

My dad is not a fan of surprise birthday parties. He's not really a fan of birthday parties at all. I called my mom on her birthday, New Year's Day, and was talking with him kidding that he might never see the surprise coming. See my dad turned sixty years old last June. He specifically told my mom not to throw him a surprise party and to make sure no one else did either. But I told him he would never see the surprise coming if the party was this year when he turned sixty one. He responded as expected that the only surprise would be that he wouldn't be there.

God speaks of a surprise this morning, described as a mystery. It's not the birthday of his Son. That isn't a mystery we just celebrated it less than two weeks ago. No the surprise, the mystery, is something going back further. Something that wasn't known for a long time. Something that's a mystery because without God giving it away it would still be a mystery.

Paul in the second lesson shares with us the revelation of this mystery. He gives us enough that we can actually say...

**What's the mystery?
Clearly known through Christ
Direct access to God because of Christ**

It's always been clear that my dad is not into parties. We've never even tried to throw him a surprise birthday party. Knowing my dad he would leave. He's someone who likes to know as much as possible what's going to happen. I am too for that matter. A lot of people are. That makes the mystery of God something that drives many people crazy. No one can know everything about God. There are things he just hides, keeps mysteries. God's eternal nature does mean that his will has been set for a long time. From eternity God simply kept the details hidden. Through the Old Testament no one knew the full story. In time God made things clearer to humanity. Paul said, **"Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation."** Paul considered it a gift of God's grace being called on to let people know what the mystery of God was and let people see God's grace.

Talk about hard to believe. Paul was given a piece of information from God that in large part had never been heard before but was always true. Without it, people had the impression only certain ones were chosen by God to be part of his special group of people. Everyone assumed these Israelites would be the only ones going to heaven. It's like thinking only good people get good things. Or thinking that the people who try hard and are better than most will go to heaven. Paul originally bought into that idea too. Since he was a better Jew than any other Jews growing up he liked the idea of only Jews going to heaven. But it wasn't true, it had never been true. God revealed first to Paul, the mystery was no longer a mystery. People outside of Israel could also be saved.

Do you find it difficult to believe someone when both the message and the messenger seem unbelievable? Take me standing before you. Week after week I preach a message. But what gives me the right? I'm no better than you. I have sins from my past and my not so distant past that I wouldn't want anyone to know about, just like you do. And when you talk with your friends and neighbors they might quickly respond asking what gives you the right to question their actions or call them sinful. They maybe even question how you can be so sure given what you've done. The accusing finger never feels good. I know, I don't like it either. And then take the message. Each week its bold statements calling you and me sinful, saying we deserve hell, but declaring those sins forgiven. I don't make those statements, God does about you and me. But come on you might ask, all sins? What about a person accepting it? What about free will? What about the really bad people or the really bad sins?

Nothing changed with God this week so nothing in my message changes. I still stand before you a humble sinner. I still announce to you the mystery of God, a mystery clearly known because God gives insight. God reveals what's on his mind and heart. God opens himself up to us. You can read it and hear it for yourselves what he did for someone like Paul, who admitted he was worse than you or me. **"I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. 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."** The mystery is really centered on a promise. God never gets away from his promise, one he made from the very beginning, for you and me and everyone. The promise that he would send a Savior. Christ is the most important aspect of this plan. God worked the entire plan so that it would happen through Christ. Through Christ perfection is achieved. Through Christ life wins over death. Through Christ it applies to all people.

When you hear the truth about this mystery, that God saves all people through Christ Jesus and that those who believe in him are free of their sins and going to heaven, all who hear that and believe are unified. From all over the globe there is a togetherness among believers in Christ. **"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 of Christ Jesus."** We are heirs inheriting the same blessings of forgiveness, life, and peace with God. Together called members of one body. Like Magi from the east visiting little Jesus to worship him as their king, so many different people from different countries, different cultures, and different languages all get interlocked together in one body of Christ with him as the head. And together we all share the same promise. One promise from God for you and for me. One promise from God that we know what the mystery is through Christ and can believe it. We are saved through Christ by the gospel according to his grace.

When you throw a surprise party it's important that eventually the one you're trying to surprise comes. If the one with the birthday stays away it doesn't work as a surprise party. God can seem far away, almost not real. His plan can seem not real. We can't verify or touch God. Only what we see and hear can be real. God kept this mystery, his plan to save people, so well hidden that even the angels didn't know the plan. It was an amazing plan no one would have dreamt up. No one would have put two and two together. But God did want it known so he made it known. He showed his glory, put his wisdom on display, and received rightful praise and honor from angels and humans for riches and blessings beyond compare.

Before the mystery was revealed Jews were going through priests to talk with God. Non-Jews had no access at all. If they wanted anything from God or wanted to talk with him they had to become Jewish or go through Jews. Things existed that way because sinners could never have access to God. Sinners who have ruined the relationship with God don't get to pretend like that relationship still exists. Today not one of us deserves to speak with God whenever and about whatever we want. We aren't worthy to pretend that a relationship exists with God when our sins have broken that relationship.

With the arrival of a Savior though there's a new direction. As God's promises become fulfilled like with the baby Jesus being born into the world, the mystery is goes from hidden to revealed. This new direction isn't new in time, it's new in that we are now hearing about what God always planned. God's saving plan in Christ always included Jews and Gentiles. It was a plan to bring all people into a relationship with him so they wouldn't have to pretend to have a relationship, they actually would have direct access. So many blessings come from the Savior Jesus. One specific blessing is that Jesus gives us the direct access to God that God always wanted us to have.

That's because God's plan was eternal. The mind and heart of God desired to see grace provided to all people. The gospel reveals that grace has been provided. ***"In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence."*** Freedom comes because Christ Jesus has removed all your sins. His birth made him like you. Jesus on the cross carried all your sins for you. Because of Jesus Christ you're freed of your sins. Free from that burden you can come before God confident because Christ hasn't left the work undone. He completed it. What you could never do alone Jesus did. He accomplished it and promises you that through him you have a loving connection with a merciful Father. No in between is needed, just Jesus.

Speak with confidence about anything at any time. Quick prayers during poor weather for safe travel, God wants to hear those. Prayers before tests or assignments, God wants to hear those. Boldly go to God with your praise when good things happen and when difficulties happen too. Show the freedom and the direct access you have to approach God because of Christ.

I grew up not making a big deal over birthdays. When I worked in an office I didn't go out of my way to tell people it was my birthday. I didn't try to keep it secret either. The mystery God kept hidden for all those years was never intended to remain hidden. God revealed it, and it was big. Grace from God is for all people through Christ. Freedom, joy, and peace are free to all people because of Christ. The mystery is over. Let's not keep it hidden. Let's enjoy it and share it.