

The Mystery of Christmas

1 Timothy 3:16 (ESV)

INTRODUCTION: The year was 1984, and I was 8 years old. I was so excited for Christmas morning - I had asked Santa Claus for a “Go-Kart.” A GoKart was the closest thing to freedom that could be owned by an 8-year-old boy in Lawrence County, Alabama.



I wake up Christmas morning, I’m tearing open the presents, and I open a big square present, which inside had a really cool helmet, which seemed promising... I looked at my dad, and said, “Why on earth did Santa bring me a helmet and nothing to go with it????” Dad said, “Well, maybe Santa had to leave the rest of it in the garage... that was it, Santa couldn’t get my gokart down the chimney, we didn’t even have a real chimney... we had a gas fireplace, but that’s beside the point... I made my way to the garage, flung the door open, and did not see a gokart... I saw this....



That, I discovered, is a Suzuki Quadrunner 250cc, an all-terrain vehicle....The first words out of my mouth were, “Why the heck did Santa bring me something you are obviously not going to let me drive by myself?”

It became the stuff of Christmas legend. In fact when our kids were around the same age, guess what Santa brought?

Ended up being, probably the best Christmas gift I ever recieved, had so many adventures on that 4-wheeler, but at first it was simply a big orange mystery.



The first Christmas wasn’t so different - the gift we got was not the one we expected. God in the Flesh.

And, the first one to wrestle with the concept of the incarnation was Mary herself, **who raised a question in Luke 1:34 (ESV)** ³⁴. And Mary said to the angel, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?”

Even Paul, the greatest mind the church has ever produced, had the same concern in 1 Timothy 3:16.

CONTEXT: Paul is writing a personal letter to his young protege in the faith, Timothy. He has a fair amount of instruction and basic reminders, the things a man might say to a friend, for example -

TEXT: 1 Timothy 3:14–15 (ESV)

¹⁴ I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, ¹⁵ if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth.

But then something happens: it is as if the Holy Spirit gripped Paul's heart a bit tighter, the illumination grew even brighter, and, in a flash, Paul quotes the words of a hymn sang often by the early church. The lyrics of this hymn reveal the *inexpressible depths of the reality of this Mega Mystērion we call Christmas*.

TEXT: 1 Timothy 3:16 (ESV)

¹⁶ Great indeed, we confess, is the *mystery* of godliness: He (that is Christ) was manifested in the flesh...

Mega Mystērion¹. The word Mystērion is used frequently by Paul because he finds several aspects of Christian doctrine to be somewhat mysterious. But then there is this phrase, Mega Mystērion, this combination of Greek words is rarely employed, in fact, it is only used one other time in the scriptures in a similar context. So, in other words, this is not one mystery among many—this is *the* mystery.

John stated the nature of the mega mysterion plainly in **John 1:14 (ESV)**

¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

No man may see God and live - this is self-evident, at least to those faith-filled readers of Moses, yet Paul, and many other like him, beheld “him in the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily.” **Colossians 2:9–10 (ESV)**

How can these things be? The consideration of the incarnation of Jesus Christ left the learned Paul, who sat under the tutelage of the Raban Gamiliel, utterly stupefied.

And not only Paul, but his tribe of bewildered compatriots is immense.²

- **Homo** - meaning *altogether*.
- **Logo** - to *speak*.
- **Umenōs** - adverb meaning *"as it is."*

So, in other words, Paul is saying, “WE ALL AGREE, this Mega Mystery simply is as it is.”

¹ μέγα (**Mega**), translated “Great indeed....” μυστήριον (**mystērion**) — “mystery...”

² “ὁμολογουμένως (*homo-logo-umenōs*)

What is this concept that Paul confesses leaves the entire world stupefied?

1 Tim. 3:16b. He (that is Christ) was manifested in the flesh...

Paul says that is not one mystery among many others, that is the essential mystery to which the ages which to comprehend.

ILLUSTRATION: Larry King said, when asked, “If you could interview anyone from history, who would it be?” he said, “I would want to interview Mary, the mother of Jesus, because if I could understand how God became a baby, I would be a Christian.”

For both the Jews and the Greeks, the incarnation was a tough pill to swallow for a few reasons:

1. The Struggle of **Gnosticism** - The Gnostics believed that all physical matter was inherently evil; to say that God, in all of His holiness, could take on flesh was blasphemy to the Gnostic.
2. The Struggle of **Docetism** - From the Greek word “Dokeo” meaning “to seem”. The Docester argued that Christ only seemed to take on flesh, but it was simply excellent CGI, not an actual body.
3. The Struggle of **Judaism** - The Jews would wrestle with the incarnation simply because to them it seemed like Idolatry. You see, the second commandment prohibits making a “*thing*” that looks like God. Thus, how could God Himself violate the second commandment? But Christ did not claim to be a representation of God, but rather the very God of very God - in the flesh.
 - Just as God revealed Himself in the burning bush (Exod 3)
 - The pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night
 - Or the *Shekinah glory* filled and enveloped the tabernacle

That same manifest presence of God was veiled in the tender flesh of a baby on that first Christmas morning.

4. But, perhaps the greatest struggle was one found in each of us, namely the Struggle with **Logic** - It is simply an equation we cannot solve.
 - Truly God
 - Truly man
 - One Person
 - Two natures
 - *Without confusion* (not mixed into a third thing)
 - *Without dilution* (God did not in any way stop being God or become less God)
 - *Without division, there was not a human Jesus and a divine Jesus*

How can these things be true at the same time and in the same way? It *appears to* violate the law of non-contradiction.

Yet, *incarnation and ultimately redemption required such a paradoxical contradiction.*

You see,

If Christ is not fully God, He cannot REDEEM.

If Christ is not fully man, He cannot RELATE.

If Christ is not God/Man, He cannot RESTORE.

1. If Christ is not fully God, He cannot REDEEM.

Redemption is not merely **sympathy** or **example**—it is **atonement**.

A price must be paid.

ILLUSTRATION: Italian Jurist Cesare Bonesana [CHEH-zah-reh Boh-neh-SAH-nah] was onto something when he suggested that for there to be faithful Justice, the severity of the penalty must be in direct proportion to the grandeur of the station of one offended.

In other words,

- If I lie to my dog, the penalty may be that he doesn't trust me the next time I offer a treat.
- If I lie to my wife, the penalty may be that I sleep with my dog.
- If I lie to a State Trooper, the penalty may be that I sleep in a jail cell.
- If I lie under oath to the Supreme Court of the United States, I may never sleep in my bed again. If Bonesana is correct, that for there to be faithful Justice, the severity of the penalty must be in direct proportion to the grandeur of the station of one offended. The only fair penalty for offending the Almighty is one that never ends.

This logic is in keeping with that of the Apostle James, who wrote - **James 2:10–11 (ESV)**

¹⁰ For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it. ¹¹ For he who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.

In other words, it is not about **WHICH** law you broke as much as it is about **WHOSE** law you broke.

You have broken the law of Almighty God and stand justly condemned as a transgressor.

¹⁰ Even now (John the Baptist has said) the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree, therefore, that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.
Matthew 3:10 (ESV)

What hope do you have of being absolved of so great an offence? What sacrifice can be made on your behalf? You cannot mitigate an eternal wrath with a temporal adjustment to your behavior, or the blood of a mutilated lamb.

The only chance you have of atonement is that God Himself can somehow resolve the Mega Mysterion and pay the penalty on your behalf.

Isaiah 43:11 (ESV)

¹¹ I, I am the Lord, and besides me there is no savior.

Boethius reminds us that “Song is the Handmaid of Philosophy”, thus it is often to the psalmist we turn for answers to such mysteries - and a lyric is readily available this time of year, “***Late in time behold Him come, Offspring of a virgin’s womb. Veiled in flesh the Godhead see, Hail th’ incarnate Deity!:***”

If Christ is not fully God, He cannot REDEEM.

2. If Christ is not fully man, He cannot RELATE.

Perhaps we would be satisfied, had God chosen to redeem us at a distance. Could you blame him? We have defiled ourselves. We know what our eyes have seen, our ears have heard, and even our lips have spoken. We know the depths of our own personal depravity - those things we have done, or that we would have done if we could. Besides all of this, we sit in judgment over others as if we were somehow superior.

Would you blame Him? If he ordained that our redemption be a distant one? It would be redemption nonetheless; we would be able to take hold of eternity.

Yet, this was not his approach.

- The **LOGOS** uttered gibberish like any ordinary baby.
- He whose words hurled galaxies into existence learned to say “imma” and “abba.”

Yes, He chose to be a relatable redeemer.

ILLUSTRATION: Job in the pits of his despair after having lost everything - his success, his authority, his family, his friends, even his health... sits on a pile of ashes reasoning with this mystery to which Paul refers...

Job 9:25–35 (ESV)

²⁵ “My days are swifter than a runner; they flee away; they see no good. ²⁶ They go by like skiffs of reed, like an eagle swooping on the prey. ²⁷ If I say, ‘I will forget my complaint, I will put off my sad face, and be of good cheer,’ ²⁸ I become afraid of all my suffering, for I know you will not hold me innocent. ²⁹ I shall be condemned; why then do I labor in vain? ³⁰ If I wash myself with snow and cleanse my hands with lye, ³¹ yet you will plunge me into a pit, and my own clothes will abhor me.

AND HERE IS THE PROBLEM:

³² For he is not a man, as I am, that I might answer him, that we should come to trial together. ³³ There is no arbiter between us, who might lay his hand on us both.

Do you grasp what Job is suggesting? I stand utterly condemned before God, and I can't understand Him, and He cannot understand me. IF ONLY THERE WERE AN ARBITER, who could somehow lay a hand on both of us... fully understand God is all of His **POWER** and fully understand Job in all of His **Pity**...

Paul speaks into the past to Job and into the future to us - and says, "You aren't going to understand this completely... it is a mega mysterion.. but such a mediator has arrived.

Consider the tensions Scripture holds without apology or even an elaborate explanation:

- He **knows all things** (John 16:30)
— yet **grows in wisdom** (Luke 2:52)
- He **upholds creation** (Col. 1:17)
— yet **needs His mother's milk**
- He **commands the winds**
— yet **sleeps from exhaustion**
- He is **immortal**
— yet He **truly dies**

In the words of the writer to the **Hebrews 2:17 (ESV)**

¹⁷ ...He had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.

If Christ is not fully God, He cannot REDEEM.

If Christ is not fully God, He cannot RELATE.

3. If Christ is not God/Man, He cannot RESTORE.

The ultimate point of the Bible is the drama that began in Eden, finding its full and complete resolution in a new Heaven and a new Earth - that is far grander than if the fall had never occurred.

For that to happen, we not only need a **redeemer** but also a **leader**. We need someone untouched by original sin to step into time and space and lead us into a better future.

We need the transcendent to become imminent.

We need the prophecy of Isaiah to be fulfilled - **Isaiah 9:6–7 (ESV)**

⁶ For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. ⁷ Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be

no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore.

Isaiah, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit anticipates the question of Mary, the question of Paul, and perhaps your question this Christmas season... how can these things be....

He answers in 7b - The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

Not only can Christ the GOD/MAN Build a new Heaven and Earth - he can rebuild you, and your family, and your legacy. He can step into your reality and show you the way home.

Hebrews 2:18

¹⁸ For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

I do not consider myself to have the gift of counseling as some people do, but this I can do: when someone presents me with their scenario that is weighing heavily on their shoulders, I race through everything I know about Jesus Christ, and say, "How can He relate to this?" I've yet to stump Him.

CONCLUSION/INVITATION:

Have you been **betrayed**?

He has as well — by His closest companions.

Have you been **accused**?

So has He — falsely, publicly, and without recourse.

Have you been **misunderstood**?

He was — even by His own family.

Have you been **abandoned**?

He was — left alone when it mattered most.

Have you been **mocked**?

He endured ridicule, sarcasm, and public shame.

Have you been **treated unjustly**?

He faced a rigged trial and an unjust sentence.

Have you **suffered physical pain**?

He knew hunger, exhaustion, beating, and crucifixion.

Have you been **overwhelmed with sorrow**?

He wept — openly, deeply, and without apology.

Have you **prayed and felt unheard**?
He cried out in agony, Heaven was silent.

Have you faced **temptation**?
He did — without yielding.

Have you carried **responsibility** heavier than you could bear?
He carried the weight of the world.

Have you faced death itself?
He's been there, my friend

- Because Jesus Christ is fully God, He CAN REDEEM.
- Because Jesus Christ is fully man, He CAN RELATE.
- Because Jesus Christ is God/Man, He CAN RESTORE.

This Christmas, you may not comprehend the gift, but it may turn out to be the best gift
you've ever received.