

## Not As A Stranger

At the heart of our Christian faith there are mysteries. Mysteries are things which can neither be explained or nor understood. For example, the Bible teaches us that our God is three persons—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—and yet only one God—a trinity and yet a unity. So God is three and yet God is one. That's a mystery. The Bible also teaches that God wants all people to be saved and that God alone does the saving, and yet not all people are saved. That's a big mystery. Another mystery in the Bible is that Jesus is fully God and also fully human. Theologians call this the dual nature of Christ—that Jesus is both God and man. But that's like saying that someone can be completely wet and completely dry at the same time. By human standards, impossible—but with God all things are possible, so we're left with a mystery. But within this particular mystery there is a hidden treasure—some wisdom which can enrich our faith. So let's go digging! We'll begin with our Gospel lesson for today. In Jesus' final conversation with his disciples before he ascended into heaven, he seems to emphasize his human nature. He says, "While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, 'peace be with you.' they were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. He said to them, 'why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.'" It's interesting that the first thought the disciples had when they saw Jesus was that he was a ghost. They could accept the fact that there were such things as ghosts even though they had never seen one. Yet they couldn't accept the fact that Jesus was physically human even though they saw physical bodies every day. Knowing their confusion and doubts, Jesus gives them additional evidence that he is human. We read, "When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet. And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, "do you have anything here to eat?" They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate it in their presence." Clearly, Jesus wanted them to realize that he was physically present and not some divine hologram. But even though they were filled with "joy and amazement" that he was appearing to them, they still doubted that he was there physically. And their doubts continued right up to the time he ascended into heaven in front of their eyes. But before we criticize the disciples for their weak faith, let's consider the fact that we too have a problem with the physical humanity of Christ. Most Christians are more comfortable with the idea of a divine Jesus than they are with a fully human Jesus. Which is ironic because in the scriptures, Jesus is more often referred to as a son of man rather than the son of God? But you might ask yourself this: if being tempted by immorality is part of human life, and Jesus is fully human, was Jesus tempted by immorality? And the answer is yes. Listen to what it says in the Book of Hebrews: "for we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin." Jesus was not only tempted by satan in the wilderness, he was tempted "...in every

way, just as we are.” Hard—even unpleasant to imagine, but it’s true. Knowing that Jesus is the son of God makes it hard for us to imagine that he was tempted by immorality. It isn’t hard for an atheist to imagine because an atheist thinks of Jesus as only human—if he thinks of him at all. But for us it’s a problem. And not only for us: some of the major heresies that infected the early church stemmed from doubt about Jesus’ dual nature. Arianism taught that Jesus was a created being and not the son of God. Adoptionism taught that he was fully human and was only “adopted” by God. Docetism taught that Jesus had no physical body, but was only a spirit—a “ghost” as the disciples called him. A lot of people over the ages—including biblical scholars have had a problem with Jesus’ dual nature. In any case, knowing that his disciples were struggling to believe the evidence of their senses, Jesus does what he did with the two men on the road to Emmaus: he points them to the Old Testament scriptures and opens their minds so that they could understand them. Then he just gives them the gospel: “this is what is written,” he says: “the Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations...” Like a traveler who returns home from distant lands, Jesus brings his disciples home to the Gospel. The Gospel is God’s pure love for us and there is no mystery about God’s love. That same Gospel—the good news that God would come as a man to redeem men appears in the Old Testament too. It’s the whole point of the *Book of Job*. Job, as you will recall, was a rich and faithful man who was, “blameless and upright” and who “feared God and shunned evil. ”Yet for reasons beyond his ability to fathom, God allowed satan to take away everything job held dear: his possessions, his children and his health. Job is faced with a mystery: why would God, who had blessed him so abundantly in the past, now turn on him and cause him to suffer. The entire *Book of Job* is about Job’s search for an answer to that question. Through it all, Job never wavers in his faith. He knows that there is a God in heaven and he also knows that he has faithfully served that God. He just doesn’t understand why God is allowing him to suffer. His so-called friends try to comfort him by using logic to dispel the mystery. Their arguments all boil down to, “you must have done something to deserve this. “But job knows better: he knows that he has placed his faith entirely in god and that through his faith his sins have been forgiven. So the mystery remains. And then, after a while, a thought enters job’s mind—a thought sent by God. He says, “if there were only someone to arbitrate between us, to lay his hand upon us both, someone to remove God’s rod from me so that his terror would frighten me no more.” What if there were a mediator between God and me? Someone who could take my complaint to God and bring God’s answer back to me? But there is no answer—only silence. And Job’s misery continues. Later another thought comes to him—more daring than the first: what if instead of a mediator, i could have an advocate? Someone who would bring my case before God and affirm my faithfulness and good character?

He says, "Even now my witness is in heaven; my advocate is on high. My intercessor is my friend as my eyes pour out tears to God; on behalf of a man he pleads with God as a man pleads for his friend...give me, o God, the pledge you demand. Who else will put up security for me?" More than a mediator—an advocate would plead his case before God and put up a bond for him. But again, there is no answer: only silence. And Job's misery continues. Finally, Job realizes that he has lost everything—not only his possessions and his children and his health—but all forms of human contact. He cries out: "[God] has alienated my brother from me; my acquaintances are completely estranged from me. My kinsmen have gone away; my friends have forgotten me. My guests and my maidservants count me a stranger; they look upon me as an alien. I summon my servant, but he does not answer, though I beg him with my own mouth. My breath is offensive to my wife; I am loathsome to my own brothers. Even the little boys scorn me, when I appear they ridicule me; all my intimate friends detest me; those I love have turned against me." Job is isolated, alone—an outcast. He has nothing left but God—and his faith. And it is through his faith that God gives him the answer he has been seeking: the sure knowledge that he has a Savior. And so, Job says, "I know that my redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes—and *not as a stranger.*" More than a mediator, more than an advocate, more than a bondsman, Job has a redeemer, a Savior who will one day stand upon the earth and after Job's physical body—his skin and flesh—have been destroyed, yet with his own eyes he will see him. Though he is a stranger to everyone else, he will be no stranger to Christ. The answer to the mystery of Job's suffering is the same answer that Jesus gave his Disciples to the mystery of his presence: the good news of a Savior. A Savior who will one day wipe away every tear from our eyes. Job's suffering and complaints don't end at this point. His "why's" and "why me's" continue even as our "whys" and "why me's" continue as long as we draw a breath. Like Job, we have questions which will go on and on until we meet our Savior face to face. For now he is in heaven where he waits for the Gospel to be preached to all nations. Then He will return and once again He will stand upon the earth. And after these bodies have been destroyed, in our new bodies we will see our Redeemer with our own eyes—and not as a stranger. Amen.