

# FURIOUS PARADOXES

## EXPLORING THE GREAT MYSTERIES OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

All Saints Austin  
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*Christianity got over the difficulty of combining furious opposites  
by keeping them both and keeping them both furious.*  
— G.K. Chesterton

### Overview

The deeper one explores the Christian faith, the deeper one finds mystery. In fact, while the Christian faith is not irrational, it is deeply mysterious. In this course, we will explore some of the great mysteries of the Christian faith.

*Seek the LORD while he may be found;  
call on him while he is near.  
Let the wicked forsake their ways  
and the unrighteous their thoughts.  
Let them turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on them,  
and to our God, for he will freely pardon.*

*"For my thoughts are not your thoughts,  
neither are your ways my ways,"  
declares the LORD.  
"As the heavens are higher than the earth,  
so are my ways higher than your ways  
and my thoughts than your thoughts."*

— Isaiah 55:6-9 [NIV]

*O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are  
his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! "For who has known the mind of the  
Lord? Or who has been his counselor?" "Or who has given a gift to him, to receive a gift  
in return?" For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory  
forever. Amen.*

— Romans 11:33-36 [NRSV]

## The Many Mysteries of Life

- Life is full of mysteries; some are trivial, some are profound. What have people seen in Loch Ness? What about UFOs? Why is Grape-Nuts neither grapes nor nuts?
- Some mysteries are quite profound. For just one example, pick up a popular book on particle physics. Should we call these particles at all? How do we explain the quantum world? Do we look to string theory, loop quantum gravity, or what?
- The Christian faith is not alone in being full of mystery! Yet some are uncomfortable with this. Is this just a cop-out for irrationality, an anti-intellectual move on the part of Christians? Others are surprised to hear Christians speak of mystery, assuming that Christianity is deeply rationalistic.
- The Christian faith is *both* profoundly rational *and* profoundly mysterious.

## The Christian Faith Is Profoundly Rational

- The Christian faith invites—*welcomes*—serious intellectual study.
  - The attitude that says, “Don’t ask questions, just believe,” is antithetical to biblical Christianity.
  - St. Augustine: The Bible is like a pond shallow enough for a child’s wading, yet like an ocean deep enough to swallow an elephant.
- The Christian faith is confident that we can know truth about God.
  - Why? Because God has *revealed* himself—in his creation, in his written Word, and chiefly in the *Incarnate* Word.
  - This is what St. Paul is getting at in the passage above.
- Therefore, we can know “true truth” (in the words of Francis Schaeffer) about God.
  - It’s not like the often-repeated parable of blind men trying to describe an elephant. That analogy looks humble, but in reality it’s quite arrogant, assuming that we are those with eyes to see the whole story.
  - We have confidence because we can, in humility, listen to what God says.

## Yet the Christian Faith Is Profoundly Mysterious

- The more we know of God, the more mystery we encounter.
  - This is true in many fields—again, not least in particle physics.
  - Like a circle—the bigger the circle, the bigger the circumference.
  - St. Augustine again: Dipping a cup in the ocean and asking, “Is this the ocean in my cup?” Well, yes; it’s not coffee. But there’s so much more of the ocean than what we have in the cup.
  - Schaeffer: We have *true* truth, but not *exhaustive* truth.

- If Christianity is true, then mystery is just what we should expect.
  - Not a cop-out, but evidence *for* the Christian faith. If there is an infinite God, then no finite mind could ever understand him fully.
  - That's the message in the Isaiah passage above.
- This is why mystery is important for Christian thinking—and why Chesterton was right.
  - We must *refuse to reduce* God's revelation to something we can rationally understand because when we do so we distort it. We lose the *wonder*.
- Is the Christian faith for you?
  - If you're looking for simplistic half-truths, then the Christian faith is not for you.
  - If you're looking for an easy emotional rush as an accessory to a conformist life, then the Christian faith is not for you.
  - *But* if you are looking for a faith that will challenge you intellectually—and for a faith with real transcendence and true mystery—you will find it in the biblical, historic Christian faith.

*Mystery is the vital element of Dogmatics.*

— Herman Bavinck (1854-1921)  
*The Doctrine of God*

### Going Deeper into Mystery

- Study the Scriptures—and do so *meditatively*.
  - Read the Bible not only for information, but also for Christian *formation*.
- Learn your theology—and do so *devotionally*.
  - Don't be afraid of theology, but don't study theology in the abstract.
- Pray—and do so *experientially*.
  - All theology—*all* theology—is to be done in the mode of prayer.
- Worship—and do so *thankfully*.
  - That's what we see in St. Paul. The more we learn, the more we lift up our voices in praise & thanksgiving.
  - And especially, we worship the Triune God for the mystery of *grace*. After ten chapters on what God has done for us in Christ, the apostle bursts forth in worship.
  - Perhaps no more profound theology than these words: "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so."

*A theologian is one whose prayer is true. If you truly pray, you are a theologian.*

— Evagrius of Pontus (4<sup>th</sup> C)