the Mishnah tell us about the Most Holy Place in the second temple?
5. Read Jeremiah 3:16-17. Why won’t God’s people miss the ark in the coming kingdom?
6. What does the ark’s history from the Jordan to Uzzah teach about how God’s people treat holy things?
7. Does a future temple need the ark? Why or why not?
8. How does Jesus’ death change the way we come into God’s presence?

Chapter 20: The Woman of En-dor

> *And when they say to you, "Consult the mediums and the spiritists who whisper and mutter," should not a people consult its God? On behalf of the living **should they consult** the dead?*
>
> Isaiah 8:19 (SLB)

King Saul is at the end of his rope. The Philistine army is camped at Shunem, and when Saul sees it, "his heart trembled exceedingly" (1 Samuel 28:5). Samuel, the prophet who anointed him, is dead. Saul prays, and God doesn't answer. Not by dreams, not by Urim, not by prophets. Heaven is silent.

So Saul does something he had once outlawed himself. He goes looking for a medium.

The Passage

> *And Saul said to his servants, "Seek for me a woman, a mistress of necromancy, and let me go to her, and let me consult her." And his servants said to him, "Look, a woman, a mistress of necromancy, **is** in En-dor." And Saul disguised himself, and he put on other garments, and he went, he and two men with him, and they came to the woman by night. And he said, "Please divine for me by necromancy, and bring up for me **the one** whom I will name to you."*
> (1 Samuel 28:7-8)

> *And the woman said, "Whom shall I bring up for you?" And he said, "Bring up Samuel for me." And the woman saw Samuel, and she cried out with a loud voice; and the woman spoke to Saul, saying, "Why have you deceived me? And you **are** Saul!" And the king said to her, "Do not be afraid; for what have you seen?" And the woman said to Saul, "I have seen gods coming up from the earth." And he said to her, "What **is** his appearance?" And she said, "An old man is coming up, and he **is** wrapped **in** a robe." And Saul knew that it **was** Samuel, and he bowed low, face toward the ground, and he bowed down. And Samuel said to Saul, "Why have you disturbed me, to bring me up?" And Saul said, "It is very distressing for me; and **the** Philistines are fighting against me, and God has turned aside from me, and He has not answered me any more, neither by the hand of the prophets nor by dreams; and I have called you to make known to me what I shall do."* (1 Samuel 28:11-15)

> *And Samuel said, "And why do you ask me, and the LORD has turned aside from you, and He has become your enemy? And the LORD has done for Himself just as He spoke by my hand; and the LORD has torn the kingdom from your hand, and He has given it to your neighbor, to David. Because you did not listen to the voice of the LORD, and you did not execute the burning of His anger on Amalek, therefore the LORD has done this thing to you this day. And the LORD will also give Israel with you into the hand of **the** Philistines; and tomorrow you and your sons **will be** with me. The LORD will also give the camp of Israel into the hand of **the** Philistines."*
> (1 Samuel 28:16-19)

The next day, the Philistines won, and Saul and his sons died on Mount Gilboa, exactly as the voice had said.

The Question

Did the medium really bring up Samuel from the dead? Or was it a demon pretending to be Samuel? Or did she fake the whole thing? And if it really was Samuel, does that mean mediums can contact the dead?

What We Know for Certain

- **God forbids consulting the dead.** "There shall not be found among you ... one who asks a medium and a spiritist, and one who inquires of the dead. For everyone who does these things is an abomination to the LORD" (Deuteronomy 18:10-12). Under the law, mediums were to be put to death (Leviticus 20:27). Saul himself had removed them from the land (1 Samuel 28:3).
- **Saul died partly for this sin.** "Saul died for his unfaithfulness in which he was unfaithful against the LORD ... and also for asking of a medium, to inquire of it, and he did not inquire of the LORD" (1 Chronicles 10:13-14).
- **The woman was shocked.** When she saw Samuel, "she cried out with a loud voice." Whatever she had expected, this wasn't it.
- **The message was true.** Everything the voice said came to pass the next day, and it matched what Samuel had said while alive (1 Samuel 15:28).
- **The text calls him Samuel.** Five times, the narrator calls him "Samuel," not "the spirit" or "what looked like Samuel."

The Main Views

View One: God Sent the Real Samuel

On this view, God Himself allowed Samuel to appear, not because of the medium's power, but over it, to pronounce judgment on Saul one last time.

- The woman's terror suggests she didn't do it. She seems to have been used to tricks or to familiar spirits, and this was something else.
- The narrator plainly says "Samuel" spoke.
- The message was a true prophecy, rebuking Saul for disobedience and predicting his death. Demons don't usually preach the word of the LORD.
- Many early Jewish and Christian readers took it this way, including the Jewish writer of Sirach in the second century B.C., Josephus, and the Christian teacher Origen in the third century A.D.

View Two: A Demon Pretended to Be Samuel

On this view, an evil spirit took on Samuel's appearance and voice to deceive Saul and drive him to despair.

- God forbids necromancy, and it seems unlikely He'd reward it by sending a real prophet.
- "Satan himself disguises himself as an angel of light" (2 Corinthians 11:14). A demon could imitate a dead man.
- Jesus' story of the rich man and Lazarus shows "a great chasm has been fixed" between the dead and the living (Luke 16:26).
- Several early Christian writers, such as Tertullian (*On the Soul* 57) and Eustathius of Antioch, held this view.

The weakness of this view is that the text never hints at deception, and a demon would have to know the future and speak God's judgment accurately.

View Three: The Woman Faked It

On this view, the medium recognized Saul, guessed what was coming, and put on a show. The problem is that she is the one who screamed. And she could not have known in detail that Saul and his sons would die the next day.

Where Scripture Is Silent

We're not told how Samuel appeared, whether in a body or as a spirit, how the woman saw him while Saul apparently didn't, or why God chose to answer this way after refusing to answer through the proper means.

Where I Land

I believe God sent the real Samuel, by His own power and to the medium's horror, to deliver a final word of judgment. That's what the text plainly says, and the details fit it best. But I want to be very clear about what this does not mean. It does not mean mediums can call up the dead. This medium was as surprised as anybody. It was a one-time act of God's judgment, not a pattern, and it ended with Saul dead the next day. Saul went looking for answers in the wrong place and got the worst answer possible.

What This Means for You

People still go to Saul's medium. They call psychics, play with Ouija boards, watch shows where someone claims to talk to the dead, and pay good money to hear from grandma one more time. I understand the grief behind it. But the Bible's word to us is the same as Isaiah's: "should not a people consult its God? On behalf of the living should they consult the dead? To the law and to the testimony!" (Isaiah 8:19-20).

If you're grieving and desperate for answers, go to God. And if God seems silent, the way He did for Saul, don't run to the dark. Ask Him why. Saul's silence came from years of disobedience. When Saul finally heard from heaven, it was too late to change. You still have time. Turn back to Him today.

Study Questions

1. Why was God silent when Saul inquired of Him (1 Samuel 28:6; compare 1 Samuel 15)?
2. What does the law say about mediums and consulting the dead, and why do you think God forbids it?
3. Why did the woman scream when she saw Samuel? What does that suggest?
4. Lay out the three main views of what happened. Which do you think best fits the text?
5. Why doesn't this story prove that mediums can contact the dead?
6. Where are people today tempted to seek answers apart from God?

Chapter 21: The Lost Books the Bible Names

> *And the sun was still, and the moon stood, until the nation took vengeance on its enemies. Is it not written in the book of Jashar? And the sun stood in the middle of the heavens and did not hurry to go **down** about a whole day.*
>
> Joshua 10:13 (SLB)

Here's something that surprises a lot of people. The Bible mentions books that aren't in the Bible. Joshua quotes one. David's lament for Saul and Jonathan was written in it. The books of Kings and Chronicles send readers to more than a dozen other records for "the rest of the matters" of the kings. Paul mentions letters he wrote that we've never seen.

So were books lost from the Bible? Is something missing? And what about those books you can buy today with the same names?

The Passages

> *Therefore it is said in the book of the wars of the LORD, "Waheb in Suphah, and the wadis of Arnon,"* (Numbers 21:14)

> *And the sun was still, and the moon stood, until the nation took vengeance on its enemies. Is it not written in the book of Jashar? And the sun stood in the middle of the heavens and did not hurry to go **down** about a whole day.* (Joshua 10:13)

> *And he said to teach the sons of Judah "**The** Bow"; look, **it is** written in the book of Jashar*
> (2 Samuel 1:18)

> *And when the letter has been read among you, cause that it also be read in the church of the Laodiceans, and that you also read the **letter** from Laodicea.* (Colossians 4:16)

The Books the Bible Mentions

Here are the main ones.

- **The Book of the Wars of the LORD** (Numbers 21:14). Apparently a collection of songs or poems about Israel's victories in the wilderness.
- **The Book of Jashar** (Joshua 10:13; 2 Samuel 1:18). *Jashar* means "upright." It seems to have been a collection of poetry about Israel's heroes, quoted for the sun standing still at Gibeon and for David's lament over Saul and Jonathan, called "The Bow."
- **The records of the seers and prophets.** Chronicles names the words of Samuel the seer, Nathan the prophet, and Gad the seer (1 Chronicles 29:29), the prophecy of Ahijah the Shilonite and the visions of Iddo the seer (2 Chronicles 9:29), and the words of Shemaiah the prophet (2 Chronicles 12:15), among others.
- **The book of the chronicles of the kings of Israel and of Judah.** Kings mentions these royal records again and again. They were official court histories.
- **Solomon's songs and proverbs.** "He spoke three thousand proverbs, and his songs were a thousand and five" (1 Kings 4:32). Only a fraction are in Proverbs and the Song of Solomon.

- **Paul's other letters.** He wrote an earlier letter to Corinth: "I wrote to you in the letter not to associate with sexually immoral persons" (1 Corinthians 5:9). He also mentions a letter "from Laodicea" (Colossians 4:16).

The Question

If God's Word is complete, why does it mention books we don't have? Did the church lose part of the Bible?

What We Know for Certain

- **Not everything inspired writers read was Scripture.** The writers of Kings and Chronicles used sources, the way any good historian does. Luke says he "followed all things carefully from the first" after many others had written accounts (Luke 1:1-3). Using a source doesn't make the source Scripture, any more than Paul quoting a Greek poet made that poet a prophet (Acts 17:28; Titus 1:12).
- **Not everything true was written down.** John said Jesus did so many things that "not even the world itself would have room for the books being written" (John 21:25). God chose what to include.
- **God preserved what He intended.** "Every Scripture is God-breathed and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training which is in righteousness, so that the man of God may be complete, fully equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17). If we are fully equipped by what we have, nothing we need is missing. "The word of our God will stand forever" (Isaiah 40:8).
- **Not every letter an apostle wrote was meant for the whole church.** Paul surely wrote many letters, notes, and messages in his life. The ones God inspired for all His people were kept.

What About the "Book of Jasher" You Can Buy?

If you search online, you'll find a "Book of Jasher" for sale, sometimes advertised as the lost book mentioned in Joshua. It isn't. Here's the history.

- **A Hebrew work called *Sefer haYashar*** was printed in Venice in 1625. It's a retelling of Genesis through Joshua with many added legends. Scholars date it to the Middle Ages. It was translated into English and published in New York in 1840, and that's the version most people find today.
- **A different "Book of Jasher"** was published in England in 1751 by a printer named Jacob Ilive, who claimed it had been translated by an ancient scholar named Alcuin. It was quickly shown to be a forgery.

Neither one is the book Joshua quoted. That book was lost long ago, and no copy is known to exist.

The Letter From Laodicea

There's also a short "Epistle to the Laodiceans" that circulated in Latin in the Middle Ages, and even appeared in some old Bibles. It's a patchwork of phrases from Philippians and Galatians, and the early church already rejected it as not genuine. As for the real letter "from Laodicea," some think it was a lost letter of Paul. Others think it was our letter to the Ephesians, which may have been a circular letter passed from church to church and might have reached Colossae by way of Laodicea. We don't know.

Where Scripture Is Silent

The Bible never tells us what happened to these books, who wrote most of them, or what they said beyond the lines that are quoted.

Where I Land

I believe the Bible we have is complete. The books it names were real, and some were good and true, but God didn't choose them to be Scripture for all time. Their loss doesn't leave a hole in God's Word, because God tells us His Word is sufficient. Be cautious with anyone selling a "lost book" as hidden Scripture. In every case I know of, it turns out to be either a much later writing or a fake.

What This Means for You

I find this oddly comforting. God didn't give us a library of everything. He gave us what we need, no more and no less. And John tells us exactly why: "these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name" (John 20:31).

You don't need a lost book to know God. You need to read the one He kept for you.

Study Questions

1. List the books mentioned in the Bible that aren't in the Bible. Which surprised you most?
2. Why doesn't quoting or using a source make that source Scripture?
3. What does 2 Timothy 3:16-17 tell us about whether anything we need is missing?
4. What is the "Book of Jasher" sold today, and why isn't it the book Joshua quoted?
5. Why do you think God chose to preserve some writings and not others?
6. Read John 20:30-31. How does John's purpose shape how you read the Bible?

Chapter 22: Behemoth and Leviathan

> *Can you draw out Leviathan with a fishhook, and with a cord hold down its tongue?*
>
> Job 41:1 (SLB)

Job had lost his children, his wealth, and his health. For thirty-some chapters, he and his friends argued about why. Then God finally spoke out of the whirlwind. And what He talked about may surprise you. He didn't explain Job's suffering. He gave Job a tour of creation: the stars, the sea, the lightning, the wild donkey, the ostrich, the horse, and the hawk. Then He finished with two creatures so powerful that no man could touch them.

Recovery brought me face to face with a problem I could not fix by willpower. As a project manager I was used to building a schedule, solving the problem and moving on. When God pointed Job to Behemoth and Leviathan (Job 40 and 41), He reminded him that only the Creator can tame what is too big for us.

The Passage

> *Look now, Behemoth, which I made with you; it eats grass like the ox. Look now, its strength **is** in its loins, and its power in the muscles of its belly. It sways its tail like a cedar; the sinews of its thighs are intertwined. Its bones **are** tubes of bronze; its limbs **are** like a rod of iron. It **is** the first of the ways of God; the One who made it, let Him bring near His sword.* (Job 40:15-19)

> *For the mountains bring it produce, and every animal of the field plays there. Under the lotus plants it lies, in the hiding place of **the** reed and **the** swamp. The lotus plants cover it **as** its shade; the poplars of the wadi surround it. Look, the river is violent, **yet** it is not alarmed; it is confident though **the** Jordan bursts forth to its mouth. By its eyes will anyone take it? With snares will anyone pierce **its** nose?* (Job 40:20-24)

> *Can you draw out Leviathan with a fishhook, and with a cord hold down its tongue? Can you put a rush cord in its nose, and pierce its jaw with a hook?* (Job 41:1-2)

> *Its sneezings flash forth light, and its eyes **are** like the eyelids of **the** dawn. Out of its mouth go torches; sparks of fire escape. Out of its nostrils goes forth smoke, like a pot blown upon, and rushes. Its breath kindles coals, and a flame goes forth from its mouth.* (Job 41:18-21)

> *On the dust **there is** not its likeness, one made without terror. It sees every lofty **thing**; it **is** king over all the sons of pride.* (Job 41:33-34)

The Question

What were Behemoth and Leviathan? Real animals Job could have seen? Animals now extinct? Or poetic pictures of chaos and evil?

What We Know for Certain

- **God made them.** "Behemoth, which I made with you" (Job 40:15). Leviathan, "which You formed to play in it" (Psalm 104:26). Whatever they were, they were creatures, not gods.
- **Behemoth eats grass, lives near rivers and marshes, and isn't afraid of floods.** It lies under the lotus plants and in the reeds.
- **Leviathan lives in the water** and can't be caught with a hook or harpoon (Job 41:1-7).
- **Leviathan also appears as a picture of God's enemies.** Isaiah says, "In that day the LORD will visit punishment with His fierce and great and mighty sword on Leviathan the fleeing serpent, and on Leviathan the twisting serpent" (Isaiah 27:1). Psalm 74:14 says God "crushed the heads of Leviathan," in a passage about the Exodus.
- **God's point was His own power.** If Job couldn't stand before a creature God made, how could he stand before God (Job 41:10)?

The Main Views

View One: Animals Job Knew

Many scholars believe Behemoth was the hippopotamus or the elephant, and Leviathan was the crocodile.

- The hippo eats grass, lies in the reeds and marshes, and is famously unafraid of rushing water. It was found in the Nile and, in ancient times, possibly farther north.
- The crocodile lives in the water, has armored scales (Job 41:15-17), terrifying teeth (41:14), and was nearly impossible to catch with ancient weapons.
- God's other examples in Job 38 and 39 are real animals: lions, goats, donkeys, oxen, ostriches, horses, hawks, and eagles. These two would fit the list as the most fearsome of all.

The main problem is the details. "It sways its tail like a cedar" (Job 40:17) is hard to say of a hippo, whose tail is short and stubby. And the fire and smoke from Leviathan's mouth (41:19-21) don't describe any crocodile. Those who hold this view take those lines as poetic exaggeration, like calling a powerful man a lion.

View Two: Animals Now Extinct

Some believe Behemoth was a large plant-eating dinosaur, such as a sauropod, with a tail as big as a tree, and Leviathan a great sea reptile. Those who hold that dinosaurs and people lived at the same time point to the tail like a cedar and to Behemoth being called "the first of the ways of God," the chief of His land creatures. They point out that dragon legends exist in cultures all over the world, and they suggest some of those legends may be memories of real animals.

Those who disagree note that a sauropod wouldn't lie hidden under the lotus plants, and that "first of the ways of God" may simply mean the greatest, not the biggest ever. And some of the details still sound poetic on any view.

View Three: Poetic Symbols of Chaos

Others believe Behemoth and Leviathan are pictures of the forces of chaos that only God can master. In 1929, archaeologists found clay tablets at Ugarit, an ancient city in Syria, with poems in a language close

to Hebrew. One of them describes the storm god Baal defeating a sea monster called Lotan, "the twisting serpent," words very close to Isaiah 27:1. On this view, the Bible borrows imagery its readers knew, not to agree with pagan myths, but to say that the LORD, not Baal, rules the sea and every monster in it.

The problem is that Job 40 and 41 describe Behemoth and Leviathan with very physical details, and God says He made Behemoth "with you," as a fellow creature.

Where Scripture Is Silent

God never gives these creatures a modern name. He describes them with poetry, which is full of picture language, so we can't tell for certain where description ends and image begins.

Where I Land

I believe God was talking about real creatures He had made, with very real strength that Job would have recognized and feared. Whether they were the hippo and the crocodile described in the bold language of Hebrew poetry, or animals we no longer have, I can't say for certain, and I don't think the Bible settles it. I also think Leviathan, by Isaiah's day, had become a picture of every power that sets itself against God. Both can be true. A real crocodile can stand for something bigger, the same way a real serpent did in Genesis 3.

What This Means for You

Here's the point of the whole passage, and it's easy to miss if we only argue about dinosaurs. God never told Job why he suffered. Instead He showed Job who He is. And it was enough.

> *By the hearing of the ear I had heard of You, and now my eye has seen You. Therefore I reject **it**, and I repent on dust and ashes.* (Job 42:5-6)

Sometimes we want an explanation from God, and what we need is a fresh look at Him. If He made Leviathan and can put a hook in its jaw, He can handle whatever is crushing you. You may not get the answer you asked for. But you can know the God who has the answer, and that's better.

Study Questions

1. Why do you think God answered Job by describing creation instead of explaining his suffering?
2. What details describe Behemoth and Leviathan in Job 40 and 41?
3. Review the three main views. Which details fit each view best? Which fit worst?
4. How does Isaiah 27:1 use Leviathan? What might that tell us about how the image grew over time?
5. Read Job 42:1-6. What changed in Job?
6. What situation in your life feels like a Leviathan you can't control? How does this passage speak to it?

Chapter 23: Ezekiel's Wheels

> *Like the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud on the day of the rain, so **was** the appearance of the brightness all around. That **was** the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. And I saw **it**, and I fell on my face, and I heard a voice speaking.*
>
> Ezekiel 1:28 (SLB)

Ezekiel was a young priest, about thirty years old, living as a captive in Babylon by the river Chebar. He should have been starting his service at the temple in Jerusalem. Instead, he was hundreds of miles away, with no temple, no altar, and no hope of going home. And then the heavens opened.

What he saw that day has puzzled readers ever since. Wheels within wheels, full of eyes. Creatures with four faces and four wings. Fire, lightning, and a throne. Some have even claimed it was a spaceship.

The Passage

> *And I saw, and look, a storm wind coming from the north, a great cloud and fire flashing, and brightness **was** all around it, and from its midst **there was something** like the appearance of the shining substance, from the midst of the fire. And from its midst **came** the likeness of four living creatures; and this **was** their appearance: they had the likeness of a man. And each one had four faces, and each one of them had four wings.* (Ezekiel 1:4-6)

> *And the likeness of their faces **was** the face of a man; and the four of them had the face of a lion on the right **side**; and the four of them had the face of an ox on the left **side**; and the four of them had the face of an eagle.* (Ezekiel 1:10)

> *And I saw the living creatures, and look, one wheel **was** on the ground beside the living creatures, for **each of** its four faces. The appearance of the wheels and their construction **was** like the appearance of chrysolite, and the four of them had one likeness; and their appearance and their construction **were** as it would be, the wheel in the midst of the wheel. When they went, they went on their four sides; they did not turn when they went. And **as for** their rims, they had height, and they had awesomeness; and their rims **were** full of eyes all around the four of them.* (Ezekiel 1:15-18)

> *And above the expanse which **was** over their head, like the appearance of a sapphire stone, **was** the likeness of a throne; and on the likeness of the throne **was** a likeness like the appearance of a man on it, above. And I saw **something** like the appearance of shining substance, like the appearance of fire with an enclosure for it all around, from the appearance of His hips and upward; and from the appearance of His hips and downward I saw **something** like the appearance of fire, and brightness **was** all around Him. Like the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud on the day of the rain, so **was** the appearance of the brightness all around. That **was** the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. And I saw **it**, and I fell on my face, and I heard a voice speaking.* (Ezekiel 1:26-28)

The Question

What did Ezekiel see? What are the living creatures, and what are the wheels? Why so many eyes and faces? And what was the point of showing all this to a captive priest?

What We Know for Certain

- **It was a vision of God's glory.** Ezekiel tells us plainly what it was: "That was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD" (Ezekiel 1:28). Notice how careful he is. Not the glory itself, but the appearance of the likeness of it. Ezekiel keeps using the words "like" and "the appearance of" because what he saw was beyond words.
- **The living creatures are cherubim.** Ezekiel saw the same vision again later and said, "That was the living creature which I had seen under the God of Israel by the river Chebar; and I knew that they were cherubim" (Ezekiel 10:20). Cherubim guarded Eden (Genesis 3:24), and golden cherubim spread their wings over the ark.
- **The wheels moved with the creatures.** "The spirit of the living creature was in the wheels" (Ezekiel 1:20). They could go in any direction without turning.
- **It was a throne-chariot.** Above the creatures was an expanse like crystal, and above that a throne, and on the throne "a likeness like the appearance of a man." God's throne was mobile. It could go anywhere.
- **John saw something similar.** In Revelation 4, four living creatures surround God's throne, full of eyes, with the faces of a lion, a calf, a man, and an eagle (Revelation 4:6-8). Isaiah saw seraphim above the throne crying "Holy, holy, holy" (Isaiah 6:1-3).

What Do the Details Mean?

Bible teachers have offered many explanations of the details. Here are the most common, and I'll tell you which ones I think are solid.

- **The four faces.** The man, the lion, the ox, and the eagle are often seen as the greatest of God's creatures: the noblest of all, the king of wild animals, the strongest of tame animals, and the mightiest of birds. All of creation serves the throne of God. Early Christian writers, beginning with Irenaeus around A.D. 180, linked the four faces with the four Gospels, though they didn't all agree on which face went with which Gospel. That's a lovely idea, but the text doesn't teach it.
- **The eyes.** The rims of the wheels were "full of eyes all around." That seems to picture God's knowledge. He sees everything. Zechariah speaks of "the eyes of the LORD; they are roving through all the earth" (Zechariah 4:10).
- **The wheel within a wheel.** Probably two wheels set crosswise, so that they could roll in any of four directions without turning. God's throne doesn't need to turn around to go where He wants.
- **The fire and lightning.** Fire often goes with God's holy presence in Scripture: the burning bush, Mount Sinai, the pillar of fire.
- **The rainbow.** Around the throne was brightness "like the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud on the day of the rain." The rainbow is the sign of God's covenant mercy after judgment (Genesis 9:13). Even in a vision that opens a book of judgment, mercy is all around the throne.

Was It a Spaceship?

In 1968, Erich von Daniken published a book called *Chariots of the Gods?* claiming that ancient peoples saw visitors from outer space and mistook them for gods. A few years later, Josef Blumrich, an engineer who had worked for NASA, wrote *The Spaceships of Ezekiel* (1974), arguing that Ezekiel described a landing craft with helicopter-like rotors.

These books sold millions of copies, but they don't hold up. Ezekiel tells us exactly what he saw: the glory of the LORD, the God of Israel, seated on His throne. He fell on his face and heard a voice that called him to be a prophet (Ezekiel 2:1-3). Nothing in the passage describes a machine built by creatures. It describes a throne, a Person on it, and worship. We'll look at claims like this again in Chapter 35.

Why Show This to Ezekiel?

Here's the heart of it, and it's beautiful. The exiles believed God lived in the temple in Jerusalem. They were in Babylon, hundreds of miles away. Many thought God had abandoned them, or that the gods of Babylon had won.

Then God showed up by a canal in Babylon, on a throne with wheels. The message was clear. God isn't stuck in one place. His throne goes where His people go. He was with them in exile.

Later in the book, Ezekiel watches that same glory leave the temple in Jerusalem because of the people's sin (Ezekiel 10:18-19; 11:22-23). And near the end, he sees it come back to a new temple, entering from the east (Ezekiel 43:1-5). The book that begins with the glory in exile ends with a city whose name is "The LORD Is There" (Ezekiel 48:35).

Where Scripture Is Silent

Ezekiel doesn't explain each detail. We're not told exactly what each face means, or why the wheels were full of eyes. He saw more than words could hold, and he did his best to describe it.

Where I Land

I believe Ezekiel saw a true vision of God's throne, attended by cherubim, and that the main point is plain: the glory of the LORD, who sees all, rules all, and goes with His people even into exile. I hold the explanations of the details loosely. The spaceship idea I reject entirely.

What This Means for You

Maybe you feel like an exile right now. Far from home, far from where you thought you'd be, wondering whether God has forgotten you. Ezekiel's vision says He hasn't. His throne has wheels. He can meet you by a canal in Babylon, in a hospital room, in a prison cell, or in a lonely apartment. Wherever you are, the God of the throne can come.

And when He does, the right response is Ezekiel's. "I fell on my face." Before you ask Him for anything, worship Him.

Study Questions

1. What was Ezekiel's situation when he saw this vision? Why does that matter?
2. How does Ezekiel 10:20 help identify the living creatures?
3. What might the four faces, the eyes, and the wheels within wheels picture?
4. Why don't the "ancient astronaut" explanations of Ezekiel 1 hold up?
5. Trace the glory of the LORD through Ezekiel (chapters 1, 10, 11, 43, 48). What story does it tell?
6. Where do you feel like an exile? How does this vision encourage you?

Chapter 24: The Star of Bethlehem

> *saying, "Where is the **One** who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east, and have come to worship Him."*
>
> Matthew 2:2 (SLB)

Every Christmas, the star goes up on top of the tree, and the wise men show up in the manger scene next to the shepherds. It's a lovely picture, though Matthew tells it a little differently. And it raises one of the most popular mysteries in the Bible. What was the star that led the Magi to Jesus? Was it a comet, a planet, an exploding star, or something only God could make?

I'll keep to the mystery here and leave the prophecies about Jesus' birth to my book on Bible prophecy. This chapter is about the star itself.

The Passage

> *Now when Jesus had been born in Bethlehem of Judea in **the** days of Herod the king, look, Magi from **the** east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, "Where is the **One** who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east, and have come to worship Him."* (Matthew 2:1-2)
>
> *Then Herod, having secretly called the Magi, ascertained exactly from them the time of the appearing star.* (Matthew 2:7)
>
> *And having heard the king, they went away; and look, the star which they saw in the east was going before them, until, having come, it stood over where the child was. And having seen the star, they rejoiced **with** exceedingly great joy. And having come into the house, they saw the child with Mary His mother, and having fallen down they worshiped Him; and having opened their treasures, they offered to Him gifts: gold and frankincense and myrrh.* (Matthew 2:9-11)

The Question

What did the Magi see? Was it a natural event in the sky, like a planetary conjunction or a comet, that God used to get their attention? Or was it a supernatural light that no astronomer could chart?

What We Know for Certain

- **The Magi were from the east.** The Greek historian Herodotus, writing in the 400s B.C., describes the Magi as a priestly tribe of the Medes (*Histories* 1.101). By Jesus' day, the word was used for wise men, astrologers, and interpreters of dreams in Persia and Babylon. Daniel had once been made "chief of prefects over all the wise men of Babylon" (Daniel 2:48). Some suggest the Magi knew of Israel's hope for a King because of the Jewish exiles who had lived among them, and perhaps through Daniel himself.
- **Matthew doesn't say there were three.** There were three kinds of gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. That's where the number three came from. We don't know how many Magi there were.
- **They didn't come to the manger.** By the time they arrived, Jesus was in "the house," and Matthew calls Him "the child," not a newborn. Herod killed the boys in Bethlehem "from two years old and under,

according to the time which he had ascertained exactly from the Magi" (Matthew 2:16). Jesus may have been up to a year or two old.

- **The star appeared at a definite time.** Herod "ascertained exactly from them the time of the appearing star" (Matthew 2:7). It appeared, and they could date it.
- **The star moved and stopped.** After they left Herod, "the star which they saw in the east was going before them, until, having come, it stood over where the child was" (Matthew 2:9).
- **Herod didn't seem to have noticed it.** He had to ask the Magi when it appeared. Whatever it was, it wasn't something that made everybody in Jerusalem look up.

The Main Views

- **A conjunction of planets.** In 1603, the astronomer Johannes Kepler watched Jupiter and Saturn pass close together in the sky, and he calculated that the same thing had happened three times in 7 B.C., in the constellation Pisces. Jupiter was often seen as a royal planet, and some ancient writers linked Pisces with the land of Israel, though that link is debated. Others point to a very close meeting of Jupiter and Venus in 2 B.C., when the two would have looked like one brilliant light to the naked eye.
- **A comet or a new star.** Chinese astronomers recorded a new object in the sky in the spring of 5 B.C. that lasted about seventy days. Some believe it was a comet, which can appear to "stand" over a place as it moves slowly in the sky, or a nova, a star that suddenly brightens.
- **A supernatural light.** Many believe the star was a miraculous light God created for this purpose, something like the pillar of fire that led Israel in the wilderness, or the glory of the Lord that shone around the shepherds (Luke 2:9). This would explain how it "was going before them" and "stood over where the child was," which no planet or comet does in the way Matthew describes.
- **A combination.** Some suggest that an event in the sky first caught the Magi's attention in the east, and then God guided them the last few miles in a special way.

How Did They Know What to Look For?

A star by itself doesn't tell you a King has been born in Judea. Somebody had to connect the sign with Israel's hope. The Bible gives us two strong clues.

The first is Balaam. He was a foreign prophet who came "from the mountains of the east" (Numbers 23:7), the same direction the Magi came from. Hired to curse Israel, he blessed them instead, and he said this: "I see him, and not now; I observe him, and not near. A star will march forth from Jacob, and a scepter will arise from Israel" (Numbers 24:17). A prophecy about a star and a King, spoken by a man from the east, would have been just the kind of saying wise men in the east would remember.

The second is Daniel, whom we met above as chief over the wise men of Babylon. Daniel's book holds the clearest timetable in the Old Testament for the coming of the Messiah (Daniel 9:24-26). Wise men who honored Daniel's memory may well have kept his writings.

We can't prove either connection. But the Magi didn't ask, "Has something happened in the sky?" They asked, "Where is the One who has been born King of the Jews?" (Matthew 2:2). They already knew what the sign meant.

What the Gifts Say

The Magi brought "gold and frankincense and myrrh" (Matthew 2:11). Christians have long seen meaning in each one.

- **Gold** is a gift for a king. Psalm 72, a psalm about the coming King, says "the kings of Sheba and Seba will bring near a gift" (Psalm 72:10). Isaiah says nations will come to Israel's light, bringing "gold and frankincense" (Isaiah 60:6).
- **Frankincense** was burned in worship at the tabernacle and temple. It's a gift for God, offered by priests.
- **Myrrh** was used to prepare bodies for burial. When Jesus died, Nicodemus brought "a mixture of myrrh and aloes, approximately 75 pounds" (John 19:39). From the start, there was a hint of the cross.

There may also be a practical side. When Mary and Joseph presented Jesus at the temple forty days after His birth, they offered "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons" (Luke 2:24). The law allowed that offering when a family couldn't afford a lamb (Leviticus 12:8). So they were poor when Jesus was born, and the Magi likely hadn't come yet. Soon after the Magi's visit, the family had to flee to Egypt. Some suggest the gold helped pay for the journey. The Bible doesn't say so, but it's a sweet thought: God provided for His Son's escape before Joseph knew he would need it.

Does This Make Astrology OK?

No. The Bible condemns trying to read the future in the stars. Isaiah mocked the Babylonian astrologers, "those who divide the heavens, who gaze at the stars," because they couldn't save anyone (Isaiah 47:13), and the law forbade every kind of divination (Deuteronomy 18:10). God met these Gentile seekers where they were, and He used a star to bring them to Jesus. But the star didn't leave them reading horoscopes. It led them to fall down and worship the Son of God. When they left, they went home by another way, warned by God in a dream, not by the stars (Matthew 2:12).

The Dating Problem

Part of the puzzle is that we don't know the exact year Jesus was born. Herod the Great was alive when Jesus was born, and Josephus says Herod died shortly after an eclipse of the moon and before a Passover. Most historians date his death to 4 B.C., which would put Jesus' birth around 6 or 5 B.C. A smaller group argues for 1 B.C., which would fit the planetary meetings of 3 and 2 B.C. better. If you're wondering how Jesus could be born "before Christ," it's because a monk named Dionysius Exiguus, who set up our calendar in the A.D. 500s, seems to have been off by a few years.

Where Scripture Is Silent

Matthew never says what the star was made of, how long it was visible, or whether anyone else saw it. He never calls it a planet, a comet, or a miracle. He simply calls it "His star."

Where I Land

I believe the star was real, and that its final movement, going before the Magi and stopping over one house in Bethlehem, was a work of God that no natural object explains. Whether God also used a natural

event in the sky to start them on their way, I don't know. The text puts the weight on God's guidance, not on astronomy.

I'll add one caution. The star is not permission to read the stars for guidance. The Bible forbids astrology plainly (Deuteronomy 18:10; Isaiah 47:13-14). God met these pagan stargazers where they were and led them to the One who made the stars, and once they found Him, they worshiped Him, not the sky.

What This Means for You

Here's what strikes me most. The religious leaders in Jerusalem had the Scriptures. They knew exactly where the Messiah would be born, and they told Herod: Bethlehem (Matthew 2:4-6). It was about six miles away. Not one of them went.

Meanwhile, foreigners traveled hundreds of miles, at great cost, following the little light God gave them, and when they found Jesus, "they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy" and fell down and worshiped Him.

You may know a lot about the Bible. The question is whether you've gone to Him. Knowing where Jesus is doesn't save anybody. Coming to Him does.

Study Questions

1. What do we know for certain about the Magi from Matthew 2? What parts of the Christmas tradition aren't in the text?
2. What clues in Matthew 2 suggest that Jesus was no longer a newborn when the Magi arrived?
3. Review the main views of what the star was. Which do you find most convincing?
4. Why does the way the star moved and stopped (Matthew 2:9) matter?
5. Why do you think the religious leaders in Jerusalem didn't go to Bethlehem?
6. What might each of the three gifts say about who Jesus is?
7. Why doesn't the Magi's story make astrology acceptable?
8. What "light" has God used to lead you to Jesus?

Chapter 25: The Silent Years of Jesus

> *And Jesus was advancing in wisdom and stature and favor with God and men.*
>
> Luke 2:52 (SLB)

We know about Jesus' birth. We know about His ministry, His death, and His resurrection. But between His early childhood and the day He was baptized by John, about age thirty, the Gospels give us exactly one story. Just one, from when He was twelve. The rest, around eighteen years of His life, is silence.

That silence has bothered people for a long time, and some have rushed to fill it with stories of their own.

I have worked on guitars for more than 20 years, and I spent about 35 years at a public utility. Most of life is not dramatic. It is showing up, doing honest work and taking care of your family. Jesus spent thirty quiet years in Nazareth before His public ministry. God uses faithful, unseen work to prepare us long before anyone notices.

The Passage

> *And His parents were going every year to Jerusalem at the feast of the Passover. And when He was twelve years **old**, they having gone up to Jerusalem according to the custom of the feast, and having completed the days, as they were returning, the boy Jesus remained behind in Jerusalem; and Joseph and His mother did not know **it**. But having supposed Him to be in the caravan, they went a day's journey, and they were seeking Him among the relatives and among the acquaintances. And not having found Him, they returned to Jerusalem, seeking Him. And it came to pass, after three days they found Him in the temple, sitting in **the** midst of the teachers, both hearing them and questioning them. And all those hearing Him were amazed at His understanding and answers.* (Luke 2:41-47)

> *And having seen Him, they were astonished; and His mother said to Him, "Child, why did You do thus to us? Look, Your father and I, being in anguish, were seeking You." And He said to them, "Why **is it** that you were seeking Me? Did you not know that I must be in the **things** of My Father?" And they themselves did not understand the declaration which He spoke to them. And He went down with them and came to Nazareth, and He was being subject to them. And His mother was keeping all these declarations in her heart. And Jesus was advancing in wisdom and stature and favor with God and men.* (Luke 2:48-52)

The Question

What was Jesus doing between age twelve and about age thirty (Luke 3:23)? Where was He? Did He travel? Did He study with teachers somewhere else? Why don't the Gospels tell us?

What We Know for Certain

- **He grew up in Nazareth.** After the temple visit, "He went down with them and came to Nazareth, and He was being subject to them." When He began His ministry, Luke says He came "to Nazareth, where He had been brought up" (Luke 4:16).
- **He obeyed His parents.** The eternal Son of God was "subject to them." He kept the fifth commandment perfectly for eighteen years.
- **He grew.** "Jesus was advancing in wisdom and stature and favor with God and men." He grew up as a real boy and a real man, in body, mind, and relationships.
- **He worked as a carpenter.** The people of Nazareth said, "Is this not the carpenter, the son of Mary, and brother of James and Joses and Jude and Simon? And are His sisters not here with us?" (Mark 6:3). Matthew calls Him "the son of the carpenter" (Matthew 13:55). The Greek word *tekton* means a builder or craftsman who worked with wood, stone, or both. Joseph taught Him the trade.
- **He had a family.** He had at least four brothers and at least two sisters, the children of Joseph and Mary born after Him. Joseph is not mentioned again after the temple visit, and many believe he died before Jesus began His ministry.
- **He worshiped regularly.** He went to the synagogue on the Sabbath "according to His custom" (Luke 4:16).
- **His hometown thought He was ordinary.** When He began to preach and do miracles, the people of Nazareth were offended. "From where then did this man get all these things?" (Matthew 13:56). If He had spent years in faraway lands studying with foreign teachers, they'd have known it. They didn't think He had studied at all. The leaders in Jerusalem said the same: "How does this man know letters, not having learned?" (John 7:15).

That last point matters a great deal. The people who knew Jesus best, His neighbors, said He'd been there all along, working in the shop.

The Stories People Have Made Up

- **The "infancy gospels."** In the second century, writings appeared that claimed to tell stories of Jesus' childhood. The best known, often called the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, has the boy Jesus making clay birds come alive and striking dead another child who bumped into Him. The early church didn't accept these writings, and the Jesus they show, petty and vengeful, looks nothing like the Jesus of the Gospels.
- **Jesus in India or Tibet.** In 1894, a Russian writer named Nicolas Notovitch published a book claiming he had found an ancient manuscript at a Buddhist monastery at Hemis, in Ladakh in northern India, describing Jesus' travels to India as a young man. The scholar Max Muller doubted the story right away. Then a British professor named J. Archibald Douglas went to Hemis in 1895 and spoke with the head lama, who said there was no such manuscript and that Notovitch had never been there. In spite of that, the story keeps getting repeated.
- **Jesus in Britain.** A medieval legend in England said Joseph of Arimathea brought the young Jesus to Glastonbury. It inspired a famous poem by William Blake. There is no early evidence for it at all.
- **Jesus among the Essenes or in Egypt.** Others claim He studied with the community at Qumran or with mystics in Egypt. The Gospels show Him at odds with the separatist spirit of groups like that, and nothing ties Him to them.

Why the Silence?

If God wanted us to know what those years held, He could have told us. So why didn't He?

- **The Gospels aren't biographies in the modern sense.** They don't try to tell us everything. John says plainly that "these have been written so that you may believe" (John 20:31). They focus on what we need: who Jesus is and what He came to do.
- **The silence itself says something.** The Son of God spent about ninety percent of His life on earth in a small town, working with His hands, obeying His parents, caring for His family, and going to synagogue. There was nothing to write about because it was ordinary. And God the Father was pleased with it. At His baptism, before He had preached a sermon or done a miracle, the Father said, "You are My Son, the beloved; in You I was well pleased" (Luke 3:22).
- **He was getting ready.** The temple story shows that even at twelve, He knew who His Father was. "Did you not know that I must be in the things of My Father?" He spent those years growing in wisdom, learning the Scriptures, and waiting for the Father's time.

Where Scripture Is Silent

We aren't told what He built, whether He traveled for work to nearby towns (the city of Sepphoris was being rebuilt about four miles from Nazareth during those years, and some suggest Joseph and Jesus may have worked there), when Joseph died, or what His days were like.

Where I Land

I believe Jesus spent the silent years in Nazareth, working as a carpenter, helping to support His mother and His brothers and sisters, and growing up under the Father's care. That's what the Gospels imply, and it's what His neighbors said. I reject the stories of travels to India, Tibet, Britain, and Egypt. They come from much later sources, and in the case of India, the source was shown to be false within a year.

What This Means for You

I find this one of the most encouraging mysteries in the book. Most of our lives look like those silent years. Get up, go to work, take care of the family, go to church, do it again. Nobody writes about it.

But Jesus lived those years too, and the Father was well pleased. Faithfulness in ordinary things is not wasted time. It's where God grows us in wisdom and favor. If you feel like your life is hidden and small right now, you're in very good company.

Study Questions

1. What do we learn about Jesus from the one story of His boyhood in Luke 2:41-52?
2. What does it tell us that His hometown was so surprised by His ministry (Mark 6:1-3)?
3. Why do you think the infancy gospels were rejected by the early church?
4. What happened to the claim that Jesus traveled to India?
5. Why do you think God chose not to tell us more about these years?
6. How does Jesus' ordinary life in Nazareth encourage you in your own daily routine?

Chapter 26: The Unpardonable Sin

> *All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the **one** coming to Me I will certainly not cast out.*
>
> John 6:37 (SLB)

Of all the mysteries in this book, this is the one that keeps people awake at night. I've heard of believers who spent years terrified that they had committed the unpardonable sin. Maybe they said something angry against God in a dark moment. Maybe a blasphemous thought flashed through their mind and wouldn't leave. And they read Jesus' words that this sin "will not be forgiven," and they wondered if they were lost forever.

If that's you, I want to say this right at the start. The fact that you're worried about it is very strong evidence that you haven't committed it. Keep reading, and I'll show you why.

The Passage

> *Then one who was demon-possessed, blind and mute, was brought to Him; and He healed him, so that the blind and mute **man** both spoke and saw. And all the crowds were amazed and were saying, "This is not the Son of David, is it?" But the Pharisees, having heard, said, "This **man** does not cast out the demons except by Beelzebul, ruler of the demons."* (Matthew 12:22-24)

> *Because of this I say to you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven to men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven to men. And whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him, neither in this age nor in the coming **one**.* (Matthew 12:31-32)

> *Truly I say to you that all the sins will be forgiven to the sons of men, and the blasphemies, whatever they may blaspheme; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit does not have forgiveness to the age, but is liable to eternal judgment," because they were saying, "He has an unclean spirit." (Mark 3:28-30)*

The Question

What exactly is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit? Why can't it be forgiven, when Jesus says every other sin and blasphemy can be? And can a person commit it today?

What We Know for Certain

- **It came right after a clear miracle.** Jesus had just healed a man who was blind, mute, and demon-possessed. The crowds were starting to ask whether He was the Messiah, the Son of David.
- **The Pharisees saw it and called it Satan's work.** They didn't deny the miracle. They couldn't. Instead, they said He did it "by Beelzebul, ruler of the demons." Mark says Jesus' warning came "because they were saying, 'He has an unclean spirit'" (Mark 3:30).

- **Jesus said every other sin can be forgiven.** "All the sins will be forgiven to the sons of men, and the blasphemies, whatever they may blaspheme" (Mark 3:28). That's a staggering promise. Murder, adultery, theft, even speaking against the Son of Man, can be forgiven.
- **This one sin cannot.** "Whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit does not have forgiveness to the age, but is liable to eternal judgment" (Mark 3:29).

What Is It?

Put those facts together, and here's what the sin was. These religious leaders looked straight at the work of the Holy Spirit, a work so clearly from God that the ordinary people in the crowd recognized it, and they deliberately called it the work of the devil. It wasn't a slip of the tongue or a moment of doubt. It was a settled, hardened decision to call God's light darkness, because they had already made up their minds to reject Jesus no matter what.

Why can't it be forgiven? Not because God's grace runs out, but because this sin rejects the only One who could bring forgiveness. The Holy Spirit is the One who convicts us of sin and draws us to Jesus (John 16:8). If a person looks at the Spirit's clearest work and calls it Satan's, they have shut the only door through which forgiveness comes. It's like a drowning man who looks at the only lifeboat and calls it a shark. He can't be saved, not because the boat is too small, but because he won't get in.

The Main Views

- **A sin only possible while Jesus was on earth.** Some believe this exact sin required seeing Jesus' miracles in person and attributing them to Satan, so it can't be committed today in the same way.
- **Final, persistent unbelief.** Many believe it is the settled, lifelong rejection of the Spirit's testimony about Jesus. Anyone who dies refusing Christ will not be forgiven, because they refused the only way of forgiveness.
- **A hardened, deliberate rejection of known truth.** Others connect it with passages like Hebrews 6:4-6 and 10:26-29, which warn about people who have been enlightened and tasted the good word of God and then deliberately turn away and treat the Son of God with contempt.

I think the second and third views are close to each other, and both are true to the passage. What all three views agree on is this: it is not a single careless word, a passing thought, or a sin committed in weakness. It's a heart so hardened against God that it no longer wants Him.

Why Worried People Haven't Committed It

Here's the comfort I promised. A person who has committed this sin doesn't care that they have. The Pharisees weren't lying awake worrying they had offended God. They were plotting to kill Jesus (Matthew 12:14).

If you're troubled about your sin and want to be right with God, the Holy Spirit is still working in you. That desire comes from Him. The very fact that you're afraid of having pushed Him away shows He hasn't left.

And listen to Jesus' own promise: "the one coming to Me I will certainly not cast out" (John 6:37). Not "probably not." Certainly not. If you come to Jesus, He will receive you. That promise has no fine print.

“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous so that He may forgive us the sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). All unrighteousness. Including the thing you’re afraid of.

Where Scripture Is Silent

The Bible doesn’t give us a list of words that count as this sin, or a test to see if someone has committed it. It doesn’t tell us we should ever conclude that a living person is beyond God’s reach. That’s not our call.

Where I Land

I believe the unpardonable sin is a deliberate, settled rejection of the Holy Spirit’s clear testimony about Jesus, calling God’s work evil with full knowledge and a hardened heart, and that in its final form it is dying in unbelief. I believe a true believer cannot commit it, and that anyone who is worried about having committed it hasn’t. I’ve written this chapter with them especially in mind.

What This Means for You

There are two messages here, and they’re for two different kinds of people.

If you’re tender, anxious, and afraid you’ve gone too far, hear Jesus: every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven. Come to Him. He won’t turn you away.

If you’re hard, and you’ve been hearing the truth about Jesus for years and pushing it away, this chapter is a warning. Every time you say no to the Spirit’s voice, it gets easier to say no again. There may come a day when you no longer hear Him at all. Don’t wait for that day. “Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts” (Hebrews 3:15).

Study Questions

1. What had just happened when Jesus spoke about blasphemy against the Holy Spirit?
2. What exactly did the Pharisees say, according to Matthew 12:24 and Mark 3:30?
3. Why is this sin unforgivable, when Jesus says every other sin can be forgiven?
4. Why can a person who is worried about committing this sin be confident they haven’t?
5. How do John 6:37 and 1 John 1:9 comfort a troubled conscience?
6. Read Hebrews 3:12-15. What warning does it give to someone who keeps resisting God?

Chapter 27: The Saints Raised at the Cross

> *and the tombs were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; and having come out of the tombs after His resurrection, they entered into the holy city and appeared to many.*
>
> Matthew 27:52-53 (SLB)

Only Matthew tells this story, and he tells it in two verses. When Jesus died, the earth shook, rocks split, tombs opened, and "many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised." After Jesus rose, they came out and appeared to many in Jerusalem. Then Matthew moves on and never mentions them again.

It's one of the strangest passages in the Gospels, and it leaves us with a pile of questions.

The Passage

> *And Jesus, having cried out again with a loud voice, yielded up the spirit. And look, the veil of the temple was torn into two from top to bottom, and the earth was shaken, and the rocks were split, and the tombs were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; and having come out of the tombs after His resurrection, they entered into the holy city and appeared to many. And the centurion and those with him keeping guard over Jesus, having seen the earthquake and the things that were happening, feared greatly, saying, "Truly this was God's Son."* (Matthew 27:50-54)

The Question

Who were these saints? When exactly were they raised, at Jesus' death or at His resurrection? What did they do in Jerusalem? And what happened to them afterward? Did they die again, like Lazarus, or did they go to heaven with Jesus?

What We Know for Certain

- **It was connected with Jesus' death.** Matthew lists it with the torn veil, the earthquake, and the split rocks. All of these happened when Jesus "yielded up the spirit."
- **The tombs opened when He died, but the saints came out after His resurrection.** Matthew is careful about the order: "the tombs were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; and having come out of the tombs after His resurrection, they entered into the holy city."
- **They were "saints."** That means believers, people who belonged to God, probably from the Old Testament era.
- **They were "many," not all.** This was not the general resurrection of the dead.
- **Many people saw them.** "They entered into the holy city and appeared to many."
- **The centurion was shaken.** Seeing the earthquake and everything else, he and his men said, "Truly this was God's Son."

The Main Views

When Were They Raised?

Some read the passage as saying the saints were raised to life at the moment Jesus died and waited in their tombs until after His resurrection to come out. Others think Matthew grouped everything together because of the opened tombs, but that the saints were actually raised at the time of Jesus' resurrection, and came out then. That second reading fits better with Paul's teaching that Christ is "the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep" (1 Corinthians 15:20). Jesus had to rise first.

What Happened to Them Afterward?

- **They died again.** Like the widow's son at Nain, Jairus' daughter, and Lazarus, they were brought back to ordinary life and later died again. This keeps Jesus as the only One raised to an immortal body before the end of the age.
- **They were raised in glorified bodies and went to heaven.** Many believe these saints were raised with new bodies that would never die, and that they ascended with Jesus or soon afterward. Some connect them to Paul's words that when Christ ascended, "He took captivity captive" (Ephesians 4:8). On this view, they were like the first sheaves of the harvest, the "firstfruits" offering presented with Christ (Leviticus 23:10-11).

Did It Really Happen?

Some modern scholars suggest Matthew meant this as symbolic or apocalyptic language, a poetic way of saying that Jesus' death shook the world and opened the way to resurrection, not a report of actual events. Others strongly disagree, pointing out that Matthew tells it in the same plain, historical way he tells everything else around it: the veil, the earthquake, the centurion, the guards. It's set in a real city, on a real day, with real witnesses.

Where Scripture Is Silent

We don't know who the saints were, how many there were, whom they appeared to, how long they stayed, or what happened to them. No other Gospel mentions them, and neither does any other book of the New Testament.

Where I Land

I believe it happened just as Matthew says. He tells it as history, alongside other events everyone agrees were historical. I think the saints came out of their tombs after Jesus rose, as Matthew says, so that Jesus was the first to rise. On whether they died again or went to heaven, I don't think the text settles it. I lean toward the view that they were raised as a firstfruits offering and went to be with the Lord, but I hold that loosely.

What This Means for You

Think about what this event was saying. At the very moment Jesus died, God tore the veil from top to bottom and broke open the tombs. Two of the great walls that stood between people and God, sin and death, cracked open at the cross.

This was a preview. One day, every grave of every believer will open. Paul says the order is “Christ the firstfruits, after that those of Christ at His coming” (1 Corinthians 15:23). These few saints were a sample of the harvest to come. If you’ve buried a believer you love, Matthew 27 is God’s down payment on your reunion.

Study Questions

1. List everything Matthew says happened when Jesus died (Matthew 27:50-54).
2. What does Matthew say about the timing of the saints’ coming out of their tombs? Why does that matter?
3. What are the two main views about what happened to these saints afterward?
4. Why do some scholars read this passage as symbolic, and why do others insist it’s historical?
5. How does this event connect with Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians 15:20-23?
6. How does this passage encourage you about believers who have died?

Chapter 28: The Spirits in Prison

> *Because Christ also suffered once for sins, **the** righteous for **the** unrighteous, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death indeed in **the** flesh, but having been made alive in the spirit*
>
> 1 Peter 3:18 (SLB)

Even good Bible teachers admit they aren't sure what this passage means. Martin Luther, in his commentary on 1 Peter, called it one of the most obscure passages in the New Testament and admitted he did not know for certain what Peter meant. It's one of the hardest verses in the New Testament, and people have built some very strange ideas on it. Let's walk through it carefully.

The Passage

> *Because Christ also suffered once for sins, **the** righteous for **the** unrighteous, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death indeed in **the** flesh, but having been made alive in the spirit, in which also, having gone, He preached to the spirits in prison, who formerly disobeyed, when once the patience of God was waiting in **the** days of Noah, while **the** ark was being prepared, into which few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water* (1 Peter 3:18-20)
>
> *to which also an antitype, baptism, now saves us (not a putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the pledge of a good conscience toward God), through **the** resurrection of Jesus Christ, who is at **the** right hand of God, having gone into heaven, angels and authorities and powers having been subjected to Him.* (1 Peter 3:21-22)

The Question

Who are "the spirits in prison"? When did Christ preach to them, and what did He preach? Did He go down to the realm of the dead between His death and resurrection? And does this mean people get a second chance after death?

What We Know for Certain

- **Peter's main point is Christ's victory.** The passage begins with Christ suffering "once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, so that He might bring us to God," and ends with Him "at the right hand of God, having gone into heaven, angels and authorities and powers having been subjected to Him." Whatever the spirits in prison are, the passage is moving from Christ's suffering to His triumph.
- **Peter was writing to suffering believers.** The whole letter encourages Christians who were being mistreated for doing right. Jesus suffered unjustly too, and He won.
- **The spirits "formerly disobeyed" in the days of Noah.** Peter ties them directly to the time "while the ark was being prepared."
- **Only eight were saved through the flood.** Noah, his wife, his three sons, and their wives.
- **Peter links the flood to baptism.** Noah's family passed through the water and came out into a new world. Baptism pictures our passing through judgment in Christ and coming out to new life. Peter is

careful to say it isn't the water that saves, but "the pledge of a good conscience toward God, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ."

The Main Views

View One: Christ Preached Through Noah to Noah's Generation

On this view, Christ preached "in the spirit," by the Holy Spirit, through Noah, to the people of Noah's day while the ark was being built. Peter calls Noah "a herald of righteousness" (2 Peter 2:5), and he says the Spirit of Christ was in the Old Testament prophets (1 Peter 1:11). Those people disobeyed and are now "in prison," meaning in the place of the dead awaiting judgment. This view was taught by Augustine and is held by many Reformed teachers. It avoids the idea of Christ traveling anywhere between His death and resurrection.

View Two: Christ Proclaimed Victory to Fallen Angels

On this view, after His death and resurrection, Christ went and announced His triumph to the fallen angels who sinned in Noah's day and are now kept in prison. The word for "preached" here, *kerusso*, means to proclaim like a herald. It doesn't always mean preaching the gospel. In the New Testament, "spirits" without any other description usually means spiritual beings, not human souls. And Peter's second letter mentions angels who sinned and were cast into Tartarus and "delivered them to chains of gloom" right before he mentions Noah (2 Peter 2:4-5). Jude says the same (Jude 6). This view ties in with the fallen-angel reading of Genesis 6, which we looked at in Chapter 15. It fits the end of the passage, where angels and powers are subjected to Christ.

View Three: Christ Preached to the Dead

On this view, between His death and resurrection, Christ went to the realm of the dead and preached to the human dead there, either announcing His victory or offering them the gospel. Some connect this with Ephesians 4:9, which says Christ "descended first into the lower parts of the earth," and with 1 Peter 4:6, "the gospel was preached also to the dead." This is part of the background for the phrase "He descended into hell" in the Apostles' Creed.

Some have pushed this view to teach that people who die without Christ get a second chance after death. That idea runs straight into Hebrews 9:27: "it is appointed to men to die once, and after this judgment." It also runs into Jesus' story of the rich man, who found "a great chasm has been fixed" after death (Luke 16:26). And in 1 Peter 3, the only people named are those of Noah's day. Nothing here offers anyone a second chance.

What About 1 Peter 4:6?

"For to this end the gospel was preached also to the dead." Most teachers read this as meaning the gospel was preached to people who heard it while they were alive and have since died. They were judged by men in the flesh, perhaps even martyred, but they live to God in the spirit. That fits the letter's theme of suffering believers, and it doesn't require preaching after death.

Where Scripture Is Silent

Peter doesn't tell us exactly when Christ preached, what He said, or who the spirits were in so many words. He assumed his readers would understand, and we're left piecing it together.

Where I Land

As I did in my study on Peter's letters, I'll lay out the views and not choose a winner here. Each has thoughtful defenders. I'll say this much: the first two views fit the passage well and fit the rest of Scripture. The idea of a second chance after death does not fit, and I reject it. Whatever Christ preached to those spirits, it was not an offer that changes anyone's eternal destiny after death.

What This Means for You

Here's what every view agrees on, and it's the point Peter wanted his readers to grasp. Jesus suffered unjustly and died. Then He was made alive, and now He reigns at God's right hand with every angel, authority, and power under Him. Even the spirits in prison, whoever they are, had to hear about it.

If you're suffering for doing right, you're following in His steps. And He won. You're on the winning side, even when it doesn't look like it. And remember Noah. Only eight people believed God in his day. Being in the minority doesn't mean you're wrong.

Study Questions

1. What is Peter's main point in 1 Peter 3:18-22?
2. Lay out the three main views of who the spirits in prison are. What is the strongest argument for each?
3. Why doesn't this passage teach a second chance after death? What other verses speak to that?
4. How does Peter connect Noah's flood with baptism? What does he say baptism is, and isn't?
5. How do you read 1 Peter 4:6?
6. How does Christ's victory encourage you when you suffer for doing right?

Chapter 29: Baptism for the Dead

> *Otherwise, what will those do who are baptized for the dead, if **the** dead are not raised at all? Why then are they baptized for the dead?*
>
> 1 Corinthians 15:29 (SLB)

Bible commentators have offered dozens of different explanations of this one verse, which tells you how hard it is. Paul mentions something called being "baptized for the dead," and he never explains it. He doesn't commend it. He doesn't condemn it. He just uses it to make a point and moves on.

The Passage

> *Otherwise, what will those do who are baptized for the dead, if **the** dead are not raised at all? Why then are they baptized for the dead? Why are we also in danger every hour?*
> (1 Corinthians 15:29-30)

The Question

What was baptism for the dead? Who was doing it? Was Paul approving of it? And should Christians do it today?

What We Know for Certain

- **Paul's subject is the resurrection.** Some in Corinth were saying "there is no resurrection of the dead" (1 Corinthians 15:12). The whole chapter answers them. Verse 29 is one of several arguments: if there is no resurrection, a lot of things make no sense.
- **Paul says "those" who are baptized, not "we."** In the very next verse he switches to "we": "Why are we also in danger every hour?" He seems to be describing what some people were doing, not what he taught.
- **It's mentioned nowhere else in the Bible.** No other verse describes, commands, or explains it.
- **Paul's argument works either way.** Whatever the practice was, his point is that it would be pointless if the dead are not raised.

The Main Views

- **Some were being baptized on behalf of believers who had died unbaptized.** This is the most natural reading of the Greek word *hyper*, "on behalf of." On this view, a group in Corinth was doing this, perhaps for converts who died before they could be baptized. Paul neither approves nor condemns it here. He simply points out that even their own practice assumes a resurrection. We'll come back to the groups that took it this way.
- **People were baptized because of the dead.** *Hyper* can also mean "for the sake of" or "because of." On this view, people became believers and were baptized because of the testimony of Christians who had died, or because they wanted to be reunited with believing loved ones in the resurrection. A mother dies trusting Christ, and her son, moved by her faith and longing to see her again, comes to Christ and is baptized. That would make no sense if the dead are not raised.

- **"The dead" means the baptized person's own body.** Some suggest Paul means being baptized with a view to one's own death and resurrection, since baptism pictures dying and rising with Christ (Romans 6:3-5).
- **Baptism into suffering.** Jesus spoke of His coming death as a baptism (Mark 10:38-39). Some think Paul means believers who face martyrdom, being "baptized" into death for the sake of the dead in Christ. This links with verse 30, "Why are we also in danger every hour?"

How Other Groups Use Books Outside the Bible

Here's something worth noticing. Every group that has built a practice of doing something for the dead, so that the dead can be helped or saved after they die, has had to go outside the Bible to do it. The Bible verse is brought in as support, but the teaching itself rests on another book. Let's look at three examples. I want to speak carefully and respectfully, because I know sincere people in each of these groups. But I also want you to see clearly where each teaching comes from.

The Marcionites

The earliest group we know of that baptized living people for the dead was the followers of Marcion, in the second century. Tertullian (*Against Marcion* 5.10) and John Chrysostom (*Homilies on 1 Corinthians*, Homily 40) both describe it, and both say the church rejected it. Marcion is the man who threw out the whole Old Testament and kept only an edited Gospel of Luke and ten of Paul's letters. A group that cut the Bible down to fit its ideas also had a practice the Bible never commands. That's not a coincidence.

The Latter-day Saints

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints baptizes living members on behalf of the dead in its temples, and this is the group most people think of when they hear about this verse. According to the church's own history, Joseph Smith taught the practice at the funeral of a man named Seymour Brunson on August 15, 1840. In January 1841 he gave a revelation, now Doctrine and Covenants 124, calling for a baptismal font in the temple for this work. In September 1842 he wrote two letters on the subject, now Doctrine and Covenants 127 and 128.

Doctrine and Covenants 128 is where the teaching is laid out. Verse 16 quotes 1 Corinthians 15:29. Verse 17 quotes Malachi 4:5-6 about Elijah turning the hearts of the fathers and the children. And verse 15 gives the reason the practice matters to them: "their salvation is necessary and essential to our salvation," because "they without us cannot be made perfect."

So the practice doesn't come from the Bible. It comes from the Doctrine and Covenants, a book written in the 1800s, which then borrows Bible verses to support it. Look at what those verses actually say.

- **1 Corinthians 15:29** doesn't explain the practice, doesn't command it, and doesn't say "we." We've already seen that.
- **Malachi 4:5-6** is about a prophet who would come before the day of the LORD and turn hearts back to God. The angel Gabriel applied it to John the Baptist, who would go "in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of fathers to children" (Luke 1:17). It's about repentance among the living, not ceremonies for the dead.
- **"They without us cannot be made perfect" is** borrowed from Hebrews 11:40, which says God planned "something better for us, so that apart from us they should not be made perfect." In Hebrews, "they" are

the Old Testament believers listed in chapter 11, who already died in faith (Hebrews 11:13). They were saved by faith in their own lifetime. Hebrews says they'll be made complete together with us when God's whole plan in Christ is finished. It says nothing about the living doing anything for them.

Prayers and Offerings for the Dead

The Roman Catholic Church doesn't baptize for the dead. But it does teach that the living can help the dead, through prayer, the Mass, and other works offered for souls in purgatory. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (paragraphs 1031-1032) says this teaching is "based on the practice of prayer for the dead, already mentioned in Sacred Scripture," and the passage it cites is 2 Maccabees 12:46.

Second Maccabees isn't part of the Hebrew Bible. The Jews never counted it as Scripture, and it isn't in the Protestant Bible. Its own author doesn't claim to be writing God's Word. At the end, he says that if the story is well told, that is what he wanted, and if it's poorly done, that was the best he could do (2 Maccabees 15:38). That's an honest historian talking, not a prophet. And even in that story, the men Judas prayed for were soldiers who died wearing idol charms under their clothes (2 Maccabees 12:40). It's a sad and sincere act of a Jewish leader. It isn't a teaching from God.

What the Protestant Bible Teaches

Now set all of that aside and ask a simple question. What do the 66 books of the Bible teach about the dead, and about whether anyone can be saved, baptized, or helped after death? The answer is clear and consistent. It never supports it, not once, in any book.

> *And inasmuch as it is appointed to men to die once, and after this judgment* (Hebrews 9:27)

- **Death is followed by judgment, not a second chance.** Hebrews 9:27 says it plainly.
- **The line can't be crossed.** In Jesus' account of the rich man and Lazarus, Abraham says "between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to cross over from here to you may not be able" (Luke 16:26).
- **We're judged for what we did in this life.** Each one "may receive back the things done through the body, according to what he did, whether good or evil" (2 Corinthians 5:10). Not what someone else did for him after he died.
- **Nobody can stand in for another.** "The soul that sins, it shall die. A son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, and a father shall not bear the iniquity of the son" (Ezekiel 18:20). "No man will by any means ransom a brother" (Psalm 49:7). Only one Person has ever stood in for others, and that's Jesus on the cross.
- **Now is the time.** "Look, now is a well-accepted time; look, now is a day of salvation" (2 Corinthians 6:2).
- **Baptism follows a person's own faith.** When the Ethiopian asked to be baptized, Philip said, "If you believe from all your heart, it is permitted" (Acts 8:37). In every baptism in the New Testament, the person being baptized is a living person who believes for himself.
- **God has finished speaking in Scripture.** God has "in these last days spoken to us in a Son" (Hebrews 1:2), and the faith was "once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3). A later book that adds a new way of salvation adds to what God has already given.

So whether the extra book is a second-century edit of the Bible, a book of revelations from the 1800s, or a Jewish history from before Christ, the result is the same. The teaching that the living can save or help the dead comes from outside the Bible. The Protestant Holy Bible gives it no support at all.

Where Scripture Is Silent

We don't know who was doing this in Corinth, how they did it, or what they thought it accomplished. Paul never tells us.

Where I Land

I don't think anyone can be certain what this verse means. I lean toward the second view, that people were coming to faith and being baptized because of believers who had died, hoping to see them again in the resurrection. It fits the word, fits Paul's argument, and fits the rest of Scripture. If the first view is right instead, then Paul was simply pointing to what a group in Corinth was doing without approving it. Either way, I'm confident of this: the verse doesn't teach that we can be baptized for people who died without Christ, and Christians shouldn't build any practice on it.

What This Means for You

Paul's real point is the one that matters. If the dead are not raised, nothing in the Christian life makes sense. "If the dead are not raised, let us eat and let us drink, for tomorrow we die" (1 Corinthians 15:32). But they are raised. Christ has been raised from the dead, and so will we be.

And here's a thought worth sitting with. Is anyone going to come to Christ because of your faith after you're gone? The second view pictures people giving their lives to Jesus because they wanted to see a believing loved one again. Live in such a way that your family will want to see you again in glory, and will know where to find you.

Study Questions

1. What is the main subject of 1 Corinthians 15, and how does verse 29 fit into Paul's argument?
2. Why might it matter that Paul says "those" in verse 29 but "we" in verse 30?
3. Review the main views. Which one do you think fits best, and why?
4. Why is one unexplained verse not enough to support a church practice?
5. Each group that teaches the living can help the dead relies on a book outside the Bible. Name the books and explain why that matters.
6. What does Hebrews 9:27 teach about the opportunity to respond to the gospel?
7. Who might come to Christ because of your faith?

Chapter 30: Paul's Thorn in the Flesh

> *And He has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is perfected in weakness." Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast in my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.*
>
> 2 Corinthians 12:9 (SLB)

Paul had seen things no one else had seen. Fourteen years before he wrote 2 Corinthians, he was caught up into Paradise and heard things he wasn't allowed to repeat (2 Corinthians 12:2-4). Then, so he wouldn't get proud about it, God allowed something painful into his life, and it stayed. Paul calls it "a thorn in the flesh." He begged God three times to take it away. God said no.

Ever since, people have wondered what it was.

The Passage

> *And so that I might not be exalted above measure by the surpassing greatness of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, so that he might buffet me, so that I might not be exalted above measure. Concerning this I begged the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is perfected in weakness." Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast in my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in distresses, on behalf of Christ; for when I am weak, then I am strong.* (2 Corinthians 12:7-10)

The Question

What was Paul's thorn? An illness? A person? A temptation? And why wouldn't God take it away?

What We Know for Certain

- **It had a purpose.** "So that I might not be exalted above measure." Paul says that twice in one verse.
- **It was "in the flesh."** That could mean in his body, or more broadly in his human life.
- **It was "a messenger of Satan."** Satan meant it to harm Paul. God used it to humble him. The same thing can come from two directions at once, the way it did with Job.
- **It "buffeted" him.** The word means to strike with the fist, over and over. It wasn't a one-time event. It kept hitting him.
- **Paul prayed three times, and God said no.** And God's answer was better than what Paul asked for: "My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is perfected in weakness."

The Main Views

- **An eye problem.** Paul told the Galatians he first preached to them "because of weakness of the flesh," and that they would have gouged out their own eyes and given them to him if they could (Galatians 4:13-15). Near the end of the same letter he wrote, "See with what large letters I have written to you with my own

hand" (Galatians 6:11). Some connect this with the blinding light on the Damascus road, which left him unable to see for three days (Acts 9:8-9).

- **A recurring illness.** Some have suggested malaria, epilepsy, or severe headaches, any of which could come and go and "buffet" him.
- **Persecution or a particular opponent.** In the Old Testament, enemies are called "thorns." God warned Israel that the Canaanites they failed to drive out would be "as thorns in your eyes and as pricks in your sides" (Numbers 33:55). And Paul calls the thorn a "messenger," a word usually used for a person. Right before this passage, Paul lists the beatings, stonings, and dangers he endured (2 Corinthians 11:23-27), and right after it he says he takes pleasure in "insults, in hardships, in persecutions." Some think the thorn was the constant opposition of false teachers who followed him from town to town.
- **A spiritual temptation.** Some in the Middle Ages took it to be a temptation Paul couldn't shake. Most modern readers think that doesn't fit, since God wouldn't give a temptation to keep Paul humble.
- **A disability or disfigurement.** After he was stoned at Lystra and left for dead (Acts 14:19), Paul may have carried lasting injuries.

Where Scripture Is Silent

Paul never tells us what it was. The Corinthians may have known. We don't.

Where I Land

I don't know, and I think the not knowing is a gift. If Paul had said, "It was my eyes," then only people with eye trouble would take this passage as written for them. Because he left it unnamed, every believer who carries a weakness that won't go away can read it as written to them. If I had to guess, I'd lean toward some physical problem, perhaps with his eyes, because of what Galatians says. But it's a guess.

What This Means for You

Most of us have a thorn of some kind. A chronic illness. A disability. A painful situation at home. A weakness we've prayed about for years.

Here's what Paul learned. God doesn't always remove the thorn. Sometimes He does, and we should keep asking. But sometimes His answer is "My grace is sufficient for you." That's not a brush-off. It's a promise. You'll have enough grace for today, and tomorrow there will be enough for tomorrow.

And God's power shows up best in weak people. Paul came to the point where he could say, "when I am weak, then I am strong." Not because weakness is good in itself, but because it leaves room for Christ's power to rest on him. The Greek word for "rest" there is related to the word for a tent. Christ's power pitches its tent over people who know they're weak.

Study Questions

1. What had happened to Paul before he was given the thorn (2 Corinthians 12:1-6)?
2. What purpose did the thorn serve, according to verse 7?
3. Review the main views. Which one seems most likely to you, and why?
4. Why might it be a gift that Paul didn't name his thorn?

5. What does God's answer in verse 9 mean to you?

6. What thorn have you prayed about? How might God's grace be sufficient for it?

Chapter 31: The Two Witnesses

> *And I will give to My two witnesses, and they will prophesy **for** one thousand two hundred sixty days, clothed in sackcloth.*
>
> Revelation 11:3 (SLB)

In the middle of the Tribulation, as the world is being shaken by God's judgments, two men will stand up in Jerusalem and prophesy. They'll be dressed in sackcloth, the clothing of mourning and repentance. Anyone who tries to hurt them will be burned up by fire from their mouths. They'll stop the rain, turn water to blood, and strike the earth with plagues. Then the beast will kill them, and the whole world will watch their bodies lying in the street and celebrate. And after three and a half days, they'll stand up.

When I translated the Steadfast Literal Bible, I made it a rule to let the words say what they plainly say. Looking at the two witnesses in Revelation 11, I find the view that they are two literal future prophets the most faithful to the text. Their miracles match signs Moses and Elijah performed. Taking Scripture at face value keeps real prophecy from becoming vague symbols.

Who are they?

The Passage

> *And I will give to My two witnesses, and they will prophesy **for** one thousand two hundred sixty days, clothed in sackcloth. These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands which stand before the God of the earth. And if anyone desires to harm them, fire goes out of their mouth and devours their enemies; and if anyone desires to harm them, thus he must be killed. These have authority to shut heaven, so that no rain may fall in **the** days of their prophecy; and they have authority over the waters to turn them into blood, and to strike the earth with every plague as often as they desire.* (Revelation 11:3-6)

> *And when they have finished their testimony, the beast which comes up out of the abyss will make war with them, and will overcome them and kill them. And their dead bodies **will be** on the street of the great city, which spiritually is called Sodom and Egypt, where also our Lord was crucified. And **those** from the peoples and tribes and tongues and nations will look at their dead bodies three days and a half, and will not allow their dead bodies to be put into tombs. And those who dwell on the earth will rejoice over them and will celebrate, and will send gifts to one another, because these two prophets tormented those who dwell on the earth. And after the three days and a half, a spirit of life from God entered upon them, and they stood on their feet, and great fear fell on those who were watching them. And they heard a loud voice out of heaven saying to them, "Come up here." And they went up to heaven in the cloud, and their enemies watched them.* (Revelation 11:7-12)

The Question

Are the two witnesses two real people? If so, who are they? Moses and Elijah? Enoch and Elijah? Two prophets God hasn't yet raised up? Or are they a picture of something else, such as the church?

What We Know for Certain

- **They prophesy for 1,260 days.** That's three and a half years by a 360-day prophetic year, the same length of time given elsewhere in Revelation and Daniel for the worst part of the end times (Revelation 11:2; 12:6; 13:5; Daniel 7:25).
- **They are "the two olive trees and the two lampstands."** That points back to Zechariah 4, where two olive trees supply oil to a lampstand. Zechariah is told they are "the two sons of the fresh oil who stand by the Lord of all the earth" (Zechariah 4:14). In Zechariah's day, those two were Zerubbabel the governor and Joshua the high priest, God's anointed leaders.
- **Their miracles echo Moses and Elijah.** Elijah shut the sky so that it didn't rain for three years and six months (1 Kings 17:1; James 5:17), and fire came down from heaven at his word (2 Kings 1:10-12). Moses turned the waters of the Nile to blood and struck Egypt with plagues (Exodus 7:20).
- **They die in Jerusalem.** "The great city, which spiritually is called Sodom and Egypt, where also our Lord was crucified." Jerusalem, in its rebellion, will be no better than Sodom or Egypt.
- **The whole world sees their bodies.** People "from the peoples and tribes and tongues and nations will look at their dead bodies three days and a half." For most of history, that was impossible to picture. Today, with live video on every phone, it's easy.
- **They rise and go up to heaven in a cloud** while their enemies watch (Revelation 11:12).

The Main Views

Moses and Elijah

- Their miracles are exactly the miracles Moses and Elijah did.
- Moses and Elijah appeared together with Jesus at the transfiguration (Matthew 17:3), representing the Law and the Prophets.
- Malachi promised Elijah would come "before the coming of the great and awesome day of the LORD" (Malachi 4:5), right after telling Israel to "remember the law of Moses" (Malachi 4:4).
- Moses' body was buried by God in an unknown place, and Michael disputed with the devil about it (Jude 9). Some see God preserving him for this role.

The objection is that Moses already died once, and it is appointed to men to die once (Hebrews 9:27).

Enoch and Elijah

- These are the only two men in the Bible who never died. If it is appointed to men to die once, they would be the ones who still need to.
- This was the most common view in the early church. Tertullian (*A Treatise on the Soul* 50) and Hippolytus (*On Christ and Antichrist* 43) both named Enoch and Elijah.
- Enoch was a prophet of judgment (Jude 14-15), which fits the witnesses' message.

The objection is that the miracles fit Moses better than Enoch, and that, as we saw in Chapter 16, Hebrews 9:27 states a general rule rather than requiring the two to return.

Two New Prophets

On this view, the witnesses are two men God will raise up in the last days, not anyone from the past. They'll come in the spirit and power of Moses and Elijah, the way John the Baptist came "in the spirit and power of Elijah" (Luke 1:17). The text never names them, and it calls them simply "My two witnesses."

A Symbol of the Church

Some who read Revelation mainly as symbolic believe the two witnesses represent the church, or the church's witness through history, especially since they are called "lampstands," and Revelation 1:20 says lampstands are churches. The difficulty is that Revelation 11 describes them so personally: they have bodies, they're killed, their corpses lie in a street for three and a half days, and they rise and ascend while people watch. Those details are hard to read as anything but two individuals.

When Do They Prophesy?

Revelation gives the witnesses 1,260 days, and it gives the nations 42 months to trample the holy city (Revelation 11:2). Both are three and a half years. Bible teachers who agree on the seven-year Tribulation still divide over which half belongs to the witnesses.

- **The first half.** Many place them in the first three and a half years. The beast kills them "when they have finished their testimony" (Revelation 11:7), and the beast's great persecution begins in the middle of the seven years, when he stops the sacrifices (Daniel 9:27). It would be hard to picture two men breathing fire in Jerusalem for three and a half years while the beast rules the city.
- **The second half.** Others place them in the last three and a half years, because their 1,260 days line up with the 42 months the nations trample Jerusalem, and because their death and resurrection come right before the seventh trumpet, when "the kingdoms of the world have become those of our Lord and of His Christ" (Revelation 11:15).

Both views are held by teachers who read Revelation in its plain sense and hold a pre-tribulation Rapture. The text doesn't say which half, and I won't pretend it does.

The World's Party and God's Answer

One of the strangest verses in Revelation is what happens when the witnesses die. "Those who dwell on the earth will rejoice over them and will celebrate, and will send gifts to one another, because these two prophets tormented those who dwell on the earth" (Revelation 11:10). The world throws a holiday. People exchange presents over two dead preachers.

Notice why. The witnesses "tormented" them. They hadn't hurt anyone who didn't attack them first. What tormented the world was their message. Hearing the truth about sin and judgment, day after day, was more than people could stand.

Then God answers. The witnesses stand up, a voice from heaven says "Come up here," and they go up in a cloud while their enemies watch. "In that hour there was a great earthquake, and a tenth of the city fell; and seven thousand names of men were killed in the earthquake; and the rest became terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven" (Revelation 11:13). The party ends in fear, and at least some who were celebrating finally give glory to God.

Is This the Rapture?

Some who hold a mid-tribulation Rapture point to Revelation 11:12 and say the church is caught up here, along with the witnesses. I don't read it that way. The voice speaks to the two witnesses, "they went up to

heaven in the cloud, and their enemies watched them." It's about two men, not the whole church. As I explained in Chapter 7, I believe the church will have been caught up before the Tribulation begins.

Where Scripture Is Silent

John never names them. He doesn't say where they come from, whether they've lived before, or whether people will recognize who they are.

Where I Land

I believe the two witnesses are two real individuals who will prophesy in Jerusalem during the Tribulation, after the church has been caught up. I don't think the text tells us who they are. Of the named options, Moses and Elijah fit the miracles best, and Elijah appears in nearly every view because of Malachi 4:5. But I hold this loosely. God may raise up two prophets we've never heard of, clothed with the power of Moses and Elijah. Either way, the point isn't to guess their names. It's to see that even in the darkest days in history, God will not leave Himself without witnesses.

For More on Revelation 11

If you want to go deeper, my *Revelation Bible Study: A Verse-by-Verse Study* walks through Revelation 11 one verse at a time, along with the rest of the book, and it has its own study questions. Like this book, it's free.

What This Means for You

The two witnesses are called witnesses, not warriors, even though they have power. Their job is to testify. They do it in sackcloth, calling the world to repent. And the world hates them for it, kills them, and throws a party.

That's a picture of what faithful witness often costs, in every age. But look at the ending. God raises them up in front of the very people who celebrated their deaths. The last word belongs to God.

If you've been mocked for telling people the truth about Jesus, you're in the company of these two. Keep testifying. The resurrection is coming.

Study Questions

1. What details in Revelation 11:3-12 show that the two witnesses are real people and not only symbols?
2. How do their miracles connect with Moses and Elijah?
3. Read Zechariah 4. How does it help explain "the two olive trees and the two lampstands"?
4. Review the main views of who the witnesses are. Which do you find most convincing?
5. Why does the world celebrate and send gifts when the witnesses die? What tormented them?
6. Do you think the witnesses prophesy in the first or second half of the Tribulation? Why?
7. What does the witnesses' resurrection teach about the cost and reward of faithful testimony?

Chapter 32: The Number of the Beast

> *Here is the wisdom. The one who has understanding, let him calculate the number of the beast, for it is a man's number; and its number **is** six hundred sixty-six.*
>
> Revelation 13:18 (SLB)

No number in the Bible has gotten more attention than 666. It shows up in horror movies, on heavy metal album covers, and in endless speculation. People have refused houses with that address and license plates with those digits. Over the centuries, people have claimed the number pointed to the pope, Napoleon, Hitler, a long list of other public figures, and, more recently, bar codes, credit cards, and microchips.

Let's look at what the Bible actually says.

The Passage

> *And it causes all, the small and the great, and the rich and the poor, and the free and the slaves, that it should give them a mark on their right hand or on their foreheads, and that no one should be able to buy or to sell except the one who has the mark, or the name of the beast, or the number of its name. Here is the wisdom. The one who has understanding, let him calculate the number of the beast, for it is a man's number; and its number **is** six hundred sixty-six.*
> (Revelation 13:16-18)

The Question

What does 666 mean? How are we supposed to "calculate" it? Does it point to a specific person? And what is the mark of the beast?

What We Know for Certain

- **The beast is a person.** "It is a man's number." The beast from the sea in Revelation 13 is a world ruler, the same figure Paul calls "the man of sin" (2 Thessalonians 2:3) and John calls the antichrist. We looked at him in Chapter 8.
- **The number is connected to his name.** People must have "the mark, or the name of the beast, or the number of its name."
- **The mark controls buying and selling.** No one can do business without it.
- **It is a mark of worship and loyalty.** The mark goes with worshiping the beast and its image (Revelation 13:15; 14:9).
- **Taking the mark is a deliberate, eternal choice.** "If anyone worships the beast and its image, and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he himself also will drink of the wine of the fury of God" (Revelation 14:9-10). Nobody takes it by accident.
- **It's a time of the Tribulation.** The mark belongs to the reign of the beast in the last days, not to some ordinary period of history.

How Do You "Calculate" a Name?

In the ancient world, letters doubled as numbers. In Greek and Hebrew, there were no separate digits. Alpha meant 1, beta 2, and so on. So every name had a number value, the sum of its letters. The practice is called *gematria*. Graffiti found at Pompeii, buried by a volcano in A.D. 79, includes a line that reads, "I love her whose number is 545." That's the kind of thing John's readers would have known.

So "calculate the number of the beast" likely means: when he comes, the letters of his name will add up to 666. The trouble is that almost any name can be made to add up to 666 if you're willing to pick the right language, spelling, and title. That's why so many guesses have been made, and why every one so far has been wrong.

The Main Views

- **Nero Caesar.** Many scholars note that "Nero Caesar," written in Hebrew letters, adds up to 666. And a few ancient Greek manuscripts of Revelation read 616 instead of 666, which happens to be the value of the name when spelled the Latin way, without the final n. Those who hold this view see Nero, who persecuted Christians savagely in the 60s A.D., as the beast John had in mind, or as a type of the final beast.
- **A future world ruler.** Many believe, as I do, that the beast is a man who will rule in the end times, and that his name will add up to 666, though we can't know it until he comes.
- **A symbol of imperfection.** Seven is the number of completeness and perfection in Revelation. Six falls short. Some see 666 as man trying to be God and falling short three times over, a parody of the divine. On this view, the number describes the beast's character rather than spelling out a name.

Notice that the second and third views can both be true at the same time.

An Ancient Warning

The church was guessing at this almost from the start, and an early writer gave advice we should still take. Irenaeus, writing around A.D. 180, discussed several names people had suggested. Then he warned that it was safer to wait for the prophecy to be fulfilled than to guess. If it had been necessary for the name to be announced in that day, he said, John would have announced it (*Against Heresies* 5.30.3-4).

In nearly two thousand years since, every confident identification has failed.

What About Chips and Bar Codes?

Every generation finds a new technology and wonders whether it's the mark. Bar codes in the 1970s. Credit cards. Social Security numbers. Microchips. Digital currency.

Here's the thing to understand. The technology of the day may well be used to control buying and selling, and the world is certainly building systems that would make it easier. But the mark of the beast isn't a piece of technology you can get without knowing it. It's a mark of loyalty to the beast, connected with worshiping him and his image. A believer can't take it by accident, any more than a person can accidentally deny Jesus. If you belong to Christ, your name is written in the Lamb's book of life (Revelation 13:8), and you won't be tricked into worshiping the beast.

And remember what I believe about the timing. The church will be caught up before the Tribulation begins. The mark is for those who live through that time and choose the beast over Christ.

Who Enforces the Mark?

The beast doesn't run this system alone. John sees "another beast rising out of the earth," which "had two horns like a lamb, and it was speaking like a dragon" (Revelation 13:11). Later he's called the false prophet (Revelation 19:20). He looks gentle and religious, but his words come from the devil.

His job is to point the world to the first beast. He performs great signs, even making fire come down from heaven. He has an image of the beast made, gives breath to it "so that the image of the beast might even speak," and has those who won't worship it killed (Revelation 13:13-15). Then he causes everyone to receive the mark (Revelation 13:16).

So the mark isn't just a commercial system. It's the last step of a religious system: a false miracle-worker, a talking image, forced worship, and then a mark that shows whose side you're on. Money is the pressure. Worship is the point.

Spelling It Out: Nero Caesar

Here's how the Nero view works, so you can see it for yourself. In Hebrew, "Nero Caesar" is spelled with seven letters, NRWN QSR. Their values are N 50, R 200, W 6, N 50, then Q 100, S 60, R 200. Add them up and you get 666. Drop the last N from Nero, the way the name is spelled in Latin, and you get 616.

That matters because 616 really does show up in some old copies of Revelation. One of the oldest pieces of Revelation we have, a papyrus fragment from Oxyrhynchus in Egypt published in 2005, reads 616. Irenaeus knew about copies with 616 in the second century and said 666 was the number in the oldest and best copies (*Against Heresies* 5.30.1). The SLB, following the Received Text, reads 666.

Is that proof John meant Nero? Not necessarily. It shows that some early Christians thought of Nero, and it shows how easy it is to make a name fit. Nero was dead by A.D. 68, and Revelation describes a beast whose career ends with Christ's return and the lake of fire (Revelation 19:20). Nero fits as a picture of the beast. He doesn't fit as the beast himself.

How the Story Ends

Revelation doesn't leave the beast in power, and it doesn't leave his victims in the ground.

- **Those who take the mark** share the beast's judgment: "they have no rest day and night, those who worship the beast and its image, and if anyone receives the mark of its name" (Revelation 14:11).
- **Those who refuse it win.** John sees "those who are victorious over the beast and over its image and over its mark and over the number of its name, standing on the sea of glass, having harps of God" (Revelation 15:2). The world thinks they lost. Heaven calls them victorious.
- **Those who die for refusing it reign.** John sees "the souls of those who had been beheaded because of the testimony of Jesus" who "did not receive the mark," and "they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years" (Revelation 20:4).

- **The beast and the false prophet** are captured and "thrown living into the lake of fire that burns with sulfur" (Revelation 19:20).

Where Scripture Is Silent

John doesn't name the beast. He doesn't tell us what language to use for the calculation, what the mark looks like, or what technology, if any, will carry it.

Where I Land

I believe the beast is a real man who will rule during the Tribulation, and that his name will be shown to match 666 when he comes, so that those who have wisdom will recognize him. I also believe the number shows his nature: a man who wants to be God and falls short. I won't guess his name, and I'd encourage you not to either. Irenaeus was right.

For More on Revelation 13

If you want to go deeper, my *Revelation Bible Study: A Verse-by-Verse Study* walks through Revelation 13 one verse at a time, along with the rest of the book, and it has its own study questions. Like this book, it's free.

What This Means for You

Every age has had people trying to buy and sell by Babylon's rules, and every age has had pressure to give loyalty to some power in place of God. The final beast will just make it total.

So the question for you isn't whether you can decode a number. It's whose name is on you. Revelation shows that God's servants are sealed on their foreheads (Revelation 7:3), and that the redeemed will see His face, "and His name will be on their foreheads" (Revelation 22:4). You'll carry one name or the other. Make sure it's His.

Study Questions

1. What does Revelation 13:16-18 tell us for certain about the mark and the number?
2. What is gematria, and how might it explain "calculate the number"?
3. Review the main views of 666. Can more than one be true at once?
4. What did Irenaeus advise about guessing the beast's name, and why is that still wise?
5. Why can't a believer take the mark of the beast by accident?
6. What role does the false prophet play in the mark? Why is the mark more about worship than money?
7. Read Revelation 15:2 and 20:4. How does heaven see those who refuse the mark?
8. Read Revelation 7:3 and 22:4. Whose name do you carry?

Chapter 33: The Lost Tribes of Israel

> *And I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel; and one king shall be king for all of them; and they shall no longer be two nations, and they shall no longer be divided into two kingdoms anymore.*
>
> Ezekiel 37:22 (SLB)

After Solomon died, his kingdom split in two. Ten tribes in the north formed the kingdom of Israel, with its capital at Samaria. Judah and Benjamin in the south formed the kingdom of Judah, with its capital at Jerusalem. About two hundred years later, in 722 B.C., the Assyrian Empire destroyed the northern kingdom and carried its people away. And from that point on, people have talked about "the ten lost tribes of Israel."

Over the centuries, people have claimed to find them in Britain, in Africa, in Afghanistan, in India, in Japan, and among Native Americans. So where did they go? Are they really lost?

The Passage

> *In the ninth year of Hoshea the king of Assyria captured Samaria and carried Israel into exile to Assyria, and he made them dwell in Halah and on the Habor, the river of Gozan, and* ***in*** *the cities of Media.* (2 Kings 17:6)

> *And the LORD was very angry with Israel, and He removed them from His face; none was left but the tribe of Judah alone.* (2 Kings 17:18)

The Question

What happened to the ten northern tribes after the Assyrian exile? Did they vanish? Were they absorbed into other nations? Or did God keep track of them all along?

What We Know for Certain

- **The Assyrians deported many, but not all.** The Assyrian king Sargon II claimed in his own records to have carried off 27,290 people from Samaria. That's a lot, but it wasn't everyone. Many of the poor and the farmers were left behind, and Assyria brought in foreigners to live among them (2 Kings 17:24). Their mixed descendants became the Samaritans.
- **Many northerners had already moved south.** When the northern kingdom set up golden calves, "from all the tribes of Israel, those who set their heart to seek the LORD, the God of Israel, came to Jerusalem to sacrifice" (2 Chronicles 11:16). Later, when King Hezekiah invited all Israel to Passover, "men from Asher and Manasseh and from Zebulun humbled themselves and came to Jerusalem" (2 Chronicles 30:11). King Josiah's reforms reached "the cities of Manasseh and Ephraim and Simeon, and as far as Naphtali" (2 Chronicles 34:6). People from every tribe ended up living in Judah.
- **The New Testament still knows the twelve tribes.** Anna the prophetess, who greeted the baby Jesus in the temple, was "of the tribe of Asher" (Luke 2:36), one of the "lost" northern tribes. Paul told King Agrippa about the hope to which "our twelve tribes, serving with earnestness night and day, hope to

attain" (Acts 26:7). James addressed his letter "to the twelve tribes which are in the dispersion" (James 1:1).

- **God has not lost them.** Jesus promised the apostles they would sit on twelve thrones "judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Matthew 19:28). In Revelation, 12,000 are sealed from each of twelve tribes (Revelation 7:4-8), and the gates of the New Jerusalem bear the names of the twelve tribes (Revelation 21:12).
- **God promised to reunite them.** Ezekiel was told to join two sticks, one for Judah and one for Joseph and Ephraim, into one stick in his hand. God said, "I will make them one nation in the land ... and they shall no longer be two nations" (Ezekiel 37:22).

The Main Theories

- **British Israelism.** In the 1800s, some in Britain and America taught that the British and related peoples were descended from the lost tribes. There's no historical, archaeological, or genetic evidence for it, and it was sometimes used to support ideas of racial superiority.
- **Communities that claim descent.** Several groups have traditions of Israelite ancestry, such as the Beta Israel of Ethiopia, who traditionally trace themselves to the tribe of Dan, and the Bnei Menashe of northeast India, who say they descend from Manasseh. The State of Israel has recognized some of these communities and accepted many of their members as immigrants. Their exact origins are still debated.
- **Native Americans.** Some early European writers in the Americas guessed that Native Americans descended from the lost tribes. The Book of Mormon tells a related story. Genetic studies have shown Native American ancestry traces to Asia, not to the ancient Near East.
- **Absorbed and scattered.** Most historians believe that many of the northern Israelites deported by Assyria were gradually absorbed into the peoples around them, while many others, as we've seen, had already joined Judah or later did. On this view, the tribes weren't so much lost as merged.

Where Were They Taken?

The Bible names the places. The king of Assyria "carried Israel into exile to Assyria, and he made them dwell in Halah and on the Habor, the river of Gozan, and in the cities of Media" (2 Kings 17:6). The Habor is a river in what is now northeastern Syria, and Media lay in what is now northwestern Iran. So the exiles weren't sent off the edge of the map. They were settled in known places in the Assyrian empire, where many of them would later live alongside the Jews whom Babylon carried off from Judah.

That's important. When the Persians let the exiles go home, the people who returned weren't only from Judah and Benjamin. When the rebuilt temple was dedicated, they offered "twelve male goats as a sin offering for all Israel, according to the number of the tribes of Israel" (Ezra 6:17). The returning community saw itself as all twelve tribes, not two.

The Missing Tribe in Revelation 7

Here's a real mystery inside the mystery. When John hears the list of the 144,000 sealed from the tribes of Israel, twelve tribes are named, but one familiar name is missing: Dan (Revelation 7:5-8). Ephraim isn't named either, though Joseph is, and Manasseh, Joseph's other son, is listed on his own. Why leave out Dan?

- **Dan led Israel into idolatry.** Dan was the first tribe to set up its own idol and priesthood, "and the sons of Dan set up for themselves the carved image" (Judges 18:30). Later, King Jeroboam put one of his two golden calves in the city of Dan (1 Kings 12:29). This is the most common explanation, and it's the one I gave in my Revelation study.
- **An early guess about the antichrist.** Irenaeus, in the second century, thought the antichrist would come from Dan, pointing to Jeremiah 8:16, "From Dan the snorting of his horses has been heard" (*Against Heresies* 5.30.2). Jacob's blessing also calls Dan "a serpent on the way" (Genesis 49:17). That's speculation, and the Bible never says it.
- **The list simply has to be twelve.** Jacob had twelve sons, but Joseph's two sons each became a tribe, which makes thirteen names. Every list in the Bible has to leave someone out or combine someone. Levi is usually left out of the land lists because the priests had no land; here Levi is in, so someone else is out.

Whatever the reason, the story doesn't end there. In Ezekiel's vision of the coming kingdom, Dan is listed first when the land is divided (Ezekiel 48:1), and one of the gates of the city bears his name: "the gate of Dan, one" (Ezekiel 48:32). Dan isn't lost to God either. That's grace.

A Small Puzzle in Judges 18:30

While we're in Judges 18, there's a curious detail there. The priest who served Dan's idol is called "Jonathan, the son of Gershom, the son of Manasseh." But Gershom was the son of Moses (Exodus 2:22). In the traditional Hebrew text, the name Manasseh is written with one letter raised above the line. Take out that letter and the name reads Moses. Many scholars believe the scribes added the letter to spare Moses' memory the shame of having a grandson who served an idol. Several ancient translations read "Moses" here. It's a reminder that even the family of the greatest prophet wasn't safe from idolatry. Faith isn't inherited.

Where Scripture Is Silent

The Bible doesn't tell us where every family of the northern tribes went, or which modern peoples carry their blood. It doesn't give us a way to trace them, and it never asks us to.

Where I Land

I don't think the ten tribes were ever truly "lost." Many of their people joined Judah over the centuries, and the New Testament speaks naturally of all twelve tribes still existing. Others were scattered among the nations, and only God knows who they are today. But He does know. When He gathers Israel and makes them one nation again, He won't need a DNA test. He'll know every one of His people by name.

What This Means for You

I find this mystery deeply comforting. If God can keep track of twelve tribes scattered over thousands of years and dozens of nations, He hasn't lost track of you. You may feel forgotten, scattered, or far from where you belong. But God knows exactly where you are. "The Lord knew those who are His" (2 Timothy 2:19).

Study Questions

1. What happened to the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 B.C.?
2. What evidence shows that people from the northern tribes moved to Judah over the years?
3. How does the New Testament speak about the twelve tribes?
4. Why do theories like British Israelism fail to hold up?
5. Read Ezekiel 37:15-28. What does God promise about the tribes of Israel?
6. Why might Dan be missing from Revelation 7, and what does Ezekiel 48 show about Dan's future?
7. How does it encourage you that God has never lost track of His people?

Chapter 34: A Handful of Smaller Puzzles

> *The glory of God **is** to conceal a matter, and the glory of kings **is** to search out a matter.*
>
> Proverbs 25:2 (SLB)

Not every Bible mystery needs a whole chapter. Some are small details that make careful readers stop and say, “Now, what was that about?” Here are five of them, in the order they appear in the Bible.

I have drifted from God more than once, and every time I came back, the hardest part was letting go of old habits and comforts. Jesus said, "Remember Lot's wife" (Luke 17:32). Moving forward with God means leaving the past behind and trusting that what He has ahead is better.

The Tower of Babel

> *And the LORD said, “Look, **they are** one people, and one language **is** to all of them, and this **is what** they begin to do; and now nothing that they plan to do will be withheld from them. Come, let Us go down and let Us confuse their language there, so that they will not understand, each the language of his neighbor.” And the LORD scattered them from there over the face of all the earth, and they ceased to build the city. Therefore **one** called its name Babylon, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD scattered them over the face of all the earth.* (Genesis 11:6-9)

The puzzle. Why did God object to a tower? And how did one language become many?

What we know. The sin at Babel wasn’t architecture. It was pride and rebellion: “let us make for ourselves a name, lest we be scattered” (Genesis 11:4). God had told Noah’s family to fill the earth (Genesis 9:1). These people wanted to stay put, make themselves great, and build their way up. God came down, confused their language, and scattered them, which is what He had told them to do in the first place. Genesis 10, which lists the nations, comes just before this story but describes its result.

What’s still debated. Where exactly was the tower, and what did it look like? Many think it was an early ziggurat, a stepped temple-tower like the ones later built across Mesopotamia. The famous ziggurat at Babylon, called Etemenanki, was much later, but the type is old. As for languages, the Bible doesn’t explain how God did it, only that He did.

The bright side. At Pentecost, God reversed Babel in a sense. People “from every nation of those under heaven” heard the apostles “speaking in his own language” (Acts 2:5-6). At Babel, language divided people in pride. At Pentecost, the Spirit united them in Christ, without erasing their languages. And in the end, people “out of every nation and tribes and peoples and tongues” will stand together before the throne (Revelation 7:9). My book on Bible evidence will look at what archaeology has found about Babel and early cities.

Lot's Wife

> *And the LORD rained on Sodom and on Gomorrah sulfur and fire from the LORD out of the heavens. And He overthrew these cities, and all the district, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and the growth of the ground. And his wife looked from behind him, and she became a pillar of salt.* (Genesis 19:24-26)

The puzzle. What actually happened? And why such a harsh punishment for one look?

What we know. The angels had told Lot's family, "Do not look behind you" (Genesis 19:17). She disobeyed. Many think the Hebrew suggests more than a glance, a longing look back at the life she didn't want to leave. Jesus used her as a warning: "Remember the wife of Lot. Whoever seeks to save his life will lose it" (Luke 17:32-33). Her heart was still in Sodom.

What's still debated. How she became salt. Some believe it was an instant miracle. Others think she lingered behind and was caught in the fallout of the destruction, which some describe as a blast that threw up salt and minerals from the area around the Dead Sea, and her body was encrusted where she stood. Josephus claimed he had seen the pillar himself: "for I have seen it, and it remains at this day" (*Antiquities of the Jews* 1.11.4, Whiston translation). Today a salt formation on Mount Sodom near the Dead Sea is nicknamed "Lot's Wife," but no one can say it's the real one.

The Handwriting on the Wall

> *In that very moment fingers of a man's hand came out, and they were writing opposite the lampstand on the plaster of the wall of the palace of the king; and the king was seeing the palm of the hand that was writing. Then the king's brightness changed on him, and his thoughts alarmed him; and the joints of his loins were loosened, and his knees were knocking this against this.* (Daniel 5:5-6)

> *And this **is** the writing that was inscribed: MENE, MENE, TEKEL, and PARSIN. This **is** the interpretation of the matter: MENE, God has numbered your kingdom and has finished it. TEKEL, you have been weighed in the scales and have been found lacking. PERES, your kingdom has been divided and has been given to Media and Persia.* (Daniel 5:25-28)

The puzzle. Why couldn't the king's wise men read four simple words? And who was Belshazzar? For a long time, historians said there was no such king, since Babylonian records listed Nabonidus as the last king of Babylon.

What we know. The words are Aramaic weights and measures: a mina, a shekel, and half-pieces. Read as nouns, they make no sense. Daniel read them as verbs: numbered, weighed, divided. It took God's wisdom to see the message, not just to read the letters. As for Belshazzar, clay cylinders found at Ur in the 1850s name him as Nabonidus' eldest son, and other texts show Nabonidus left him in charge of Babylon for years while he stayed in Arabia. That explains why Belshazzar could only offer Daniel the place of "third ruler" in the kingdom (Daniel 5:16, 29). Nabonidus was first, Belshazzar second. The Bible had it right all along. "In that night Belshazzar, the Chaldean king, was killed" (Daniel 5:30).

The Young Man Who Ran Away

> *And having left Him, they all fled. And one certain young man was following Him, having thrown a linen cloth around **his** naked **body**; and the young men seize him. But having left behind the linen cloth, he fled from them naked.* (Mark 14:50-52)

The puzzle. Who was he, and why does Mark tell us this?

What we know. Only Mark records it. When everyone else fled, this one young man was still following, until they grabbed him and he left his linen cloth in their hands.

What's still debated. Many have suggested it was Mark himself, signing his Gospel in a quiet way, the way an artist might paint himself into a corner of a picture. John Mark's mother had a house in Jerusalem where the church met (Acts 12:12), and some think the Last Supper may have been there. That would explain how a young man came to be following in the night. Others see the scene as a picture of total desertion: even the last follower ran away, leaving Jesus completely alone. Both can be true.

The 153 Fish

> *Simon Peter went up and drew the net onto the land, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three; and although there were so many, the net was not torn.* (John 21:11)

The puzzle. Why does John give the exact number?

What's still debated. People have found all kinds of meanings. Jerome, around A.D. 400, claimed that ancient writers counted 153 kinds of fish in the sea, so the catch pictured every nation coming into the church. Augustine noted that 153 is the sum of all the numbers from 1 to 17, and linked 17 with the Ten Commandments and the sevenfold Spirit (*Tractates on John* 122). Others have tried number codes based on Greek or Hebrew letters.

Where I land. I think the simplest answer is the best. Fishermen count their catch. That's what fishermen do, especially on a morning when they've caught nothing all night and then haul in a net so full they can't pull it into the boat. John was there. He remembered the count because it was astonishing. The bigger point is in the second half of the verse: "although there were so many, the net was not torn." Jesus had told them they would catch men (Luke 5:10). The net of the gospel will hold everyone He brings in.

Study Questions

1. What was the real sin at Babel? How does Pentecost answer it?
2. Why do you think Jesus told His disciples to "remember the wife of Lot"? What might that look like today?
3. How did the discovery of Belshazzar's name affect people's view of the book of Daniel?
4. Who do you think the young man in Mark 14:51-52 was? Why might Mark include this detail?
5. Which explanation of the 153 fish seems most reasonable to you?
6. Which of these five smaller puzzles was most interesting to you, and why?

Chapter 35: Mysteries That Are Not

> *For not having followed cleverly devised myths did we make known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but having become eyewitnesses of His majesty.*
>
> 2 Peter 1:16 (SLB)

Every few years, a new book, video, or documentary promises to reveal a secret hidden in the Bible. A code buried in the Hebrew letters that predicted world events. Proof that the angels were really space aliens. Photos of giant skeletons dug up in the desert. A lost gospel that changes everything.

I've saved these for last because they're the opposite of everything else in this book. The real mysteries of the Bible lead us to Jesus. These lead people away from Him, or at least waste a lot of their time. Peter said the apostles did not follow "cleverly devised myths." Neither should we.

Here's how to test them, and what happens when you do.

Bible Codes

In 1994, three Israeli researchers published a paper in a statistics journal claiming that names of famous rabbis and their dates of birth and death were hidden in the Hebrew text of Genesis. They found them by skipping letters at equal intervals, every fiftieth letter, for example. In 1997, a journalist named Michael Drosnin turned the idea into a bestselling book, *The Bible Code*, claiming the hidden letters had predicted assassinations, wars, and disasters.

Here's what happened next. Other mathematicians tested the method. In 1999, a team led by Brendan McKay published a reply in the same journal, showing that the original results depended on choices about spellings and dates that could be adjusted to produce the desired outcome, and that the same kind of "hidden" messages could be found in a Hebrew translation of *War and Peace*. Drosnin had dared his critics to find assassination predictions in *Moby Dick*. McKay found several.

The basic problem is simple. In any long book, if you're allowed to skip any number of letters, start anywhere, and read in any direction, you'll find just about any short word you're looking for. That's not a miracle. That's math.

And there's a deeper problem. God gave His Word to be read, not decoded. "The revealed things belong to us" (Deuteronomy 29:29). If the real message were hidden in a letter grid that needs a computer, then for three thousand years nobody could have understood it. That's the opposite of how the Bible describes itself.

Ancient Astronauts

In 1968, Erich von Daniken's *Chariots of the Gods?* claimed that ancient monuments and religious texts, including the Bible, were records of visits by space aliens. Later, Zecharia Sitchin claimed that ancient

Sumerian texts described a race of aliens called the Anunnaki from a hidden planet he called Nibiru, and that they genetically engineered mankind. Television has kept these ideas alive for decades.

We already looked at the claim that Ezekiel saw a spaceship (Chapter 23). The same pattern runs through all of these theories. They take ancient descriptions of God, angels, or heavenly visions and reinterpret them as technology. But the Bible's writers tell us plainly what they saw: the glory of the LORD, angels sent by Him, and the God who made the heavens. Scholars who actually read Sumerian and Akkadian have pointed out that Sitchin's translations don't match the texts. No planet called Nibiru has ever been found, though people have repeatedly predicted it would show up and destroy the earth.

These ideas also have a spiritual cost. If God is just an alien, then He isn't God, Jesus isn't the Son of God, and the cross is meaningless. That's not a harmless theory. It's another gospel (Galatians 1:8).

Giant Skeletons

If you spend any time online, you've probably seen pictures of archaeologists standing next to enormous human skeletons dug out of the ground, often with captions saying the government is hiding the truth about the Nephilim.

Those photos are fakes. Many of the best known ones were created in 2002 for a photo-editing contest on a website called Worth1000, where artists competed to make the most convincing fake archaeological images. They spread across the internet with made-up stories attached, sometimes falsely credited to well-known magazines. Fact-checkers have traced them back to that contest.

This isn't new. In 1869, a man named George Hull had a ten-foot statue of a man carved from gypsum, buried it on a farm in Cardiff, New York, and then "discovered" it. Thousands paid to see the "Cardiff Giant" before it was exposed as a hoax.

As we saw in Chapter 15, the Bible does describe very tall people: Goliath, Og, the Anakim. I believe those accounts. But we don't need fake photos to prove the Bible true, and believers who share them do real harm. When a skeptic finds out the picture is a fake, he assumes the Bible is too. "Do not add to His words, lest He rebuke you, and you be proved a liar" (Proverbs 30:6).

Lost Gospels That Change Everything

Every so often, a headline announces a "lost gospel" that will overturn Christianity. Some of these are real ancient writings, such as the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Gospel of Judas*, which were written in the second century or later by groups the early church considered heretical. They're interesting for history, but they were written long after the apostles and teach ideas the apostles opposed.

Others turn out to be outright fakes. In 2012, a small papyrus fragment that seemed to mention "Jesus' wife" made headlines around the world. Within a few years, investigators showed that it was almost certainly a modern forgery, and the scholar who first published it said the evidence now pointed toward forgery.

The Gospels we have were written by eyewitnesses and their close companions within the lifetime of people who knew Jesus. “Not having followed cleverly devised myths did we make known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but having become eyewitnesses of His majesty” (2 Peter 1:16).

Date-Setters

Finally, there are people who claim to have solved the mystery of when Jesus will return. They calculate dates from feast days, blood moons, numbers in Daniel, or the age of Israel. Every one of them has been wrong. Every single one.

Jesus said, “concerning that day and the hour no one knows, not even the angels of the heavens, except My Father alone” (Matthew 24:36). Anyone who claims to know is claiming to know more than the angels. Believe Jesus, not the calculator.

How to Test Any Claim

Here are a few simple questions that will protect you from almost all of this.

1. **Does it come from the plain words of Scripture, read in context?** If it needs a secret code, a special key, or a new revelation to see it, be very careful. “You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you” (Deuteronomy 4:2).
2. **Can the source be checked?** Real discoveries are published, examined, and named. “Experts say” and “the government is hiding it” are not sources.
3. **Does it point to Jesus or away from Him?** Every true mystery in this book ends with Christ. A “discovery” that makes Him smaller or replaces Him is not from God.
4. **Is it being sold with fear or excitement?** Paul warned of a time when people “will heap up teachers for themselves, being tickled in the hearing” and “will be turned aside to the myths” (2 Timothy 4:3-4).
5. **Would the Bereans accept it?** They examined “the Scriptures every day to see if these things might be so” (Acts 17:11). Do the same.

What This Means for You

You don’t need a code, a spaceship, or a giant to make the Bible exciting. It’s already the most astonishing book ever written. It tells of a God who made everything, a world that fell, a Savior who came in the flesh, died for sinners, rose from the dead, and is coming back. It reveals mysteries hidden for ages and tells us honestly where it is silent.

That’s enough mystery for a lifetime. And unlike the fake ones, it’s true.

Study Questions

1. Why do “Bible code” claims fail when they are tested?
2. Why is it a problem, not just a mistake, to reinterpret God and angels as space aliens?

3. Where did many of the giant skeleton photos come from? Why does sharing them hurt the Bible's credibility?

4. How do the four Gospels differ from the so-called "lost gospels"?

5. Why have all the people who set dates for Jesus' return been wrong?

6. Which of the five test questions would be most helpful to you the next time you see a sensational claim?

A Closing Word

> *The hidden **things belong** to the LORD our God, and the revealed **things belong** to us and to our sons forever, to do all the words of this law.*
>
> Deuteronomy 29:29 (SLB)

We started this book with Moses' words about the hidden things and the revealed things, and I want to end there too.

If you've read all the way through, you've seen how much God has revealed. He told us the mystery of the kingdom, the mystery of Israel, the mystery of the church, Christ in you, the mystery of His will to sum up all things in Christ, the mystery of marriage, the mystery of the Rapture, the mystery of godliness, and how history will end. Those aren't small things. Paul called them riches. Kings and prophets longed to see them.

You've also seen that some things God has kept to Himself, at least for now. We don't know who the sons of God were for certain, where the ark is, what Paul's thorn was, or who the two witnesses will be. Faithful people disagree on some of those questions, and that's all right.

Here's what I hope you take with you.

Hold on tightly to what God has revealed. Read it. Believe it. Build your life on it. It's enough to save you, to guide you, and to carry you home.

Hold loosely to your own guesses about what God hasn't revealed. Enjoy the questions. Talk them over with other believers. But don't divide over them, and don't let anybody sell you a secret that God never told.

And remember that the greatest mystery of all has been made plain. "God was manifested in flesh" (1 Timothy 3:16). The God who keeps some secrets didn't keep Himself a secret. He came to us in Jesus, died for our sins, and rose again. Anyone who comes to Him will be received.

One day, every remaining mystery will be cleared up. "For now we see through a mirror in an enigma, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will fully know, even as I also have been fully known" (1 Corinthians 13:12). On that day, I don't think we'll care much about the location of Eden or the meaning of 153 fish. We'll be looking at Him.

Until then, keep your Bible open, and keep your eyes on Jesus.

> *Lord Jesus, thank You for all that You have revealed: Yourself, Your Word, Your plan, and Your love. Thank You that what was hidden for ages has been made known to me. Give me a hungry heart for Your truth and a humble heart about what I don't understand. Keep me from being led astray by clever myths. Help me to walk with You like Enoch, to cling to You like Jacob, and to wait for You like the believers in Thessalonica. And until I see You face to face, let my life show that I belong to You. Amen.*

Appendix A: Every “Mystery” in the New Testament

The Greek word *mysterion* appears 27 times in the New Testament: 3 times in the Gospels (all reporting one teaching of Jesus), 20 times in Paul’s letters, and 4 times in Revelation. This table lists every one, with the chapter in this book that covers it.

Reference	What the mystery is	Chapter
Matthew 13:11	The mysteries of the kingdom of the heavens	2
Mark 4:11	The mystery of the kingdom of God	2
Luke 8:10	The mysteries of the kingdom of God	2
Romans 11:25	Israel’s partial hardening until the fullness of the Gentiles	3
Romans 16:25	The mystery kept secret in eternal times, now made manifest	1
1 Corinthians 2:7	God’s hidden wisdom, predestined before the ages	1
1 Corinthians 4:1	The apostles as stewards of the mysteries of God	1
1 Corinthians 13:2	Knowing all mysteries is nothing without love	1
1 Corinthians 14:2	Speaking mysteries in a tongue no one understands	1
1 Corinthians 15:51	We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed	7
Ephesians 1:9	The mystery of His will: all things summed up in Christ	5
Ephesians 3:3	The mystery made known to Paul by revelation	4
Ephesians 3:4	The mystery of Christ	4
Ephesians 3:9	The fellowship of the mystery hidden from the ages	4
Ephesians 5:32	Marriage, Christ, and the church	6
Ephesians 6:19	The mystery of the gospel	4
Colossians 1:26	The mystery hidden from the ages and generations	4
Colossians 1:27	Christ in you, the hope of glory	4
Colossians 2:2	The mystery of God the Father and of Christ	4
Colossians 4:3	The mystery of Christ, for which Paul was in chains	4
2 Thessalonians 2:7	The mystery of lawlessness	8
1 Timothy 3:9	The mystery of the faith	9
1 Timothy 3:16	The mystery of godliness: God manifested in flesh	9
Revelation 1:20	The seven stars and seven lampstands	10
Revelation 10:7	The mystery of God finished	11
Revelation 17:5	Mystery, Babylon the Great	12
Revelation 17:7	The mystery of the woman and the beast	12

Appendix B: The Hidden Mysteries at a Glance

This table sums up Part Two. “Where I land” gives my conclusion in a few words. Where it says “Open,” I lay out the views in the chapter and don’t think Scripture settles the question.

Ch.	Mystery	Main views	Where I land
13	Where was Eden?	Southern Mesopotamia; eastern Turkey highlands; geography reshaped by the flood	A real place near the Tigris and Euphrates; exact spot lost in the flood
14	Cain’s wife and mark	Wife: a sister or niece. Mark: a visible mark; a sign given to him; unknown	Cain married a close relative before God forbade it; the mark is unknown, and never skin color
15	Sons of God and Nephilim	Fallen angels; line of Seth; kings and rulers	Fallen angels most convincing, held with an open hand
16	Enoch, Elijah, and Moses’ body	Taken bodily to God; body hidden to prevent idolatry	Taken up without dying; Moses’ grave hidden from idolatry
17	Melchizedek	A real king and priest who pictures Christ; Christ Himself; Shem; an angel	A real king of early Jerusalem whose record pictures Christ
18	The angel of the LORD	A created angel; an appearance of God; the Son before Bethlehem	The Son of God before He became a man
19	Urim and Thummim; the ark	Lots; shining stones. Ark: destroyed; hidden by Jeremiah or Josiah; in Ethiopia	Unknown; likely destroyed or taken; Jeremiah 3:16 says it won’t be missed
20	The woman of En-dor	The real Samuel sent by God; a demon; a fake	The real Samuel, by God’s act, not the medium’s power
21	Lost books	Sources, not Scripture; modern “Jasher” books are later works or fakes	The Bible is complete; nothing we need is missing
22	Behemoth and Leviathan	Hippo and crocodile; extinct animals; poetic symbols of chaos	Real creatures; exact identity open
23	Ezekiel’s wheels	God’s throne-chariot with cherubim; spaceship theories	A vision of God’s glory; spaceship theories rejected
24	The Star of Bethlehem	Planetary conjunction; comet or nova; supernatural light	Its final guiding was a work of God
25	Jesus’ silent years	In Nazareth as a carpenter; travels to India, Britain, or Egypt	In Nazareth; the travel stories are false
26	The unpardonable sin	Only possible in Jesus’ day; final unbelief; hardened rejection	Settled, deliberate rejection of the Spirit’s witness to Jesus
27	Saints raised at the cross	Died again; raised to glory; symbolic	Historical; what happened afterward is open
28	Spirits in prison	Christ through Noah; victory over fallen angels; preaching to the dead	Open; no second chance after death
29	Baptism for the dead	On behalf of the dead; because of the dead; other views	Leaning “because of the dead”; no basis for proxy baptism
30	Paul’s thorn	Eyes; illness; opponents; injury	Unknown, perhaps his eyes
31	The two witnesses	Moses and Elijah; Enoch and Elijah; two new prophets; the church	Two real people; identity open

Ch.	Mystery	Main views	Where I land
32	666	Nero; a future ruler; a symbol of falling short	A future ruler; don’t guess his name
33	The lost tribes	Absorbed; scattered; British Israelism and other claims	Never truly lost to God; many joined Judah
34	Smaller puzzles	Babel, Lot’s wife, the handwriting, the young man, 153 fish	See the chapter
35	Mysteries that are not	Bible codes, aliens, giant skeletons, lost gospels, date-setting	All fail when tested

Appendix C: Glossary

Term	Meaning
Angel of the LORD	A figure in the Old Testament who speaks and is worshiped as God, yet is sent by God. This book takes him to be the Son of God before He became a man (Chapter 18).
Antichrist	The final world ruler who opposes Christ, also called the man of sin, the lawless one, and the beast (Chapters 8 and 32).
Apocrypha	Jewish writings from the centuries before Christ, such as 1 and 2 Maccabees, that are in Roman Catholic and Orthodox Bibles but not in the Hebrew Bible or the Protestant Bible.
Apostasy	A falling away from the truth. Paul says a great apostasy will come before the day of the Lord (2 Thessalonians 2:3).
Christophany	An appearance of Christ before His birth in Bethlehem.
Cherubim	Powerful angelic beings connected with God's throne and holiness. The singular is cherub.
Canon	The list of books recognized as Scripture. The Protestant Bible has 66 books.
Dead Sea Scrolls	Ancient Jewish manuscripts found in caves near the Dead Sea starting in 1947, including the oldest known copies of many Old Testament books.
Doctrine and Covenants	A book of revelations and writings of Joseph Smith, accepted as scripture by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. It is not part of the Bible.
Gematria	Adding up the number values of the letters in a word or name.
Josephus	Flavius Josephus, a Jewish historian born about A.D. 37, who wrote *Antiquities of the Jews* and *The Jewish War*.
Magi	Wise men, astrologers, and royal advisers from Persia or Babylon.
Mysterion	The Greek word for mystery. In the New Testament, a truth God once kept hidden and has now revealed.
Nephilim	A people mentioned in Genesis 6:4 and Numbers 13:33. The word may mean "fallen ones." Older English Bibles say "giants."
Purgatory	Roman Catholic teaching of a final cleansing after death for those who die in God's grace. The Protestant Bible does not teach it.
Rapture	The catching up of believers to meet the Lord in the air (1 Thessalonians 4:17), from the Latin word used to translate "caught away."
Restrainer	The one who holds back the man of lawlessness until God's time (2 Thessalonians 2:6-7). This book takes him to be the Holy Spirit working through the church.
Septuagint	The ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament, made in the centuries before Christ.
Tribulation	The seven-year period of God's judgment on the earth before Christ returns to reign.
Urim and Thummim	Objects kept in the high priest's breastpiece and used to learn God's will (Exodus 28:30).

Appendix D: Sources and Credits

All Scripture quotations are from the Steadfast Literal Bible (SLB), free to read at trinfinityenterprises.com/slb.

Quotations and references from other ancient and historical works are listed here. Quoted translations are in the public domain. These works are history, not Scripture.

- Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, translated by William Whiston. Project Gutenberg (ebook 2848). Book 1, chapter 3, section 1 (Chapter 15); 1.10.2 (Chapter 17); 1.11.4 (Chapter 34); 3.8.9 (Chapter 19); 4.8.48 and 9.2.2 (Chapter 16); 5.2.3 and 6.9.1 (Chapter 15).
- Flavius Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews* (*The Jewish War*), translated by William Whiston. Project Gutenberg (ebook 2850). Book 5, chapter 5, sections 2 and 5 (Chapters 4 and 19).
- *The Book of Enoch* (1 Enoch), translated by R. H. Charles (London: SPCK, 1917). Project Gutenberg (ebook 77935). Chapters 1 and 6 (Chapters 15 and 16).
- Origen, *On First Principles*, book 3, chapter 2, section 1 (Chapter 16). In *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, volume 4.
- Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, chapters 56-60 (Chapter 18). In *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, volume 1.
- Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, book 5, chapter 30 (Chapters 32 and 33). In *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, volume 1.
- Tertullian, *A Treatise on the Soul*, chapters 50 and 57 (Chapters 20 and 31), and *Against Marcion*, book 5, chapter 10 (Chapter 29). In *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, volume 3.
- Hippolytus, *On Christ and Antichrist*, chapter 43 (Chapter 31). In *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, volume 5.
- John Chrysostom, *Homilies on First Corinthians*, homily 40 (Chapter 29). In *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, first series, volume 12.
- Augustine, *The City of God*, book 15, chapter 23 (Chapter 15), and *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, tractate 122 (Chapter 34). In *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, first series, volumes 2 and 7.
- Herodotus, *Histories*, book 1, section 101 (Chapter 24). Tacitus, *Histories*, book 5, section 9 (Chapter 19).
- The Mishnah, tractate *Yoma* 5:2 (Chapter 19). 2 Maccabees 2:4-8 (Chapter 19); 12:40, 12:46, and 15:38 (Chapter 29).
- *Doctrine and Covenants* 124, 127, and 128, and “Letters on Baptism for the Dead,” *Revelations in Context*, both on churchofjesuschrist.org, read 2026-11-10 (Chapter 29).
- *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraphs 1031-1032, on vatican.va, read 2026-11-10 (Chapter 29).
- Papyrus 115 (Oxyrhynchus Papyrus 4499), a fragment of Revelation that reads 616 at 13:18 (Chapter 32).
- Dead Sea Scrolls text 11Q13 (11QMelchizedek) (Chapter 17).
- Bible code studies: D. Witztum, E. Rips, and Y. Rosenberg, “Equidistant Letter Sequences in the Book of Genesis,” *Statistical Science* 9, no. 3 (1994); B. McKay, D. Bar-Natan, M. Bar-Hillel, and G. Kalai, “Solving the Bible Code Puzzle,” *Statistical Science* 14, no. 2 (1999) (Chapter 35).
- Word count for *mysterion* (Appendix A): the Greek Received Text (Scrivener, 1894), checked against STEPBible word data (Tyndale House, Cambridge).

About This Book

The Secret Things is a book about the mysteries of the Bible, both kinds.

Part One walks through the places where the New Testament uses the word “mystery” for a truth God kept hidden for ages and has now revealed: the kingdom, Israel’s hardening, the church and Christ in you, God’s plan to sum up all things in Christ, marriage, the Rapture, the man of lawlessness and the restrainer, the mystery of godliness, and the closing mysteries of Revelation.

Part Two takes the hard questions Bible readers have asked for centuries, in the order they appear in Scripture: the Garden of Eden, Cain’s wife, the Nephilim, Enoch and Elijah, Melchizedek, the angel of the LORD, the lost ark, the woman of En-dor, the lost books, Behemoth and Leviathan, Ezekiel’s wheels, the Star of Bethlehem, Jesus’ silent years, the unpardonable sin, the spirits in prison, baptism for the dead, Paul’s thorn, the two witnesses, 666, the lost tribes, and more. For each one it shows what the Bible plainly says, the main views of Bible-believing teachers, and where Scripture is silent. It closes with a chapter that tests popular claims about Bible codes, ancient astronauts, and giant skeletons.

Every chapter ends with study questions for personal reading or small groups. The back of the book has a table of every “mystery” in the New Testament, a summary of the hidden mysteries, a glossary, a list of sources, and a Scripture index.

All Scripture quotations come from the Steadfast Literal Bible, which is free to read at trinfinityenterprises.com/slb.

Scripture Index

This index lists every Bible passage that is named with its book somewhere in the text, with the pages where it appears. When a chapter refers back to a verse by chapter and verse alone, such as (14:27), that page isn't listed separately.

Genesis 2:8 (45); 2:8-12 (45); 2:8-14 (47); 2:13-14 (45); 2:18-25 (24); 3:15 (19, 46, 55); 3:20 (48); 3:24 (45, 84); 4:13-17 (48); 4:15 (48); 4:16 (50); 4:26 (53); 5:4 (48, 50); 5:21-24 (57); 6:1-4 (51, 56); 6:4 (51, 54, 133); 6:5 (51, 55); 6:6 (56); 6:8 (56); 6:8-9 (56); 6:9 (55); 7:11 (46); 9:1 (122); 9:12-13 (49); 9:13 (84); 9:25 (49); 11:4 (42, 122); 11:6-9 (122); 12:3 (12); 14:18-20 (61, 63); 14:22 (61); 16:10 (66); 16:13 (65); 17:14 (68); 19:17 (123); 19:24-26 (122); 20:12 (49); 22:15-16 (65); 22:16-17 (66); 32:24-30 (67); 32:30 (65); 49:17 (120)

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