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Festival of Epiphany – Ephesians 3:2-12 – The Mystery Revealed
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Sometimes Christian people say this almost as a concession: God works in mysterious ways. I mean, all along, we've known that God's ways and thoughts are higher than our ways and thoughts, but that can be a real challenge for us sometimes – especially when his ways and thoughts seem to us to be so counterintuitive, so counterproductive... even so cruel.

But without fail, whenever God grants us the grace of seeing his mysteries revealed, we can always see that his plans and purposes are better than anything we ever could have expected and certainly better than anything we could have carried out ourselves. And that was exactly the case in our second lesson for today. Paul told the Ephesians here that God works in mysterious ways – even ways that we can't always understand or comprehend in the moment – but God's mysteries always turn out in the end for the benefit of his people.

See, whenever God's mysteries are revealed, we always see the great things that his plans accomplish for us. And that's been true even since the creation of the world. I mean, how many times throughout human history did God do something that seems at first glance to be hurtful and offensive, when really he was just doing what he had to do to carry out his grand plan to bring a Savior into this world for us who could restore our sin-broken relationship with him? For example, when God made Adam and Eve leave the Garden of Eden after they sinned, was he being selfish and petty, or was he making sure that they would never eat from the tree of life and so condemn themselves to an eternity of living in their sin and spiritual death? Or when God sent the flood on this world, was he being hot-headed and cruel, or was he doing what he had to do in order to preserve the knowledge and line of the Savior at all costs before it was too late? Or when the Israelites went into slavery in Egypt, was God being careless – uncaring toward his people – or was he using that time to build them up as a nation and to show them just how great his power and deliverance were on their behalf? When he gave Israel all those laws at Mt. Sinai, was he being harsh and controlling, or was he teaching them to avoid the sinfulness and idolatry that could have ruined everything and broken their relationship once again? And finally, when the Israelites went into captivity in Babylon, was the Lord throwing up his hands and giving up on his people (like some of those people thought), or was he showing them firsthand the importance of faithfulness to him in every aspect of their lives and using their captivity to spread the Gospel even in a foreign

land – which may very well have been the reason those Magi from the East in our Gospel lesson for today knew to look for Jesus' birth in the first place?

Yes, those were all mysteries at the time, but in the end God worked each of those events out for the good of his people, and they knew it. They could see it clearly looking back; they couldn't deny it. But even all those mysteries were really only a part of the much larger mystery – God's greatest mystery, in fact – that was revealed to all mankind only after the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and that's what Epiphany is really all about. Paul here tells the Ephesians about the mystery of Christ and his work of salvation for us that God had been weaving together since the beginning of time so that one day every eye could see and every ear could hear that Jesus Christ is the Savior of all nations, and that through faith in him all people are heirs together, members together, and sharers together in all of God's gifts of grace and salvation.

So here's again what Paul said to the Ephesians, *“In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, 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... This grace was given me... to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known... according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.”* Throughout all of human history and beyond, God has been carrying out his eternal purpose of providing salvation for sinners. See, even before time began, God chose us in love to be his own, to be his children, and to live with him in his heavenly Kingdom forever. And that's because even before time began, he knew that humanity would fall into sin, so he appointed his one and only Son, Christ Jesus our Lord, to come into this world for us to live a perfect life in our place, to die a sacrificial death for our sake, and to rise again on Easter morning to forever destroy sin and death and the devil and anything that would try to ruin his plans and keep us from him.

All along those plans were always in place, and we can see evidence of them all throughout the Old Testament. God's Word and salvation were always meant for all people. It's just that our human sinfulness and the selfishness that is so characteristic of it blinded us to that fact, so that God's plan of salvation became a mystery for us that was revealed only through faith. See, God chose the Jewish people, the descendants of Abraham, to carry his Word and the promise of a Savior down through the centuries, but rather than protecting it and sharing it faithfully like God wanted, the Jews instead

hoarded it for themselves and twisted it so badly to the point that they even rejected and killed the promised Savior when he finally came to do what had been prophesied all along.

But that still didn't stop God from accomplishing his purposes and revealing the mystery of Epiphany, because the greatest mystery of Epiphany was that the Christ had to be rejected, had to suffer, had to die, because that's what he had to do for us to be our Savior and take away our sins forever. The mystery of Epiphany tells us that the cross and empty tomb are the focal points of God's plan to take away sin and win souls for himself from every nation, language, and people on earth. That's what the Jews missed, but that's what means so much for us now – this salvation from God wasn't just a Hebrew thing. It was a human thing. And those blessings of God's plan change everything, even for us right here and now.

Here is God's mystery revealed: *“through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.”* Never has it been more true that the ends justify the means. Maybe it was a mystery all along about what God was doing for us in this world and how he was doing it, but now that we see the whole completed picture, by grace through faith, we marvel at God's wisdom that everything else falls into place and it makes perfect sense in his plan. There aren't Jews and Gentiles anymore in God's fulfilled plan. There's only one unified people of God, who are equal and on level with each other in every way because of their mutual faith in Jesus Christ.

But that would have been a tremendous shock to the Jews who first heard it. I mean, they knew the Old Testament talked about salvation even for Gentiles – even for non-Jews – but for them to have the same blessings as the Jews themselves, to the same extent? That was unheard of, that was unthinkable! But that was God's grace, and that's the glory of Gentiles like you and me. And Paul tells us now that we are heirs together with Israel. That means that we too are God's true children, with all the rights and privileges that come along with it. We are heavenly royalty; we can approach God in prayer and worship with freedom and confidence because he's our own dear father now and we're his own dear children, and one day we are going to live and reign right along with our Savior in his heavenly Kingdom forever.

But that's only the first part. Paul tells us that we are also members together of one body with Israel. What's important about us as God's people isn't how we look or what kind of name we have or where we live or what kind of blood we have running through our veins. It's the faith that's in our hearts.

That's what unites us to each other closer than any other earthly relationship ever could, because that is a unity that comes only from God, not us, and it's based only on Christ's blood, not ours. We have a special unity of faith and hope and love that can't be found anywhere else in the world – not in nations, not in clubs, not even a lot of times among families and friends. This is the kind of unity that looks past outward circumstances and considerations and it's the kind of unity that flies in the face of all the devil's divisive schemes in this sinful, selfish world. Our special unity is the perfect way of displaying God's glory with the people around us, because this kind of unity between people who are often vastly different but yet have a unified purpose and hope could never exist in this world except under the one banner of faith in Jesus Christ our Lord.

And then finally, Paul says that our faith means we are sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus. Apart from Jesus, the only promise from God we would share in is the one that condemns us to hell for our sinfulness. Apart from Jesus, there could never be blessing for us. But now with Jesus, one blessing is piled on another for us. We have forgiveness, eternal life, and salvation. We have true spiritual peace, hope, and joy that can never be taken away from us. We have reconciliation with God and our fellow believers, we have free access and a personal audience with the king of Kings, and we share in the promise that one day we will live in his heavenly Kingdom with him and all our fellow believers, Jew and Gentile together, forever.

So are you shocked by this news, like the Jews and Gentiles who first heard it? Probably not, because by God's grace this is the message you've been hearing at church all your Christian life, and you just take it for granted. See, for us, it's not a challenge that God works in mysterious ways – it's a blessing of faith, because it just makes it all the more amazing when God finally reveals everything he's doing in our lives for us and for our salvation. What a blessing it is that what you've heard here today isn't a mystery to you. It's been revealed to you in God's Word, and thank God for that, because that's what Epiphany is all about – God's *mystery* of salvation becoming a *certainty* for people of all nations, Jew and Gentile alike, through faith in Jesus Christ our Lord. God grant it. Amen.