

January 4, 2015 – Epiphany

Ephesians 3:2-12

Theme: God's Secret Revealed!

- 1) *See the documented evidence (2-5).*
- 2) *Listen to what this secret is (6-9).*
- 3) *Understand what this means for your life (10-12).*

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

Everybody finds secrets intriguing. It's human nature. This is why every tabloid cover page will inevitably include news about some celebrity's secret being revealed. The more important the person, the more interested we are in his secrets. The only thing the media needs to be careful of is the source – lest the revelation they sell turns out to be a lie, and they lose all credibility.

Since we all like seeing big secrets revealed, I have a treat for you today. With the Apostle Paul as our guide, let us see: **God's great secret, revealed!** 1) *Let us consider the documented evidence,* 2) *listen to what God's secret is,* and then 3) *understand what God's secret means for our lives.*

Part One: See the documented evidence (2-5).

Paul writes: *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, as I have already written briefly. 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.*

Earlier in this letter, Paul had already detailed some of of secret things God wanted him to reveal. Now any one can claim direct revelation from God. How can we trust Paul? Paul doesn't expect us to believe him simply because He said it. He wants us to believe him because what he says is true; and to demonstrate the truthfulness of his revelation he encourages us to compare what he says with the rest of Scripture so that our conviction might not rest on the person of Paul, but solely on God's Word.

I want to pause here for a moment and discuss something very important. There are a lot of "religious experts" today claiming a lot of different things about the Bible. Some things may sound good; other things sound outrageous. Many people claim to have the truth – insight into God's secret wisdom. Whom should we believe?

Don't believe what anyone says about religion merely because it "sounds" right. The devil will always try to make his doctrine sound logical and loveable if he can lead people away from Christ. He always appeals to faulty, human logic and emotions.

And don't believe someone just because they have a doctorate or teach at an Ivy League college. Many scholars read the Bible in unbelief – exalting their own "theories" over the written Word itself. They will try to befuddle you, claiming that the Bible is not really God's Word but a "creation" of the early church – attempting to support their assertions by pointing to variations in ancient manuscripts or similar teachings in other ancient religions. The problem is that they rarely present all the facts or tell you that the actual manuscript evidence does not support their "source" theories.

"Well, whom then should we believe? We are simple people, not theologians. We just want to know what the Bible says so that we might know our Savior and be at peace with God."

Dear Christian, believe the Bible. Whenever someone tells you something about God, check what he says with the Bible. Even though St. Paul was inspired, he still didn't expect people to believe him merely because he said something was true. He always wanted people to compare his teachings with the rest of Scripture so that their faith might rest on God's wisdom, and not human theories. This is why Paul was not offended when the people in Berea *examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.*ⁱ

Be a Berean and study the Scriptures. When you do this in faith, you can be sure that the LORD will send his Spirit to guard you against false doctrine – keeping you safe from those who would try to tear you away from Him. Holy Scripture is always God's documented evidence for every secret He wishes us to know.

Part Two: Listen to what this secret is (6-9).

Paul talked about how the mystery he is going to reveal to us was hidden for a long time, but now is revealed. What is God's great secret? Are you all ready to hear it? *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.*

"That's the big secret?" you might be thinking, "It doesn't sound like that great of a secret to me!" Before you pass a hasty judgment concerning its importance, consider what it means.

You see, before Christ came, God had chosen a specific nation – Israel – to be his own; and I don't believe that any of us here ever belonged to that particular race of people. He gave their ancestor the promise of the Messiah, not ours.

Now, from the very beginning God certainly intended to save all people. Old Testament passages (like our 1st lesson from Isaiah) make this point abundantly clear. However, because the LORD wanted to keep His Old Testament people safe from the influences of the world so that the Messiah might be born. He set up a cultural and religious hedge around Israel. Even though the Old Testament prophesied that the Messiah would be the Savior of the world, the Old Testament ceremonial laws were so strict that many Jews thought that only they would be saved.

But when Jesus came, God revealed the true intentions of His heart: that he *wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.*ⁱⁱ

That Jesus was the Savior of all people is demonstrated by the fact that, shortly after Jesus birth, magi from eastern lands worshipped him as their Savior. Somehow they heard about the promised Messiah. Now he had come. Now was the time for the nations to hear the good news, believe it and be saved.

And look at the blessings this good news brings: we, who are not Jewish, are coheirs with Israel! Through faith we have an even greater claim on Abraham as our father than an unbelieving Jew.ⁱⁱⁱ All the promises God made with his Old Testament people (promises like: always being with them to protect, bless and encourage them, the promise to forgive all their sins, the promise of being considered so special to him that he would work wonders and overthrow nations to protect them. . .) these promises all apply to us!

And why? Because of what Jesus did to save us, we, together with every Christian Jew, are all members of one body. By the power of the Holy Spirit, God the Father declared us to be His special sons and daughters in Holy Baptism. We, whose ancestors are from different peoples and nations, all form the one body of Christ. We belong to one, holy nation: the kingdom of Christ. We are brothers and sisters in one family: the family of God. This is what Christ accomplished for us through his life, death and resurrection. This, then is the glorious meaning of Epiphany: we Gentiles, together with every Christian Jew, are reconciled to the LORD through faith in Christ Jesus.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, rejoice in the revelation of God's great mystery: we, who are so different from one another, are one family in Christ. Let us now take some time to consider the implications this has on our lives.

Part Three: Understand what this means for your life (10-12).

What was God's intent in making us Gentiles co-heirs with every Christ-confessing Jew? St. Paul says (in verse 10 and 11) that *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, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Everything God had written in the Scriptures, He had written for us. He revealed to us what the prophets before only wished they could see: who, exactly, Christ is.^{iv} Even angels love hearing about God's grace and plan of salvation.

And do you want to know something totally amazing? Guess who gets to tell the angels about God's salvation? We do! This is what Paul means, we he says: *through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms.* The "rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms" are God's holy angels. In other words, when we share the Gospel with other people, angels listen in! They rejoice when they see us living our lives to God's glory out of love for what He has for us. No, angels don't need the Gospel. They don't need to come to Church or Bible Class, but they do. Why? Because they love the Gospel that much! Just think: right now God's angels surround us and are worshipping God with us!

It's an interesting thought, isn't it? Angels, who have no need to hear the Gospel, love to hear it - even more than we who so desperately need it! This should lead us to pray: "Dear Lord, give us the desire for the Gospel that matches the angels - that we may ever long to hear and study your word."

There is yet another implication God's revealed secret has on our lives. In verse 12 Paul writes: *In [Christ] and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.* Just think about

that for a second. Who of us would think of running up the lawn of the White house to greet the President of the United States? We would probably be shot if we did!

But, because of Christ's work for us, we get to run up to the almighty King of the Universe with the same love and confidence that little children have when they run up to their parents. God encourages us to be like little children and tell him everything that is bothering us – even confessing the shameful, secret sins that lay deep in our hearts. We can freely admit our failures and need for his help because, in Christ, our sins are all ready paid for. God will not punish us. He will not turn his back on us in shame. No, when we confide our problems to Him, He hugs us with His Gospel and gives us the forgiveness and gifts we need to fight temptation.

You can come to God with your relationship problems, financial problems, physical needs and wants - this is what it means to approach God in freedom and confidence! You can tell God your worries, no matter how silly they may seem. You can thank God for all that He gives you, ask God to help your friends, and even hold God to his promises. God wants you to come confidently to him in prayer – all because of what Jesus' work has declared you to be: a member of God's dearly loved Israel; a child of heaven.

St. John once wrote: *How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are.*^v This is God's great secret, revealed to us in the Gospel. May the Lord keep us rejoicing in this wonderful news – ever willing to share it with others so that they also might believe in Jesus and be saved. Amen.

ⁱ Act 17:11 NIV84

ⁱⁱ 1 Timothy 2:4 NIV84

ⁱⁱⁱ Cf. Romans 4:11-17

^{iv} Cf. 1 Peter 1:10-12

^v 1 John 3:1 NIV