

Now to him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past,²⁶ but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey him—²⁷ to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen.(Romans 16:25-27)

Why does God Reveal this Mystery?

Are there things that you just don't get about your spouse? Hopefully, that person you married is not a complete mystery to you. Even though my wife and I have been married for over twenty years, every once in a while she'll say to me, "I never knew that!" Your spouse's story unfolds for you over the time that you spend together. Even after twenty years, there are still things to discover. God often compares his relationship to the Church to a marriage. He is the bridegroom and the Church is the bride. Over the thousands of years that God has had a relationship with his bride, he has gradually unfolded the story of his plan for us. It took 1600 years to get from Genesis to Revelation. None of us could know God's story without his sharing it. What God is, what he wants, what he plans to do for us would be a complete mystery without his gospel message. So God explained it to us. This morning, St. Paul closes the book of Romans with a brief word of praise to God for doing that. To share that praise, we need to understand his point. **Why does God reveal this mystery?**

I.

Very simply, **to strengthen our faith.** St. Paul praises God "**who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ.**" What does it mean to "establish" us? That's kind of strange thing to say about a person. We sometimes say that someone has become well established and we mean that they're financially secure, but that isn't what Paul is talking about. The Greek word that he uses here means to enable us to stand firm. Paul is talking about our faith. In one sense, our faith was established when God gave it to us. That's when it began. He gave it to us by revealing the mystery, that is, through the gospel, the proclamation about Jesus Christ. That was true for the Roman Christians that Paul was writing to and it will be true for everyone who ever comes to faith until the Lord returns.

But the people Paul was writing to originally were already believers, just like us. He praises God because he can still establish them. He can still make them stand firm in that faith that he gave them. As I was thinking about this word, I thought of those TV reporters that you see whenever a hurricane strikes someplace like Florida. They go out to the ocean or downtown in some city, dressed in their rain slickers. You can see the rain coming down in sheets. It's almost horizontal because the wind is blowing so fiercely. They often give you a shot of a stoplight blowing sideways and huge waves breaking over a beach. Often, you can see those reporters struggling to stand up against those incredible winds. In a really big storm, the time comes when they just can't report from a place like that anymore because they can't stay on their feet.

We are like those reporters trying to stand firm against hurricane force winds – not literally, of course, but spiritually. St. Paul is praising God because he can make us Christians stand firm against all the storms and hurricanes of this life. What winds are we trying to stand in? Certainly, every pain and sorrow of this life presents a spiritual storm for us. When we lose our jobs, when the doctor has bad news for us, when people we love are hurt or die, the winds rise against our faith. The devil whispers in our ears that we don't deserve this and if God were really out there, he'd never let this happen to us. When persecution comes and we suffer because we're Christians, when our own family members make it clear that they expect us to put them ahead of what God says, we have trouble standing firm in a spiritual headwind. And when temptation stalks us, when our sinful hearts want to do things that we know God forbids, when our faith is too weak to walk in God's footsteps and we give in and sin, our faith is in a hurricane that could pick it up and dash it against the rocks. We could die spiritually.

But Paul praises God who is able to establish us. God can make us stand, no matter how great the spiritual hurricane we face. God does that through the gospel, through the message about Jesus Christ. That is such an important truth. We cannot stand up against the devil and the evils of life in a sinful world by ourselves. We can't even beat the sinner in our hearts by our own strength. Too often, we try to. Too often, we think that if we just try harder, if we're just more disciplined, we will do better. But we're sabotaged by our own sinful

weakness. It would be like that weather reporter standing out there in the storm with a bad knee. He wouldn't be able to dig in against the wind. He wouldn't be able to put his weight on it without it giving way. Our will power and self-discipline are broken by sin. Even though we are believers and we have a new man inside us who fights against sin and wants to stand firm in trouble and sorrow, the sin in our hearts betrays him over and over again.

What can we do? Flee to Jesus. He is able to make us stand. And he does that by reminding us what he has done for us. Jesus lived the perfect life that we can never live. All his life a spiritual hurricane raged around him. His enemies never gave him any peace. His life was hard and poor and often lonely. His brothers didn't believe in him. His father seems to have died when he was young. The devil came at him relentlessly to get him to sin. Even his own disciples tried to turn him away from his true path. Jesus once called Peter "Satan" when he tried to do just that. But Jesus stood firm in the storm. His perfect life makes us perfect in God's sight. In our baptism, God clothed us with Jesus. We are holy now, as far as God is concerned. And that holy Jesus lives in us now. He gives us strength.

That Jesus died and paid for all the times the wind blew us over. He died and paid for how little self-discipline and will power we sinners can show. His blood washes away the guilt of that sinner we were born with – that is the promise of Jesus' resurrection. Jesus lives and we are holy. Jesus lives and every time we hear that good news, God works in our hearts to establish us, to strengthen us so that we can stand firm against those hurricanes that never stop coming. How much more strength will you need in life? How much higher will the winds get? How many more hurricanes are coming? You and I can't know. Only God does. Come to him and fill up on that gospel message and let God make you stand.

II.

What Jesus did for you and me, he did for all people everywhere. The history of God's relationship with his people is the history of his unfolding that love. No one is born knowing Christ. No nation begins as believers. Jesus has to come in the gospel and show his love. He has to reveal the mystery. Paul was praising God because he wants to unfold that mystery to all people everywhere. **Why does God reveal this mystery? To bring all nations to faith.**

Last week, we heard from Peter that God wants all people to come to repentance. Today, Paul says that God revealed this mystery "**so that all nations might believe and obey him.**" The consistent message of the Bible is that God wants everyone to get to heaven. Jesus died and rose to pay for all the sins of the people who will ever live. But Paul points out that this truth was a "**mystery hidden for long ages past.**" What does he mean? God's plan to send Jesus to die and rise was something that he conceived of before the world began. God knew Adam and Eve would sin. God knew that you and I would sin. So he came up with the perfect plan to get us to heaven. But that plan was hidden in his mind and heart until he revealed it.

He began to reveal it on the day that Adam and Eve sinned. He promised the Seed of the Woman, a human being who would crush the devil's head but who would die in the process. He promised Jesus. Down through the ages, God worked in what Peter calls "**the prophetic scriptures**" to further reveal that plan. To Abraham, to Moses, to Isaiah and Micah and Jeremiah and Malachi and the rest of the Old Testament prophets, God doled out the details his plan to send the son of a virgin, who would be the mighty God, who would be born in Bethlehem and who would die for our sins but then rise, who would preach and teach and heal and later judge the world. God showed them that Jesus was coming. He revealed the mystery.

But most of what he did through those prophetic scriptures, he did for one people, Israel, in one postage stamp sized country. For the rest of the world, the plan was still hidden in darkness. But already in the Old Testament, God began to reveal that mystery to the gentiles. When Christ came, that process increased. After Pentecost God gave the New Testament scriptures and sent preachers across the face of the globe. Today, there is no nation that does not have that message. A couple of weeks ago, I heard a presentation by the publishers of the NIV Bible. They told us that they are in the process of producing high quality Bible translations for the 100 most spoken languages on earth. I suspect that if they succeed in that endeavor, they will easily cover ninety percent of the population of the world. God continues to reveal that mystery.

Why? Because he wants all nations to believe in him. Last week, when I spoke about God's desire that all people would come to repentance, I also mentioned that God knows it's not going to happen. I mentioned in passing the truth that God has chosen those who will believe. After church, a couple of people asked me about that. There is a paradox here that's impossible for us to understand. We simply have to accept what God says,

which can be difficult for us to do. God is all powerful. God knows everything. God wants all people to be saved, as he says here again today. That is his will. And anyone who comes to faith, comes because God gives that person their faith. But not everyone will be saved. Many people have rejected Christ and many more will, and that will continue until he returns. If they don't believe, it is totally their own fault. How can both of those things be true?

I don't know. We believe because God chose us to believe before the world began and because he sent Jesus to live and die and rise for us. We believe because he sent the gospel to us personally and established our faith and he has continued to enable us to stand firm against the hurricane. It's all his doing. Those who go to hell will die because of their own sin and unbelief. They will die in spite of God's real desire that they be saved. I cannot explain to you how both those things can be true.

But God did not reveal these truths to give us headaches. He calls us to accept what he says and to see the comfort and the joy in it. You and I were chosen before the world began. You and I have God's promise that Jesus did all that we need. You and I heard the gospel and God gave us faith and God promises that no matter how hard this life gets, he will make us stand. You and I are sent by God to share that good news with the whole world, knowing that when we personally proclaim it, God works. When we support missionaries who proclaim it, God works. When we send that message out, we are doing the work God gave us to do. He wants all people to hear and believe. Rejoice in what he is doing. Rejoice in how he reveals the mystery, even while we admit that there are still parts of the mystery that are hidden in darkness. God understands all the mysteries. And we trust in him.

I hope that my wife and I continue to learn more about each other. But when we've been married fifty years instead of twenty, will there still be times when she says to me, "I never knew that!"? I don't know. Maybe some of you who've been married a little longer can tell me. Even if there are always more mysteries to decipher, I hope that the basic truths of our love and commitment to each other will remain, even though by then that won't be a new story. We all know the basic truth of the mystery of God. He has unfolded the story of his love for us in Christ. The Bible is finished and it has gone to all the world. But God is still dealing with each of us personally. The mystery of his love in Christ is what makes us stand firm and it is his power to bring all nations to faith. Hear that mystery and share it. Amen.