

2 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 people 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 the Lord's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless 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 that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. 12 In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.

## **Mysterious Ways**

The Lord works in mysterious ways. You've probably heard it a time or two and or you've spoken the words when it comes to comforting another Christian, "God works in mysterious ways." What we mean by such a statement is that God's ways are beyond explanation. We can't understand it. He is God and we are not. God knows all, sees all, and controls all - our knowledge, sight, and control are limited. Like the Magi who came to Jerusalem asking, "*Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?*" They could see the signs in the heavens, they knew what others did not know but they didn't know the mind of God, and the truth is no one ever could.

We make plans sometimes they are scrapped or changed but God's plans are perfect, there are never any unforeseen accidents. It may seem like things get in the way all the time, a gunman takes out three people in southern california, children are born outside of marriage, cars break down, jobs are lost.

Was this part of God's plan? Maybe, "God works in mysterious ways"? We may trust that, we may say that, but it is not so easy to see. Paul talks about a few things that we never

would have seen or been able to understand if they had not been explained to us. Paul shows us that God's plan although mysterious has been revealed to you and you are part of his plan.

But if you're looking over the Old Testament you might be thinking that the Gentiles were some sort of accident. God's plan for salvation involved a select group of stubborn people. The promise was first given to Abraham and it was said, "*To your descendants I give this land....*" (*Genesis 15:18*). *They will be as numerous as the sands on the seashore.*

What about us? God continued reaffirming that promise to his people Israel. On Sinai he made a covenant (a contract) with them. They were his own people. No one else belonged to them, almost every single promise was for the benefit of this one nation, one race. They were special. He set them apart as his nation. He gave them, laws, diets, temples, rules for worship. Only Jews were allowed to enter the temple any non-jew was considered unclean. Even the manger scene is entirely Jewish. There were no other nations in attendance. And the promise, "Peace to his people," refers to God's people. .

So where are the Gentiles in this, waiting to be let in? Second class citizens. Provisions were made for Gentiles, but they were not on equal footing. God works in mysterious ways? Peter has to be publicly rebuked when he refuses to sit with Gentiles and this after God has given him a revelation from God that declared, "*Don't call unclean what I have made clean.*" This is the reason why Paul has been put in prison. He's away from the Ephesian congregation for some five years, all because of an accusation in Acts 21. Paul is accused of bringing Gentile into the temple. A riot breaks out and they were going to kill him had it not been for the Roman guard. They stop the riot and allow Paul to address the people. They carefully listen to him as he speaks in Aramaic of his conversion and their history right up until he stated that he had been sent by God to the Gentiles. They're upset that Paul revealed this mystery across cultures. That set them off. They would have lynched him there on the spot had it not been for the intervention of the Roman guard. It was because of this great message that Paul was a prisoner. The Lord works in mysterious ways?

Paul writes, "*This mystery is that through the gospel Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus. 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.*"

God always had you in mind. From the very beginning. The mystery is that it has not always been so obvious. It does not need human investigation. It needs divine revelation. Paul wants us assured, you were part of the plan from the very beginning, "*His intent was now,*

*through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known... according to his eternal purposes.*” God began revealing his plan from the very beginning. It wasn’t that he first started with the Jews and that failed. But the Gentiles were always a part of God’s plan, even though for centuries it was a mystery. Listening to this could leave one thinking pretty highly of themselves, “God’s been thinking of me since the beginng of time? And why not?” Instead of confessing with Paul, “I am the least of all God’s people... cheif of sinners,” we may make the mystery obvious, Why wouldn’t God want me? People should be more like me. I’m the one church should be modeled after. But as soon as the culture begins to shift, not doctrinally, but culturally - as soon as a change occurs - we no longer want to sit with the Gentile and the childiish threats are thrown about, “I’m going to leave.” The only mystery that I can’t explain is why God would want such a group of people like us.

If God put so much planning and forethought into us, how much time do we give him? Instead it’s only ever about us from the, “I didn’t care for that...Worship just didn’t do anything for me today,” We’re not here to worship you or me. But we often only ever worship ourselves. We’re often self-centered. We only know how to serve one person every minute of every days and it’s not God. It should be a mystery that God would save you, not someone else. God had a plan for that as well. He knew how we would be and how we would act and he planned for it.

It shouldn’t have been that surprising, because this mystery is consistent with the Old Testament that Peter and the rest of the Jews should have been familiar with. God’s promise to Abraham states, *“All peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”* (Genesis 12:3). Not just Jews, extended family, but all nations. Every tribe, language, nation, and people. Even our Christmas lessons from Isaiah record, *“It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel i have kept, I will also make you a light to the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach the ends of the earth.”* (Isaiah 49:6). The pieces were there. Even the temple was to serve as a beacon of hope for the surrounding nations.

They should have known what God would do but what they couldn’t understand was the how God would accomplish this. God slowly revealed bit by bit his plan. When the time had fully come God sent his Son into the world. Little by little we see Jesus making his way around. Jesus will enter predominantly Gentile areas and do healings there as well. Jesus is going right into the heart of Gentile Country and he is healing people and goes on to feed the 4000. Look how he treated them. Overturning the money changers tables and driving animals out of the Gentile courts so that they too could worship. He did more than stand up for them he gave his life for all. God works in mysterious ways bringing about justice for sin and forgiveness for the sinner. And if that weren’t enough Jesus rose from the dead, ascended into heaven, and now rules the world for the good of his church.

He sent out his apostles and prophets to “*make disciples of all nations.*” He called a persecutor of the church, a violent man, Paul and “*the administration of God’s grace was given to him.*” It’s almost as if Paul is saying, “I’m God’s gift to mankind,” but not quite. Rather than focus on the messenger Paul places all attention on this mystery revealed to the ages. This is all God’s doing. All God’s Work. All God’s revealing, sending the Holy Spirit, converting. This insight and understanding have come from God. Paul did not plan up these things on his own. He couldn’t have. Rather, God revealed them to him and now they share what they themselves have received. Paul is a prisoner of Christ. He is bound and held captive by his word. While he may be a prisoner of Rome, Paul understood who was really in control even if he couldn’t explain how or of what benefit his confinement was for the church. In some ways I see it as Paul’s opportunity to write these letters for our benefit.

It shouldn’t be that surprising to us, because we have the Old and New Testament. We are Gentiles. All nations of the earth have been blessed through Abraham and his descendant. All the pieces have fallen into place and we are a part of it. This was planned long ago, from the beginning of time. God’s plan was that through the gospel you and I would be heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise of Jesus Christ.

But it’s not so obvious to others. There are still so many who have not heard and do not know what God has done for them. You’re forgiven. You’ve been brought into his family by means of his baptism. God continues to strengthen us through his Word and Sacrament. He’s done that for you. He’s given you forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. Not because of any merit or worth that you bring to the table but because of God. You know that. Others don’t. .

God chose Paul even though he was a violent man. God chose you even though you are a sinner. Each and every one of us can say the same thing as Paul, “I am the chief of sinners.” But the power of the Gospel does not come from us. It comes from God. You might worry, “How will I know what to say?” Read his word and you will be able to understand the insight of Paul. God to the word. It has the answers even when you do not. We may not understand God’s plan for this world, all we know is that our thoughts are not his thoughts, neither are our ways his ways.

Whether your plans are scrapped and you are comforted with, “God works in mysterious ways.” or your plans flow as well as you have planned, remember God’s plans included you. While it may be a mystery why God chose you remember he chose me, he also chose Paul. This Epiphany season God reveals his plan for our salvation as it starts and ends with his Son. Amen.

