

*Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you,<sup>3</sup> that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly.<sup>4</sup> In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ,<sup>5</sup> which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets.<sup>6</sup> This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.*

*<sup>7</sup>I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power.<sup>8</sup> Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ,<sup>9</sup> and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things.<sup>10</sup> His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms,<sup>11</sup> according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.<sup>12</sup> In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence. (Ephesians 3:2-12)*

### **God's Mystery is Revealed!**

When you hear the word “mystery,” what do you think of? My first thought is a book or TV show. My wife enjoys reading mysteries. We often watch them on TV. But there is another, more basic meaning of the word. A mystery is something that we don't know the answer to. History is full of mysteries. What was the purpose of Stonehenge – the great monument in England? How was it built? What religious and cultural significance did it have? There are theories and some of them are probably accurate. But we can never know for sure because the people who built it and used it didn't leave any written records. In Israel, near the Dead Sea, there's a place called Qumran. At the time of Christ and just before, it was a kind of Jewish monastery. The Dead Sea Scrolls were found nearby. They contain copies of most of the Old Testament and writings about what that sect believed. But there's no description of everyday life there. Several years ago, I heard an archeologist talk about how puzzling some of the artifacts from Qumran are. What were they doing with this or that object? The archeologists can guess. But it's hard to know for sure. That idea of something that we can't know on our own is the idea that's in play whenever the Bible uses the word “mystery.” Today, St. Paul tells us **God's mystery is revealed!**

#### **I.**

What mystery does he mean? Paul says, **“This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.”** What's the point? That God was going to save Gentiles, too? Yes, but the point is actually stronger than that. In Greek, Paul actually says that the Gentiles will be co-heirs, co-members and co-sharers in the promise of Christ. In other words, it's more than just that once all the Jewish people came in, God gave us whatever space was left in heaven. God made us equal to the people who were already Israel. God is using the image of adoption. If someone adopts a child and then dies without a will, the estate will be divided equally between the adopted and the natural children. So the mystery is that we aren't second class citizens in heaven. We aren't after-thought children. We are God's own people, part of the true Israel of God.

Paul says that this mystery **“was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets.”** At first glance, it might seem like Paul is saying is that God didn't tell the people in the generations before the New Testament that the Gentiles would be a part of his people. But that is clearly false. I can point to passage after passage of the Old Testament where God says that he will bring in the nations – which is what the word “gentiles” actually means, the nations, that is those people who are not Jewish. What Paul says is that the mystery is now revealed by the Spirit to the apostles and the prophets. The apostles are New Testament guys like Paul and John and Peter. The prophets are those Old Testament guys like Isaiah and Moses and Jeremiah. God revealed the mystery through them, generations before Paul lived.

So what does it mean that this mystery was not revealed to the other generations? This truth was lost on Israel. They looked down on the Gentiles. The Jews of Jesus' day thought that they were the children of

Abraham, so they would automatically go to heaven. They thought that they had earned the right to sit with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in eternal life because they imagined that they were keeping the Old Testament law. Do you see the two problems they had? First of all, they imagined that Israel was a purely ethnic thing. If you were born into the right family you had the inside track. Then they imagined that they deserved the grace God gave them. They were wrong on both counts. Grace means God's undeserved love. It means a gift he gives us that we can never earn or deserve. It was God's grace that called Israel out of Egypt. It was his grace that caused him to keep coming back to them in generation after unfaithful generation.

And what made them God's people was not their ancestry, but their trust in his grace: their faith. The true Israel of God is all those people who trust in Jesus as their Savior. We are part of his family because God came to us through the gospel and he made us his. In Paul's day, most Jews rejected this truth. But Paul wasn't writing this letter to Jews to correct their false thinking. He was writing to Gentiles to assure them of his grace. God doesn't want us to doubt that we belong to him.

And it's important that you and I remember what a tremendous gift it is to be a part of the people of God. I think one of the devil's cleverest tricks is getting Christians to stop thinking about how much they deserve to go to hell and to start assuming – like the Jews did – that we're the good people, we're the people who should be in heaven. We start to look down on people who obviously live a sinful life. Now, I'm not saying we should accept sin. God calls us to testify to the truth. But he also calls us to welcome all people into his family. Are we prepared to do that? If the prostitutes and sinners of our day starting coming to church here, would they make us uncomfortable? Would we look down on how they dress and how they talk and want to keep our kids away from them? Would we rejoice that they're hearing the gospel or would we be too snooty to have people like that in our church? And what if we started hearing an undertone of Spanish or of Arabic in the conversation before services started? How would we feel about that?

Jesus died for all people. Jesus rose for all people. God calls us to welcome all those who hear the gospel and believe. If we have a problem with people who are different from us sitting in our pews, that's the same sin the Jewish people committed when they looked down their noses at Gentiles like us. If we allow that sin to grow, it could turn into the same unbelief those people showed. It deserves God's punishment in hell forever. But Jesus did die for all people. He died for you and for me. He paid for the pride in our hearts that assumes that we deserve the gospel. He paid for all the ways that we look down on other people and make them feel unwelcome. Then he rose and declared that all that sin and pride were wiped away. God has forgiven us.

Sometimes, though, the problem isn't that we look down on other people. The problem is that we just don't feel worthy ourselves. Most of the congregations Paul served were organized by Jewish converts and then were flooded with Gentiles. Paul used those Jews who knew the Old Testament Scriptures to help the Gentiles learn about God. But some Gentiles must have wondered if they really belonged, at least as much as those Jews who had been worshipping the one true God all their lives. They must have struggled sometimes with how much more Christian those Jews seemed to be.

Do you ever feel that way? Do you look at families that have been members of this church for generations and wonder if your family will ever look like theirs? Do you figure that when we ask for men to serve on boards and committees, we must be talking to people who grew up Lutheran? Do you ever feel like you're an afterthought in our church, because you don't have kids in the school or you didn't go to catechism class or you don't say the common table prayer before meals?

If you have faith, you are a part of the people of God. If you trust in Jesus as your Savior, God chose you to believe before the world began. And he guided the whole history of the world so that Jesus would be born in Bethlehem and die outside Jerusalem and rise on the third day for you. And then he made sure that at just the right moment, the gospel would come to you and you would believe. You have just as much a right to be a part of this church as people whose families have been here for generations. God loves you just as much as people who grew up reciting "Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest." We are all co-hears, co-members of the body of Christ, co-sharers in his promises. That's the secret Paul shares today. **God's mystery is revealed to all creation!**

## II.

How do we solve mysteries? If you take any real mystery in life – who committed a crime or why they built Stonehenge or even some scientific mystery – the approach is the same. People investigate. They put together the clues and try to uncover new evidence and they construct theories and test them. But most of us

here aren't law enforcement officers or scientists or archeologists. We learn about their work later. Someone else solves the mystery and then they tell us.

No one actually solved God's mystery. God told us the answer. He sent Jesus to live and die and rise, but also to preach and call disciples to serve the church when he was gone. And then God inspired those men to give us the New Testament just as he had inspired the prophets to give us the Old Testament. Through those men, God revealed this mystery to us.

St. Paul writes about his part in that work in our reading for today. Paul considered being an apostle charged with carrying the good news about Jesus to us Gentiles to be a gift of God's grace. Now, being a missionary cost him. Repeatedly, he was beaten and whipped for proclaiming the gospel. Cities rioted against him. His enemies got him arrested and he spent at least four years in prison. When he wrote these words, he was under house arrest in Rome, chained to a guard, waiting to be tried by Caesar for that terrible crime of preaching the gospel. And still he considered it a gift of God's grace to carry that good news to the Gentiles.

Paul recognized that he didn't deserve that gift. He called himself the least of all God's people. He wasn't talking about his gifts or abilities. He was talking about his personal history. Paul had been a persecutor of the church. He had tried to stamp out faith in Christ. And then Jesus had appeared to him and showed him the error of his ways and miracle of miracles, called him to go and preach the gospel. Through Paul, God gave us most of the New Testament epistles, so that we can grow in our understanding of the mystery of Christ.

God used Paul – and Matthew and Mark and Luke and a whole host of other people – to give us the Word of God so that we can have a ministry here that proclaims Christ. God established that ministry two thousand years ago. He has called countless men and women to teach and preach so that his people would grow in their faith. Over those two thousand years, the names of most of those men and women have been forgotten. But God sent them all for our benefit. And he gave them this gift of grace: they got to proclaim the good news about Jesus.

But they aren't the only ones who proclaim. God made us into a church so that we can gather together and strengthen one another and pool our resources and then reach out and bring more people to Christ. The Church proclaims. You proclaim. You get to share the gospel with your family, with your brothers and sisters in the congregation, with friends and family outside the Church who need to hear that good news. What God calls ministers to do is the same thing he calls you to do. We just do it in a more formal and public way. But the gospel belongs to the Church, to all of us. We proclaim it and God moves heaven and earth so that sinners hear it and believe it. Even someone like me who has spent almost twenty years doing that cannot say when God's word will convict a sinner and then give them faith and comfort and joy. But I can say that it happens, because I've seen over and over again. Whether you've seen it yet or not, you are a part of what God sent the Church to do. **God's mystery is revealed through the Church and its ministry.**

Life is full of mysteries, of things we can't understand unless someone tells the answer. God, too, gives us many mysteries: Christ, the Son of God and the son of Mary; the Trinity; the way he works through the gospel to give us faith; the end of the world; and many more. But he reveals those things to us for one purpose: to give us faith so that we live forever. We Gentiles belong to him. We are the Israel of God. There is one Church, one people of God, and God uses us to bring more people into that Church. What a blessing! What a mystery! Amen.