

STUDY 9

The Victory of the King

Ian Pennicook

The wise men came asking for the one ‘born King of the Jews’. While that title may have specific ramifications within Israel, we also recognise that kingship is essential to full humanity. Mankind was created to reign over all that God has made and the distortions within all of mankind and within individuals are the result of the refusal to reign authentically (righteously) and the subsequent domination of mankind by evil powers of many sorts.

While we may approach this topic analytically, examining the Scriptures to see the various strands that emerge, it should first be noted that that will not, of itself, give us a clear view of Christ as King. To perceive the issues and inner workings of the kingdom of God requires that it be given to us. Thus Jesus told the disciples concerning the parable of the sower, to us an obvious explanation of the variety of responses to his ministry of the word, that to them it was *given* to know the mystery of the kingdom (Mark 4:11).¹ The ‘obvious’ requires revelation.

KNOWING THE MYSTERIES

Within the Old Testament, only Daniel uses the word ‘mystery’,² and does so in a way that shows that a mystery is not a conclusion to be deduced from clues but a matter that only God can disclose.³ Mark 4:11 is the only use of ‘mystery’ in the Gospels,⁴ while there are four uses in Revelation (1:20; 10:7; 17:5, 7). Basically, in the New Testament, the word is Paul’s. If we follow through the New Testament order, we encounter: the mystery of the ‘hardening’ of part of Israel (Rom. 11:25); the mystery by which the power of the gospel and the proclamation can be understood (Rom. 16:25); the mystery in which the wisdom of God is spoken (1 Cor. 2:7)⁵; the mystery of our resurrection (1 Cor. 15:51f.); the mystery of God’s will (Eph. 1:9);

¹ Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture quotations in this study are from the New Revised Standard Version.

² Seven times in chapter 2 and then 4:9.

³ It seems to be generally agreed that ‘In sum, μυστήριον [*mustērion*] is a rare expression in the NT which betrays no relation to the mystery cults. Where there seems to be connection (e.g. in sacramental passages), the term is not used; where it is used there are no such connections’ (G. Bornkamm, μυστήριον, C3, in TDNT, vol. 4, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1967, p. 824). Other LXX uses besides Daniel are all in Hellenistic documents.

⁴ Matt. 13:11 and Luke 8:10 are parallels, though using the plural. Paul uses the plural on only 3 of his 20 occasions (1 Cor. 4:1; 13:2 and 14:2).

⁵ Literally, ‘But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery’ (AV); ἀλλὰ λαλοῦμεν θεοῦ σοφίαν ἐν μυστηρίῳ (*alla laloumen theou sophian en mustēriō*).

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The mystery of Christ (Eph. 3:3, 4, 9); the mystery of marriage (Eph. 5:32); the mystery of the gospel (Eph. 6:19); the mystery of the word of God (Col. 1:25–27); the mystery of God, Christ himself (Col. 2:2); the mystery of Christ (Col. 4:3); the mystery of lawlessness (2 Thess. 2:7); the mystery of the faith (1 Tim. 3:9); and the mystery of our religion (1 Tim. 3:16).⁶ The plural is used three times: in 1 Corinthians 4:1, where Paul describes himself and others as ‘stewards of God’s mysteries’; in 1 Corinthians 13:2, ‘understand all mysteries’, probably refers to all those things revealed by God in Christ; and in 1 Corinthians 14:2, speaking of things said in tongues, the meaning may be no more than things which are humanly unintelligible.⁷ The only other occasion where ‘mystery’ might occur is in 1 Corinthians 2:1, though that is not certain.

The phrase in 1 Timothy 3:16 is one which highlights the way that Christians saw themselves as distinct from the other religions and their devotees: εὐσεβεία (*eusebeia*) does not refer to ‘godliness’ in the sense of likeness to God’s character. In the Hellenistic period it referred to a proper attitude and conduct towards the gods and proper conduct towards the affairs of life. Within the New Testament, other than in the Pastorals and 2 Peter, the word is never used of Christian faith and life.⁸ Paul, then, is saying that there is no doubt that *our* ‘religion’, our *eusebeia*, is of a vastly different order than that of any other religion. We are about a great mystery.

Although ‘mystery’ can be seen under various headings, such as those listed, the first feature of our religion is that it is received and understood not by explanation but by revelation. As I noted above, mystery does not refer to something seen by initiates because someone has given further information which was previously withheld. Knowledge of the mysteries of God is given by God himself:

... as it is written, ‘What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him’—¹⁰these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God (1 Cor. 2:9–10).

We have the mind of Christ. Indeed, not to see clearly and so not to live in the truth of God’s revelation is culpable behaviour. It is ‘unspiritual’, tragically human (ψυχικός, *psuchikos*, 1 Cor. 2:14). Were we to live in the Spirit and hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches, no strange matter for those in Christ since he goes on supplying the Spirit (Gal. 3:5), then we would be men and women who know the mysteries of God. As has been so often said, the mystery of God is not a riddle to be solved but a revelation to be lived in.

THE MYSTERY OF LAWLESSNESS

In 2 Corinthians 5:19, Paul tells us that ‘in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them’. There is a viciously destructive heresy around today (as always), which says that in Christ, God has made reconciliation and forgiveness *possible*. The actualising of that reconciliation and forgiveness is, it is preached, dependent upon our faith receiving them, our appropriation of them.

⁶ Or, ‘the mystery of godliness’ (NIV etc.): τὸ τῆς εὐσεβείας μυστήριον (*to tēs eusebeias mustērion*).

⁷ Therefore, necessitating the gift of interpretation.

⁸ G. Foerster, εὐσεβής κτλ. in *TDNT*, vol. 7, pp. 176ff.

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The result is that faith is preached first as something we must *do*, and not, as in Ephesians 2:8–9, as God’s own transforming gift. Associated with the misrepresentation of faith is the misrepresentation of reconciliation.

To use the word ‘friend’ to describe our relationship with God and Christ is correct, as in James 2:23, ‘Abraham . . . was called the friend of God’ and John 15:13–15 speaks of the disciples now being friends of Jesus.⁹ In the latter passage, friendship is closely associated with intimate understanding of the things which transpire between Jesus and the Father.¹⁰ Further, Jesus declared that ‘No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends’ (John 15:13). Friendship is a status which is given to these disciples, and Jesus’ laying down of his life relates not just to his willingness to put them before himself but to his taking away the sins of the world (John 1:29), including theirs.

This takes us to the deep, moral core of all things. The reconciliation of the world cannot mean anything if it does not deal with the removal of the sin which had previously stood in stark opposition to God and his holiness and which resulted in the fierce defiance of all men and women towards their Creator/Father. Paul wrote of the Thessalonians knowing what restrains the son of perdition (2 Thess. 2:6); can we begin to imagine what the removal of the restraints upon all human evil would mean? When that takes place and darkness is given apparent free reign, who could imagine the horror?¹¹

Yet Paul called it ‘the mystery of lawlessness’, meaning that no human being could possibly discern the fearsome dimensions of such evil. In contrast to this there is the pathetic presentation of human sin as a series of actions which at worst ‘sadden’ God and at best limit our enjoyment of life. Hence, regular confession of sin is treated as beneficial, though hardly so by those confessing. This is so unlike the Apostle Paul whose cry of ‘Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?’ (Rom. 7:24) would have been uttered in total desperation, were it not for the ‘thanks be to God . . .’ which follows. The description ‘God haters’ in Romans 1:30 cannot be minimised:

. . . hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. ⁶For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. ⁸But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. ⁹Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. ¹⁰For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. ¹¹But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation (Rom. 5:5–11).

‘Weakness’ (v. 6) evokes in most a sense of pity, while ‘sinners’ (v. 8) perhaps a nod of agreement. But the weak sinners are sworn enemies, determined to destroy God

⁹ The word ‘friend’ is now used far more loosely in much religious communication today, more akin to ‘mateship’.

¹⁰ See Geoffrey Bingham, ‘The Pastoral Power of Friendship’, NCTM Pastors’ Study Group, 6th April 1992.

¹¹ I am often reminded of Joseph Conrad’s book *Heart of Darkness* and the later film *Apocalypse Now* (1979). In both we are led to presume that if only man could be educated in some way, then the evident and destructive foolishness that takes place could be eradicated. But the alternative to foolishness is not wisdom, but only ‘the horror!’

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and to thwart his purposes. Their hatred cannot be understood apart from the universal cry of ‘Crucify him!’

The word ‘enormity’ means far more than enormousness; it means the extreme evil, in this case, of humanity in its opposition to God, as all of the truth of God is suppressed in deliberate acts of unrighteousness (Rom. 1:18). Mere theologising can never encompass the dimensions of human sin. Hence Jesus said that it would require the coming of the Spirit to convict the world of sin, righteousness and judgement (John 16:8). The trivialisation of it all, where ‘sins’ are presented as infringements of a social code in distinction to the total opposition of men and women to the person and purpose of God, requires a revelation if it is to be recognised. For the same reason it will require the gift of the Spirit for the disciples to bring forgiveness to men and women (John 20:22–23).

There is no denying that men and women are in the grip of evil powers. Humanity is essentially incapable of independence, and where there is refusal to submit to the Father, King and Creator, there will be the consequent takeover by sin, by Satan and his powers, by death and the distorting fear of death, by the world and the flesh, two elements which rush on apparently unrestrained carrying all with them. The law of liberty is now the fearful judge which exposes the guilt of the conscience, and the love of God which delineates the character of created humanity and its goal now stands against humanity in fierce and just wrath.

Reconciliation is not the result of bilateral discussions. It is totally the action of God, who made him who knew no sin to be sin for us (2 Cor. 5:21). Reconciliation demands that the moral heart of God and so of all that he has created be satisfied. In the words of P. T. Forsyth, ‘[God’s] conscience has to be pacified as well as His heart indulged. And if His conscience be not met, ours is not sure.’¹² Without a moral judgement there could be no reconciliation, only uncertain coexistence dependent on our powers of appropriation, which is, sadly, so often what is preached today.

It requires a great moral action to remove guilt and so give release to the captives. It is this which is so often overlooked when such passages as Luke 4:18–19 (cf. Isa. 61:1–4) are discussed. The promised ‘release’ (ἀφεσις, *aphesis*) must be the ‘forgiveness’ (ἀφεσις, *aphesis*) of sins (Luke 24:47), otherwise the release is only partial and so not release at all. What is preached is, then, ‘the unfinished work of Christ’. Reconciliation requires therefore, the transformation of the rebels and not merely their agreement. Indeed their agreement is part of the giving (Eph. 2:8–9; Acts 5:31; 11:18).

Paul called the cross of Christ which he preached the wisdom of God (1 Cor. 2:2–7). That was because the cross was the point where the moral demand of God’s being confronted the defiance of rebellious humanity and defeated it. This is the thrust of Romans 3:21–26:

But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, ²²the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, ²³since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; ²⁴they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement [a propitiation] by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; ²⁶it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.

¹² P. T. Forsyth, *The Work of Christ*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1994, p. 167.

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By putting forward Christ as a propitiation by his blood, God himself bore the whole of his own holy wrath. We are saved by Christ from the wrath to come (1 Thess. 1:10; Rom. 5:9).

Here is the triumph of the King. The only one who can fill the role of Lion and open the scroll of God's purpose is the slain Lamb. He has conquered (Rev. 5:5)! What is more, in him all humanity has conquered.¹³ In the cross of Christ is the total vindication of God. All that he purposed is now accomplished. The dual τετέλεστοι (*tetelestai*) of John 19:28 and 30 declare this triumph. *All* is now finished (cf. John 1:29)!

After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished [*tetelestai*], he said (in order to fulfill the scripture), 'I am thirsty' . . . ³⁰When Jesus had received the wine, he said, 'It is finished' [*tetelestai*]. Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

Unless God in Christ dealt with the moral distortion of creation then all could not be complete. For that reason, all that Jesus did and said prior to the cross must be seen against that background. Thus, in Matthew 9:2, speaking to the man let down through the roof, Jesus said, 'Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven'. And when dealing with the woman who washed Jesus' feet with her tears, said, 'her sins, which were many, have been forgiven . . . Your sins are forgiven', and identified her love for him as evidence of the internal transforming work which had been done (Luke 7:47–48).

There can be no doubt that Jesus liberated captives prior to the cross. Liberation from the oppression by demonic powers was a startling demonstration of the kingdom of God (Matt. 12:28; Luke 11:20; cf. Exod. 8:19). But mere exorcism proves nothing. Many did it, both inside and outside of Israel.¹⁴ However, without a deeper work being done, nothing was secure (Matt. 12:43–45). The same applied to healings, as in John 5:1–15 where, I believe, the healed man remained quite angry and unreconciled. Yet the healings and exorcisms done by Jesus nonetheless had their power in the atonement (Matt. 8:16–17); without that they would have been no more than a parody of the kingdom.

THE MYSTERY OF THE CROSS

Paul says that he speaks God's wisdom in a mystery (1 Cor. 2:7). In Romans 1:16–17 he indicates that the gospel has power because in it the righteousness of God is revealed. If the cross is the declaration of God's righteousness then it requires a revelation for the effect of the cross to be known. That is, it cannot effect a response through explanation alone.

Indeed, to the human intellect, the word of the cross is foolishness or scandalous, an offence either to the mind or the ego (1 Cor. 1:18–24). That is not to suggest that our presentation should not be rational or explanatory. But it does mean that the effective work of the cross cannot be known unless it is made known, and repentance and faith are given for a person to be enabled to see it.

Arguments for the validity of the resurrection of Christ relate to this. First, the principle was that a genuine 'messiah' would actually 'produce the goods'. Unless

¹³ See study 1, *Christ Our Prophet, Priest and King*, section 'In Christ', pp. 12ff.

¹⁴ See Matt. 12:27; Graham H. Twelftree, *Jesus the Exorcist: A Contribution to the Study of the Historical Jesus*, Hendrickson, Peabody, 1993, pp. 22–47.

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deliverance was effected then the messianic claim was invalid.¹⁵ To all outward appearances Jesus was a dead claimant. However Peter and other early believers were strong in their insistence that ‘God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified’ (Acts 2:36). This assertion was validated by God raising Jesus from the dead, hence the numerous references to ‘Jesus and the resurrection’ within Acts. Arguments for the validity of the faith, using the resurrection of Jesus as a base, have been common in recent apologetics. There is a problem, however, namely that the resurrection itself is a ‘mystery’. The claim that Jesus was raised from the dead could not be validated by producing the risen Christ. Within the New Testament, the resurrected Jesus appeared only to the disciples, to the ‘apostles whom he had chosen’ (Acts 1:2). Even the 500 mentioned in 1 Corinthians 15:6 were all ‘brothers’. To Cornelius, Peter said:

... but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear,⁴¹ not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead (Acts 10:40–41).

How, then, could the gospel which was preached come with power? Even Jesus himself told those arresting him:

When I was with you day after day in the temple, you did not lay hands on me. But this is your hour, and the power [authority, ἐξουσία, *exousia*] of darkness! (Luke 22:53).

The gospel stands as humanly unacceptable, and the cross appears as the triumph of evil itself, as utter defeat and foolishness.

THE MYSTERY OF THE GOSPEL

There is no room for personal boasting when the very heart of the proclamation is foolishness to the hearers. No doubt that lies behind the attempts of many to validate or at least recommend the human preacher to our hearers. But Paul speaks of the mystery of the gospel in Ephesians 6:19, while in the parallel passage in Colossians 4:3 it is the mystery of Christ. The mystery is to be declared yet it is not in the power of any preacher to make it effective.¹⁶ At the same time, the gospel is the power of God for salvation. How can this be?

We must note the content of Paul’s request in Ephesians 6:19:

Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a [λόγος, word] may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel.

The proclamation will be effective as it is a given word. It must not originate from the preacher, just as every effective ‘word’ and ‘utterance’ (ῥῆμα, *rhēma*, Eph. 6:17; Heb.

¹⁵ Josephus, writing only a few years after the New Testament, describes the many ‘messianic’ (not his word) claimants who arose in Judea during the period AD 6–70. All of them died, along with their followers (cf. Acts 5:35–37). See Ian Pennicook, *The Expectation of Signs in Israel A.D. 27–70 in the Writings of Josephus and the Gospel of John*, unpublished M.A. thesis, Macquarie University, 1983.

¹⁶ Col. 4:4 has, ‘so that I may reveal it clearly, as I should’ (NRSV), ‘proclaim’ (NIV), ‘make it clear’ (NASB), ‘make it manifest’ (AV, ASV). The verb used was φανερώω (*phaneroō*): ‘to make visible, clear, manifest or known’ (Abbott-Smith). ‘Reveal’ is probably the least appropriate translation.

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11:3) is from God. Paul's request for prayer for a given word is therefore consonant with living in the mysteries and with being a steward of those mysteries. The effective word is never ours, but is always the word of Christ. 'Faith comes from what is heard and what is heard comes through the word [ῥῆμα, *rhēma*] of Christ'¹⁷ (Rom. 10:17). It goes without saying that the word concerns Christ, but the word *about Christ* is potent because it is the word *of Christ* which is powerful (cf. Mark 2:27, 'a new teaching with authority').

Whether we use language such as 'the Holy Spirit speaks', or 'the word of Christ', in the long run we must say that the power of the gospel lies in the victory of Christ. Just as it has been given to him, as risen, to pour out the Spirit (Acts 2:33), so it is his to declare his own victory. We see the power of the word which issues from his mouth in Revelation 19:15. *All* authority is his (Matt. 28:18), not merely to command but to effect.

The effectiveness of the gospel relates to the purpose of God in Christ. The moral action of the atonement which was finished in the cross is now revealed in the proclamation of the gospel because the victorious King now draws to himself those who are his by right of conquest: 'Everything that the Father gives me *will* come to me' (John 6:37)! The creation is his by birthright (Col. 1:15–16) and as the heavens declare the righteousness of God (Ps. 97:6), righteousness *will* dwell in the new heavens and new earth, starting with those who are in Christ by virtue of election (Eph. 1:3–4) and justification (Rom. 8:28–30). So when the gospel is proclaimed, the righteousness of God is revealed by the transformation of the hearers. There is no *potential* transformation but an actual transformation.¹⁸ The righteous demands of the law are fulfilled in us who now walk according to the Spirit (Rom. 8:4). The righteousness is that of Christ but that does not make us any less righteous. The victory of our King is our victory. If he has defeated the evil powers which depended on our guilt for their grip on us, then we are truly free. If he crucified our Adam, our *old* man, then the body of sin has been rendered utterly powerless and we are no longer slaves to sin (Rom. 6:6). That must be so, since he who died is freed from sin and we died with Christ (Rom. 6:7–8).

Through the ancient imagery of 'shepherd' as a title for the king, we hear Jesus say:

My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand (John 10:27–29).

¹⁷ Some manuscripts have 'of God'.

¹⁸ We may be saved in hope (Rom. 8:24) but we are nonetheless fully saved.