

***<sup>25</sup> 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, <sup>26</sup> 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— <sup>27</sup> to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen. <sup>(NIV84)</sup>***

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## **A MINISTRY OF MYSTERY**

Do you like stories about spies? Spy movies and novels are pretty good, but sometimes the real life stories are even better. If you ever get a chance to visit Washington DC, you have to find, only a few blocks from the White House, the International Spy Museum. In the Spy Museum, you walk around and watch clips and see artifacts and learn tactics that were used by spies from our country and around the world. There are stories of spies from the Cold War and even earlier, as well as some displays about spying in our not so distant past.

I think it's the unknown that is intriguing. There is so much about the spying world that is unknown and that's what draws people in. Can you imagine how exciting life would be as a spy? Your job and your whole life – a mystery.

### **1. A Ministry of Mystery Begins**

The Apostle Paul, who penned the book of Romans, and thus our sermon text, lived and carried out a Ministry of Mystery – at least it started out that way! Now I am not trying to tell you that Paul was a spy, but what I am trying to say is that the fact that Paul even was a missionary was a real head scratcher to many. “Paul, the one that was trying to kill Christians just a month ago, that Paul is a missionary now?” The one that was trying to destroy the faith of Christians is now one of us?” Really? Kind of a mystery!!

You can see the mystery that Paul was to the early church, from early on. Many didn't believe him. Barnabas had to vouch for Paul to let the Apostles know that Paul was one of them now. It was only then the Apostles met him and offered him their blessing.

Paul's ministry, given him by God's grace, was a mystery even to himself at times. That God would use him, an enemy of the Church, to proclaim his love was a mind boggling thought for him. In one place he said, ***For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God*** (1 Corinthians 15:9). Later he said ***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*** (Ephesians 3:8). He humbly encouraged young pastor Timothy with these words <sup>15</sup> ***Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst*** (1 Timothy 1:15).

Yet, God chose him. God chose him for his kingdom. God chose him for his public ministry. Why? It's a mystery...but it was God's loving plan.

The same could be stated about us! Why are you a Christian? Is it because you were such a good person before? Is it because you are a Super Christian and are always doing the right thing. IS it

## Romans 16:25-27

because you are better than anyone else? It's none of those reasons. Like Paul, we were born in sin. Like him we were enemies of God and hostile to his desires. But God called us from that life into the lives that we now enjoy through faith. God chose us. Why? Who knows? It's a mystery? But we can be glad that he did. We can be glad that God has offered us his unfathomable grace and that we have heaven as a result.

### II. A Ministry of Mystery-Revealed

Paul's ministry had a mysterious beginning. It was a humble, God-appointed, grace-filled, 180 degree turn around in Paul's life that began it. God could have chosen anyone to be a missionary in his Church, but he chose Paul. A glorious mystery? But you know, *mystery* isn't really just how Paul's ministry began, it's really what Paul's ministry was really about. ***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, but now revealed.***

Paul's ministry was a mystery ministry. It was a ministry devoted to declaring the mystery - solved, the hidden - revealed, all by our loving God.

Unravel the Old Testament scroll in your head for a few moments and consider how it really is the story of a mystery being slowly revealed. The Old Testament really is like a curtain that is slowly pulled so that more and more and more can be seen. God comes to new sinners Adam and Eve and tells them how God is going to crush the serpent's head through Eve's offspring. We have New Testament 20/20 vision to know what he is talking about, but did you ever wonder what Adam and Eve thought about that. Abram was told that his offspring would be countless like the sand and the stars, but he had no children. A mystery? Judah was told that the scepter would not be removed from between his feet until the one comes to whom it belongs. What scepter? Whose is it? What? David was promised that his kingdom would last forever! Forever? Really Lord, how? Isaiah told King Ahaz that God would offer an amazing sign – ***the virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son!*** That not how babies are born! The prophets got together to proclaimed of Jesus that he would be from Bethlehem, from Nazareth, and that he would come from Egypt. What a convoluted mystery?!? Until it was revealed, that is! ...***according to the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed.***

***When the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons*** (Galatians 4:4). When God's timing was perfect, when the players were in the right spots, and the rulers on the right thrones, God pulled back the curtain and set in motion his plan of salvation. He sent his Son into Mary's womb, and sent the devil reeling! God sent sins packing, as he sent his Son to our world to be the victor. He had revealed bits and pieces of what that might look like and how that might go down, but that night in Bethlehem, he threw back the curtain, the angelic spot lights shone their light on the main event and the show began. The angels sang, the shepherd ran, the parents clutched their new gift from God, a gift not just for them, but for the whole world. Even to them, it had been a mystery, but now it was revealed.

That was the content of Paul's ministry. "The mystery has been revealed. The prophecies have been fulfilled. God's promises are coming true! Believe the Good News!!" That was so much Paul's message that he calls it his gospel. It's the gospel that he lived to proclaim about the Savior that he lived

to proclaim. **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,<sup>26</sup> but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God,**

Paul's ministry was a ministry of revealing that mystery for all to see. He wanted everyone to know what God has revealed to him. He traveled the world, **so that all nations might believe and obey him.**

This whole section is what we would call a doxology. You maybe have heard the song, **Praise God from Whom All Blessings Flow** called The Doxology. That's a big Greek word that really means "words of praise." Paul oftentimes will break his train of thought, sometimes even leaving sentences unfinished, to shout, to sing the praises of our God. He was so thankful that the mystery was revealed to him that he sometimes couldn't wait to praise God for it!

Are we always that eager to praise God? Do we rejoice in his Word and seek to spend as much time as we can having more and more mysteries revealed to us? Or are we content to know the basics? Do we treat God's Word like the precious treasure that it is, or do we act as if we deserve it and that it just belongs to us as a right? We take our faith for granted and fail to strive to grow in the faith like we should. It's not outbursts of praise that are heard in our lives, but rather outbursts of complaints and grumblings. It's not worship and obedience that we are so eager to offer, but rather self-service and rebellion is what we offer.

We should speak words of praise to our God every day, and every day that we do not is evidence that our priorities are lousy and our focus skewed. We long for the unimportant and trivial in this world and we leave the valuable and priceless treasures lay. We put the important spiritual things on the back burner and for that we deserve to be on God's back burner. Literally we deserve to be out of God's attention and on the burner of hell for our blatant disregard for him and his Word. For this disregard of our God, we ought to be disregarded by him. We ought to be left out in the cold and off the list in the book of life. We deserve to be punished, we deserve pain, we deserve hell!!

But the mystery is, the glorious mystery is, that our God is more interested in forgiveness than fairness. He doesn't seek to rough us up or to shake us down until we can pay the debt we owe him for our sins. Instead he provides the payment. He gives us Jesus, our Great High Priest who has become the sacrifice in our place. He was born to live for us, born to die for us. **When the time had fully come,** Jesus paid our sin debt and washed us clean in his blood. When God was ready the mystery of grace was revealed.

God opens our eyes to that revelation through faith. As we meditate on his Word, the curtain is peeled back even further. In Holy Baptism we are cleansed and reconciled to our God. How can water do such awesome things? It's a mystery, but through faith a mystery revealed. In the forgiving gospel of the Lord's Supper, we see and hear and touch and taste a wonderful miracle - working forgiveness of sins and strengthening of faith. A big job for a thin wafer of bread and a half a sip of wine. How can this be called a feast? A mystery, but one revealed to us through our Savior's love. His holy Word and sacraments reveal to us more each time we receive it, the mystery of our life through his death!

## Romans 16:25-27

And with that faith growing and our relationship with him being strengthened, our resolve to continue in his way grows too. The more we think and live and pray to God, the more eager we are to praise him with Paul by saying Glory to God –the more doxologies we will strive to offer to our holy God!! The more our hearts fill with joy that can't be contained the more we want to tell the world that the mystery has been revealed. And then by his gospel grace, he puts the curtain in our hands and gives us the privilege of pulling it back in the lives of those around us. We get to watch faith grow in another heart. We get to work in his kingdom. We get to be the ones that can change a person's life forever. He's done that for us and now let's us be a part of doing it for others. Now that's a reason to worship him! That's a reason to sing his praise!!

What was once a mystery to us has been revealed! Praise God! Praise God and never forget the **Ministry of Mystery** that he calls you to! An unlikely candidate, a forgiven sinner, a minister of his mysteriously marvelous grace. With your life, in his help and confidence, go carry out what he's called you to – a **Ministry of Mystery** – mystery revealed in Jesus! Paul had it right! The Angels had it right! Glory to God in the Highest!! Alleluia! Amen.