

# THE SECRETS OF GOD

by Ray C. Stedman

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In preparation for a series of messages from Ephesians 1 through 3, it will be helpful to consider a subject which is always of prime interest to believers -- the authority of the Scriptures. Why do we accept the Scriptures as the Word of God and as the authority in our lives?

I hope you recognize that authority is always the ultimate question. In any issue we discuss, we finally must resolve it on the basis of authority. We can't get away from that, although we might like to. Many of us cherish the fond illusion that, if we only had the opportunity, we could set aside everybody else's thinking and do our own. We say, "I want to come to my own conclusions." We don't want anyone else to influence us. But we are kidding ourselves when we talk that way, because, of course, we can't do that. There is no way by which we could possibly spend the time necessary to think and study through everything ourselves. We must accept authority. We do it all the time:

- If you are a stranger in a town and somebody gives you directions, you accept them as an authority in that area without question, because you think they know more than you do, even though you have never met them before.
- If you read a road map or refer to the owner's manual of a new appliance or even read a newspaper, you are constantly accepting statements on the authority of others.

Therefore the final issue always is: "What authority do you have?"

I hope you have learned already that a Christian resolves his puzzles and riddles and the difficult questions of life on the basis of the authority of the Word of God. The final right we have as human beings is to choose the authority we are going to obey. That is all. We must obey some authority. We must submit to some master. And the final right -- really the only right -- we have, is to choose which master we are going to submit to.

Here in Peninsula Bible Church, and among the Christian community around the world, the ultimate authority is the Scriptures. "The Word of God" we call it. This book, the Old and New Testaments, is the revelation of the mind of God -- God speaking to man. Therefore, what it says is final. It is superseded by no other authority. It is challenged and rivaled by no other. There is nothing which approaches it, in the mind of a Christian. It is unquestionable because it is God himself speaking -- the ultimate authority in all of life.

"Well," somebody says, "that is fine for you Christians. You accept that by blind faith. But how do you know the Bible is the Word of God?" There are many very legitimate approaches to answering that question.

- We might discuss the uniqueness of the Bible in its unerring ability to foretell human history.
- Or we might invoke the authority of Jesus Christ -- and of course all final authority rests there. Even the Scriptures are acceptable to us only because of the authority of the person of Jesus Christ.
- But the approach I want to discuss this morning -- and what to me is the most remarkable and convincing evidence that the book I have in my hand is God's revelation of ultimate reality, of final truth -- is the fact that here in this book I find revealed about life certain truths which are essential to me, or to any person, in order to live life as it was intended to be lived, and which I cannot find anywhere else -- no other source gives them to me.

They are certain essential elements which I must know if I am going to handle life properly, and which I cannot learn anywhere else. Not in all the libraries or universities of earth, nor in all the research of science,

nor in all the thinking of philosophers -- not in any of the investigation of human knowledge and wisdom -- can I ever find the truths which are hidden here. These are what mark this as God's book, the essential book about life. And it is some of these I want to bring before you.

In First Corinthians 2, the Apostle Paul is saying this very thing to the Corinthian believers:

**When I came to you, brethren, I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in much fear and trembling; and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.**

**Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glorification. None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But, as it is written,**

**"What no eye has seen,  
nor ear heard,**

**nor the heart of man conceived,  
what God has prepared for those who love him,"**

**God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For what person knows a man's thoughts except the spirit of the man which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is from God, that we might understand the gifts bestowed on us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who possess the Spirit.**

**The unspiritual man does not receive the gifts of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual man judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one. "For who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ. {1 Cor 2:16 RSV}**

He says that among the mature we speak or impart a hidden, secret wisdom, which none of the rulers of this age know anything about. When he refers to the rulers of the age, he does not mean governmental authorities, necessarily. He is talking about the leaders of human thought -- the philosophers, the statesmen, the molders and fashioners of world opinion, the poets, the politicians -- those who lead people in every realm of life. And he says, "They do not know these secrets of God. And because they don't know them, they make the most atrocious blunders. They are constantly making mistakes -- terrible, ghastly, costly mistakes which injure and damage thousands and millions of people. "But," he says, "God has revealed these secrets to us, by his Spirit. They are imparted to those who are filled with the Spirit. Those who possess the Holy Spirit can hear and understand these secrets of God." Paul calls them the "depths" or the "deep things" of God.

It is these same things which later on in First Corinthians he refers to as the "mysteries" of God. In Chapter 4, Verses 1 and 2, there is a beautiful statement describing what a Christian is:

**This is how one should regard us [Christians], as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy [faithful to their task]. {1 Cor 4:1-2 RSV}**

We know what a stewardess is, in this day of aviation. And a steward is the male counterpart -- a dispenser of necessities, who gives out meals and tickets and information and all the other things necessary to any traveler. This is the idea Paul conveys regarding Christians. Christians are said to be stewards of the mysteries of God. We are caretakers, custodians, of God's secrets, dispensers of them -- not to keep them for ourselves, but to practice them and distribute them to a waiting world which is falling apart because it doesn't understand how to

handle life the way it ought to be lived. Therefore it is essential that we understand these mysteries.

Now, even Christians struggle a great deal in their lives. The knowledge of these secrets doesn't remove us from conflict. We all have grave problems.

I have discovered that you can fall through the roof even though you are a pastor of a church!

You can be confronted with puzzling and baffling experiences you don't know the answers to. These secrets do not exempt us. But one thing they do -- they enable us to find the solutions, and to handle the circumstances which come. And without them we are unable to do so.

I am greatly concerned at how many Christians exposed to the truth of God are still unable to handle life as it is thrown at them. That is why I have chosen to bring this message -- in order that we might understand these secrets, and give ourselves to this matter of becoming faithful stewards of the mysteries, the secrets, the hidden wisdom, of God.

T. S. Elliot described life this way: "All our knowledge brings us nearer to our ignorance. And all our ignorance brings us nearer to death. But nearer to death, no nearer to God. Where is the life," he asks, "that we have lost in living?" It is possible, is it not, to lose life while you are living it because you don't know the hidden wisdom, the secrets, the mysteries of God.

Mysteries, in Scripture, are not 'Who Done Its.' They are not insoluble problems, strange and mysterious riddles nobody can grasp. They are secrets hidden from the general public, but available to those who are in the inner circle because they are willing to be taught by the Spirit. And they are essential to life. As we take up some of the more important of them, we need to realize that I can touch upon them only briefly in the time available. But they are not unfamiliar themes. They have been preached here many times. They are set before you constantly, so they won't be new and startling.

But what you should think of as we go through them is:

- How much do I know these?
- How much can I handle this kind of truth?
- How much can I impart it?
- How much is it showing up in my practical daily existence?

That is where these secrets become available to the world around.

One of the greatest secrets scattered throughout the Scriptures is what you find referred to repeatedly as "the mystery of the kingdom of God" -- the secret government of earth, if you like. This is the fact that in the midst of the world around us, with nature and people and books and trees and houses and all the other visibilities of life -- right in the midst of it, permeating all of it, and governing and controlling everything -- is a secret, invisible kingdom. It is the kingdom of God. God is in control of history. He is governing human affairs. He is behind creation. He made nature.

I am always disturbed, whenever I go someplace like a national park, to hear the rangers say, "Nature did this, and nature did that." But, nature is what is there. So if you say this, what you are really saying is that nature made nature, that *nature* produced what you call "nature." That is senseless. It doesn't mean a thing. Nature does nothing. Nature is what is produced, not what is producing. It is God who produces nature. But sometimes even Christians use that phraseology because we are falling heir to the philosophy of the world about us which tries to obscure the kingdom of God and act as though it isn't there.

Men don't want to think of God as being present. Yet without this knowledge of the kingdom of God, and God's control of human events and human lives, including yours and mine, even to their most intimate details, life becomes meaningless, empty, and devoid of purpose. We feel worthless, useless. And the older we grow, the less reason we seem to have for living. If you want purpose in your life, you must begin by recognizing the fact of this mystery, of this secret kingdom, this rule of God in the midst of human affairs. Then things

will begin to fall into place and make sense. Without it, life is mere existential despair.

That despair has spread throughout the world in our day. Men deny the existence of this secret kingdom. But they are constantly falling apart at the seams because they have no meaning, no purpose, no reason to exist. This feeling is perhaps best described by the high priest of humanism, Bertrand Russell, who recently died. He wrote:

Brief, powerless is man's life. On him and all his race the slow, sure doom falls pitiless and dark. Blind to good and evil, reckless to destruction, omnipotent matter rolls on its relentless way. For man, condemned today to lose his dearest, tomorrow himself to pass through the gate of darkness, it remains only to cherish, ere yet the blow falls, the lofty thoughts that ennoble his little day.

What a gloomy statement! What dark, rank pessimism!

And yet that is all you can see in this universe. It is nothing but a cold, cosmic machine, cranking on its relentless way ... if you don't recognize the kingdom of God as Jesus revealed it -- the heavenly Father with his heart of concern for his own, his intimate knowledge of even the hairs of your head and every other part of your body and being. This is the answer -- this secret of God.

But to translate this into your daily experience is absolutely necessary. It is one thing to talk about it at church. But what about tomorrow at work, and in your home, and among the neighbors, and in the realm of politics?

- Do you see the kingdom of God there?
- Do you see God's iron-clad grasp of human events there as well?
- Do you see his ruling and overruling hand, his ability to control and manipulate, and to bring about his purposes through tears and darkness and sorrow?

Well, that is what makes the difference between meaning and meaninglessness in life.

Then there is what Paul calls, in Second Thessalonians, "the mystery of lawlessness," {2 Th 2:7 RSV}. How we struggle with this!

Who hasn't asked, "Why did this happen to me? Why do I have to go through this experience? Why does cancer suddenly strike a dear one?" You must face these questions.

"Why should injustice prevail? Why do wars continue their senseless destruction?" Man wrestles with injustice, evil, and the inability to make real social progress -- and always has. Why is it that we are still grappling with the problems the Romans struggled with in the days of Julius Caesar? We haven't learned a thing more than they about how to solve them. And back even to the dimmest recesses of human history they were wrestling with the same basic problems. Why? Where has all our vaunted education -- the heights of human wisdom -- brought us, when we haven't been able to solve any of the basic problems? Why is this? Why is it that politicians can never be trusted to keep their promises -- even the best of them? Of course, a lot of demagogues run around making promises merely because they want to get into office. It is amazing each year how people fall for that, never seem able to see through those who make promises, and change them with the wind, in order to get elected. But there are some good politicians, too, who make promises they fully intend to keep. And they promise what they sincerely want to deliver when they get into office. But when they get there they can't do it. Why?

The answer of Scripture is that there is a mystery of lawlessness. There is a malevolent being called Satan, prince of a great kingdom of darkness and evil, a kingdom of millions of beings like himself who are in headlong stampede against the government of God, in revolt and rebellion against him, and who are intent on wrecking and smashing and mangling all the love-born plans of God for the human race. And they know how to do it!

You will never understand life, and you will never understand the conflicts you have in your home between yourself and your wife, or your children, or your parents, or with your neighbors, or anyone else, until you understand this secret, this mystery of lawlessness. You will never be able to do anything effective about it. You will constantly be merely treating the symptoms which keep reappearing all the time unless you begin to understand how to use weapons which will aim at the real source of trouble, as Paul tells us in the sixth chapter of Ephesians. Without this knowledge there is no explanation of history. There is no realistic way of dealing with current problems. There is no solving of harmful or hurtful relationships between human beings. You will never solve the problem of the Communist threat to the world, or anything else, until you understand the mystery of lawlessness.

Exactly parallel with that is what Paul calls "the mystery of godliness." In First Timothy he says, "Great is the mystery of godliness," {1 Tim 3:16 KJV}. This is the answer to the mystery of lawlessness.

God has a secret which, if you learn it, enables you to handle this mystery of lawlessness. You can never escape the struggle, but you can win! That's the point. You don't have to be defeated. You don't have to be torn apart and discouraged and bored and jealous and envious and anxious and fretful. You can win, by means of the secret of godliness. It is also called "the mystery of the gospel" {Eph 6:19}, and in another place "the mystery of Christ and his church," {cf, Eph 3:4}. It is simply the fantastic, radical principle that God intends to live in man. Man is to be the dwelling place of God. And, through the cross and the resurrection, God has set aside man's guilt and provided for his weakness and impotence, and has given him a way of handling life as it comes -- through the power and the activity of God himself, living in you. That is the mystery of godliness -- the greatest secret the world has ever heard of!

And it is waiting for Christians to demonstrate -- so that when you get upset or anxious or attacked, you don't react as a non-Christian would. You don't retaliate or spill out a torrent of angry words in return. You don't strike back, you don't get even. But many, many Christians evidence the fact that they haven't yet learned the mystery of godliness, simply haven't really learned this secret. They may know it intellectually, but they haven't committed their lives to it. And yet that is what changes life. That is what revolutionizes society. That is what God calls us to learn.

It is the answer to guilt. How many of you get up in the morning, and, first thing, feel a sense of guilt about something you didn't do but should have, or something wrong you did do the night before?

- Do you know how to handle it?
- Do you know how to divest yourself of that sense of guilt and to step out, free, forgiven -- God's man or God's woman?
- Do you know how to handle the sense of feebleness you feel whenever you are challenged with something too big for you?
- Do you know how to avail yourself of God's power to meet that challenge?

Without this secret we become victims of life instead of victors. Much already has been taught here about that over the years, and doubtless much more will be.

But now we must move on to another mystery. In First Corinthians 15, Paul says to these men and women who are facing life and death,

**Lo! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. {1 Cor 15:51-52 RSV}**

There are many passages in Scripture which speak of that change, of what God is going to do in the future, what he is preparing us for. This is what explains what happens to us in our lives. This is why we can take the sorrows and heartaches and injustices which come.

As Paul tells us, "This slight, momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison," {2 Cor 4:17 RSV}. And, "The sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us," {Rom 8:18 RSV}.

All this points to that great theme which, Paul tells us in Ephesians, is behind all of God's work {see Eph 1:10} -- that in the fullness of time he may gather together all things in Christ, and harmony and unity will be restored to the universe. The second law of thermodynamics, which insists upon decay and loss, will be reversed, and things will get better and better, and greater and greater, and richer and richer, and higher and higher to an infinity beyond our comprehension. This is what puts hope back into our discouraged lives. Life is not without meaning. This is the secret of it. There is no more encouraging secret in all the world than to understand this mystery of God's working in the future.

Finally, we stand before the mystery of God himself, this mighty Being, this wonderful God -- three persons, yet one God -- whose ways are different than our ways, greater and higher, who teaches us to lose life in order that we might gain it, that if we are going to live, we have to die, that if we are going to reign, we must become a servant of others, that if we are going to become rich, we must accept poverty and loss, who constantly rules with undeviating justice, and yet with warm, heartfelt, absolutely unending love. No wonder Paul says, "The foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men," {1 Cor 1:25}. At last we must cry out with the apostle as we stand before the greatness of God and say, "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!" {Rom 11:33 KJV}. What a God! What truth!

The thing that grips me at this moment, and I hope it grasps you, is the fact that to us -- we plumbers and carpenters and doctors and bankers and housewives and laborers and construction workers and secretaries -- to us have been committed the secrets of God. We are stewards of the mysteries of God. They are given to us in order that we might understand them, and begin to live on them ourselves, and then by that demonstration to impart them to others around us, so that all of life begins to be changed.

Do you have any idea how dark this world would be, how completely hopeless life would be, without the slightest bit of relief, were it not for the dissemination of these secrets of God through the centuries already -- by Christian people?

And we have a responsibility to our own generation to be stewards of the mysteries of God. "Moreover, it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful," {1 Cor 4:2 KJV}.

I share with you something which has been troubling me: I am disturbed at how few of our people really have habits of personal Bible study. We all love to come and listen to these truths expounded here. We love to read the messages in printed form, and some are studying them. Some are using them as they are intended to be used -- as guidelines to prompt your own study. But many are only coming and drinking it all in, but never going beyond that -- merely listening -- perhaps a few changes apparent here and there, but nothing very much.

Now, let me say something out of the depths of my pastoral heart: You will never be a faithful steward of the mysteries of God that way. You will never be able to help another. You will never be able to demonstrate these secrets in your own life until you personally begin to dig deeper into the Scriptures yourself, and find them out for yourself. It is only as you take these guidelines and begin to translate them

- Into your own terms,
- Into your situation,
- Into your home, where you live,

that these truths begin to come alive, and the community starts sitting up and taking notice that here indeed are people who have learned to live in a wholly different way.

Only thus can we become faithful stewards of the mysteries of God.

The ultimate demonstration is what takes place down in the hurly burly of life, right in the blood and the sweat and the tears of the marketplace and the home and the school and wherever we are.

This is what makes me know the Scriptures are the Word of God. They solve the problems of life, explain its puzzles. And yet they are still beyond us, still challenging to the intellect. I have been studying this Bible for more than thirty years, but I still often feel as though I have just opened the book and it is flashing its new insights, revelation, and knowledge into my mind which simply dazzle me and challenge me and make me pause in humility to give thanks to God for these marvelous, delivering truths. What a ministry God has committed to us!

My challenge to you is to ask yourself how faithful a steward you are of these great secrets. These are the riches God has entrusted to us to disseminate through our lives to others. May God help us as we face them and answer these questions:

- How much do you know of this yourself?
- How much has it gripped your heart, and changed your life?

As we close, I would like to ask you for a moment to pray silently before God and answer whatever the Spirit of God is asking your own heart. I don't mean to condemn; God does not condemn. But sometimes he wants us to take an honest look at ourselves and see where we are, and to renew our commitment to allow him to change us and make us faithful stewards of his mysteries.

## Prayer

Our Father, we ask you to forgive us for the neglect of your Word. What a fantastic treasure of knowledge is here in these pages! How much we need to give ourselves to it, Lord. This is what you have put us here for in this brief span of earthly life -- that we might learn these eternal truths which will flash in glory forever through the endless reaches of eternity. And our lives will be reckoned as worthwhile only as we have grasped them and understood them and begun to practice them. Lord, teach us, then to be faithful stewards of the mysteries of God. Help us, Father. We accept your immediate forgiveness for our failure, but we want to go on from here, Lord. We don't want to be fettered and impotent through ignorance or faithlessness. We want to be strong and genuine and healthy and whole and wholesome, imparting health and strength to others as well. Through us, Lord, heal the blight of humanity around us -- the curse and the darkness and the corruption and the despair which is so evident about us. Work through our lives to heal many, we pray, and above all, make us faithful stewards of these secrets. As ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

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