

Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, ³ that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. ⁴ In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, ⁵ 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. ⁶ 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.

⁷ I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. ⁸ 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, ⁹ and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. ¹⁰ 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, ¹¹ according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. ¹² In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence. (Ephesians 3:2-12)

Can You Solve this Mystery?

My wife likes to read mystery novels. One of her favorite authors was Sue Grafton who died right after Christmas. She wrote the alphabet mysteries – *A is for Alibi*, *B is for Burglar*, etc. The main character for all of them was the same private detective and last year, “Y” came out. Then she got sick and died. The family made it clear that there will be no “Z” because she hated the whole idea of ghost writers. So I don’t know if she was planning some big finish that would answer all the questions of the twenty-five previous novels and bring her character’s career to a close, but now, the world will never know. Some mysteries can’t be solved.

Personally, I don’t read a lot of mysteries. I’ve read one or two of the alphabet books but I don’t enjoy them as much as my wife does. But I do enjoy a movie mystery. Sometimes, it’s fun to watch it a second time once you know how it ends to see what you missed the first time through. This morning, St. Paul talks to us about a mystery. Now, he’s not talking about a kind of novel or movie, and yet, throughout these verses he acts a little bit like a detective walking us through the solution at the very end. My friends, **can you solve this mystery?**

I.

By definition, you can’t. Neither can I. When God uses the word “mystery” he usually means something that we could never figure out on our own. Some people hate it when the author of a mystery doesn’t tell you everything you need to know to figure out how it ends. I know from watching them with my wife, she almost always knows how it’s going to end. But with God’s mysteries, we can never have all the clues. So God has to solve the mystery for us or we won’t understand it, certainly not here, and maybe not even in heaven. Turning to the specific mystery that Paul is talking about this morning, **can you solve this mystery? St. Paul solves it for us.**

That’s what he says. He talks about us understanding his insight into the mystery of Christ. God called Paul to lay this all out for us, just like those detectives do at the end of a novel or movie. But not because he was so much smarter than we are. He probably was, but even the smartest man on earth would never figure this out on his own. If you had Stephen Hawking or Albert Einstein plugging away at this, they still would never get the answer. They would be like the rest of us speculating about how those alphabet mysteries would’ve ended had the author lived a couple more years. But just like with those books, there are too many things we don’t know to ever get the right answer. St. Paul spent years studying with great Jewish teachers and he never even get close to the right answer.

So how did he find it? Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus and called him to be an apostle. And then Jesus spent years training Paul to be the preacher and teacher and missionary he was. Unlike you and me, Jesus spoke directly to Paul. But not just for his benefit. He spoke to Paul so that Paul could write down the things God wants us to know. Not just you and me here at Peace, but all Christians in every age, until Jesus comes back. God revealed the mystery to us, so there is no question about what the right answer is.

So what is the mystery? 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.”** Now, at first glance, that might not seem like a big deal, but that’s because you already know the answer. In Paul’s day, this was revolutionary. In fact, he 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.”** Before the New Testament era, before God called men like Paul and John and Peter to be apostles and men like Agabus who maybe you haven’t heard of but who was a New Testament prophet, no one solved this mystery. No one could see what God planned for a deeply divided church.

How could that be? God talks about the Gentiles coming in, again and again in the Old Testament. God says that he will bring all nations to the light that shines from Israel. God says that it was too small a thing for Jesus just to save Israel. Throughout the Old Testament, God promised to save the Gentiles. So how could it be true that this mystery was unknown in previous generations?

God said it, but it hadn’t happened yet. And it was impossible to envision it happening. More than that, God didn’t answer all the questions about it. Jesus taught that Israel came first – because that was God’s plan. Even Peter didn’t understand until God made it clear that the things that divided Jews from Gentiles ended in the New Testament Church. What divided them? All those Old Testament laws and regulations. Before the New Testament era, Jewish synagogues were open to Gentiles – but only if they got circumcised and stopped eating pork and starting obeying all the purity laws and so forth. In other words, only if they became Jews. It was entirely possible to believe that Gentiles would see the light of the gospel, but still be second class citizens in God’s kingdom. Because of all those differences, in another place, Paul talks about the dividing wall of hostility between Jews and Gentiles, a real thing then and sadly, even in our world today.

The mystery here is that God would make all people one. There are no second class citizens in the true Israel of God. There is no hostility between different races and peoples. All the Old Testament laws are fulfilled in Christ and so they’re over. To God, there are only two kinds of people: believers and unbelievers. Everyone who trusts in Jesus is now an heir – and that means they have authority in his kingdom. Everyone who believes in what Jesus did for us is now a member of Christ’s body, the church – even though we all have a different role to play. Everyone who clings to Jesus’ death and resurrection now shares in the promise of eternal life.

That matters because we are all Gentiles. We are not going to be second class citizens in heaven. We are not an afterthought in God’s plan. From eternity, God chose us to have faith and he ruled all things so that we heard and believed the message. We have what Paul calls “unsearchable riches” in Christ. We were all strangers and foreigners, but God made us citizens of heaven. We were all racing toward hell as fast as we could go. We believed that we were good people and we deserved to go to heaven. Yet, every day we felt guilty about our sins and we didn’t know what to do about them, except to try harder and to tell ourselves over and over again what good people we really are. We were trapped in that box and we could only drop into hell. But Jesus died and paid for all our sin. He rose to announce that we are forgiven. He rose to send that message to the very ends of the earth so that you and I would hear it, two thousand years later. God solved the mystery so that today, all over the world, people like us know our Savior and look forward to eternal life with him.

That will be the greatest treasure. We will live with Jesus forever. We will know him face to face. We will live in a world where there is no sorrow or sin, no pain or death. We will know only joy and love with Jesus for all eternity. The mystery that we could never have known on our own is that God did all that *for us*, and that was always his plan.

II.

But the plan didn’t end with St. Paul solving the mystery for those Christians in Ephesus who died two thousand years ago. It didn’t even end when Paul wrote it down in this letter. The plan ends when Jesus comes back. Until that time, the mystery has to be solved over and over again – someone has to play the detective who sits everyone down at the end of the movie and walks them through what really happened. By God’s plan, that someone is you and me. **Can you solve this mystery? We solve it for the world.**

Paul says, **“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, and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things.”** Paul’s primary call was to people like us. God can do math. He always understood that at no time in history

were the Jewish people more than two or three percent of the whole world's population. So God always planned to send the gospel out to the rest of us. Paul was the linchpin in that plan.

But the plan didn't stop there. Paul says, “[God’s] **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, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.**” Through the church, the manifold wisdom of God is made known. The Greek word translated as “manifold” really means “many-sided.” God’s wisdom is many-sided and you see it when you see what he does with people. When you see babies baptized, when new families in our school tell me that their children talk about Jesus and their Christlight lessons and how much those parents are learning about Jesus through that, that’s the many-sided wisdom of God. When a world missionary tells us what’s happening in Africa or South America or India, it’s amazing. When a troubled, guilty person comes into my office and I assure them that Jesus died and paid for them, and they take comfort in that, when I stand next to the bed of a dying Christian and I remind them that Jesus is taking them home and they find peace in that, when a couple forgives each other because God has forgiven them and they renew their marriage vows – all those things are the many-sided wisdom of God, working in the gospel.

But there’s another part to this many-sided wisdom of God: every time we share what Jesus did, God does a miracle. God has hidden his power in words, in a message so simple that 1st graders can explain it to unchurched parents. Yet, you and I will continue to discover new treasures in that message until we see Jesus. God works when we pull our Bibles off the shelves. God works when we kneel here and receive the body and blood of Christ in, with and under those little tastes of bread and wine in communion. God works every time you confess your sins and I announce your forgiveness, and in every sermon and Sunday school lesson and adult Bible study that reminds us that Jesus died and rose and wiped all our sin and guilt away. Only God could have planted the greatest power in the universe in such simple things.

God uses us to share that message with the world. God’s wisdom solves the mystery of death and hell and makes our children and our friends and neighbors part of that one great people of God. So share it with them! But did you notice who else the church solves the mystery for? Paul said that it is “**made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms.**” What does he mean by that? Angels. We’ve heard this message so many times that it’s easy for us to get bored with it. But the angels are always amazed at what God did to bring us home to heaven. Every time one of us comes to faith, we reveal the many-sided wisdom of God to them. And when we rise, the angels will gather us to eternal life. I wonder if they’ll tell us then what amazing miracles we really are?

Because we are. That is the point. It’s a mystery that defies all explanation, but you are a child of God. You matter to him. He loves you as much as he loves anyone else on earth. Today, the divide in the church isn’t so much between Jews and Gentiles, as it is between people of different skin colors and ethnic backgrounds. But in the Church we are all one. It doesn’t matter if you’re white or black. It doesn’t matter if you went to college or never learned to read. It doesn’t matter if you stand up here and preach a sermon or if you serve the Lord by cleaning the school. God loves us all. God has made us all one. You matter to him as much as I do, as much as St. Paul did, and he sent Jesus to die and rise for you. That is the mystery. And even though it’s solved, it’s worth reading and hearing over and over again, because the many-sided wisdom of God amazes us and fills our hearts with faith. Amen.