

**Title: The Revealed Mystery**  
**Biblical Text: Romans 16:25-27**  
**Teaching Series: Justified by Love**  
**Preaching Date: November 26, 2023**  
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## **Romans 16:25-27**

*Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith— to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen.*

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Our souls long for mystery. But it seems like our brains aren't having it.

Throughout history we've sought to eradicate as much mystery as we can from modern society. This is especially true in prevailing urban cultures like Chicago.

We can track this proclivity back to the third century. A philosopher named Epicurus who was brought to public awareness by the poet Lucretius, believed that the world was split in two. There was the sacred—*made for the gods*. There was the secular—*made for human beings*. Scholar N.T. Wright explains, "*the Epicureans declared that the gods, if they existed at all, were totally removed from the world and never intervened in its affairs*" (*Surprised by Scripture*, 132).

Lucretius' work (and thus Epicurus' thought) was lost for over a thousand years but was rediscovered in the fifteenth century. It became a widely accepted and formative perspective in major European cities.

Wright calls this the split-level world.

Over the course of the next five hundred years, three revolutions took place that embedded the split-level world into our collective psyche: technological (or scientific), political, and theological. Each revolution has targeted mystery in some sense. Technologically we developed modern medicine and the internet. Now the mystery of whether or not that person likes you is quickly dissipated by a left or right swipe. Politically we rejected monarchies and established democracies. The mystery of hidden power has been taken back by the people and for the people. Theologically we traded a bully in the sky for a benevolent yet impersonal higher power that gives us space to pretty much do as we please. The mystery of the divine has been replaced with the so-called common sense of doing good to all—even ourselves.

With each revolution, the wider the divide between the secular and sacred ... and the less mystery persists. Less God. More us. Or, so we suppose. Here's N.T.

Wright again, "***Just because we observe evolution, that doesn't mean there can't be a god who is active within that process as well as beyond and above it. Just because we want to cast off tyranny, that doesn't mean there can't be divine impulses and constraints in democracy. Just because we don't like the prevailing***

*theology that doesn't mean there isn't a better and indeed more biblical one*" (132). You see, our attempt to eradicate mystery has not (necessary) been effective.

Nevertheless, we have learned to be suspicious of mystery. That's what I want to talk about today. Because Paul is going to end his letter to Rome with mystery. Specifically he's going to help us see how the entire story of God can be understood through the lens of a mystery revealed—*Jesus Christ*. That's what I want to talk about. I want to talk about the beauty of this revealed mystery and how it ought to inform our daily lives in a split-level world.

Here's how we'll organize our time together ...

- The *nature* of the mystery.
- The *effect* of the mystery.
- Our *response* to the mystery.

[Prayer]

## **Movement 1: The Nature of the Mystery (vv.25-26; 1:19-20, Isaiah 45:15)**

God is a mystery. But not because he can't be known. After all, the Bible (not to mention all of human history!) is a visible and tangible and awe-inspiring display

of who God is, what he's like, and what he's up to (see Romans 1:19). Nevertheless he's a mystery. The great prophet Isaiah says, *Read Isaiah 45:15 ... Truly, you are a God who hides himself, O God of Israel, the Savior.* God is hidden and unseen. However, this doesn't mean he is unknowable. It doesn't mean Epicurus was right, that the world is divided between the sacred (unknown) and secular (known). Rather God is mysterious because he is only known on his terms. Or we might say, God is only known because he reveals himself.

He can't be discovered.

He can't be happened upon.

He can't be figured out.

But ... graciously, God is a God who gives himself up.

This makes knowledge of God fundamentally different than our knowledge of say, the earth's roundness. Through scientific research and testing, the spherical characteristic of earth was first discovered by Greek philosophers and astrologist in the fifth century B.C. But no amount of research and testing proves God. He is not discovered. Rather, he reveals himself. This doesn't make God less true. Rather it makes knowledge of him of a different order. Unlike knowledge of earth, knowledge of God is highly relational.

It's like when I was a kid. We used to play hide-and-seek as a family. And whenever one of the kids was it, inevitably my dad was the last one hiding. After a few minutes of the siblings teaming up in search of him, we'd start to hear a growl

or a bird chirp or a knocking or scratching sound. We'd follow the sound, turn a corner, and my dad would jump out of hiding. We'd scream then laugh and he'd hug us. You see, we never found my dad ... he would always find us. He revealed himself. And it was all about our relationship with him. My dad's hiding and revealing fostered love and intimacy and joy. That's how it is with the Lord.

That's precisely what Paul is getting at in v.25. ***Read Romans 16:25 ... Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages.*** Notice, the second half of the verse explains the mystery of God, that is knowledge of the gospel, of Christ ... it was kept secret for ages ... but then it was revealed. That's the *nature* of the mystery. It's a revealed mystery. In fact, the phrase "*the mystery that was kept secret for long ages*" in v.25 is in the perfect text. That means it has an eternal nature and on going effect. *God is a mystery and will be forever.* But "*has now been disclosed*" in v.26 is in the aorist tense. That means it's pointing to a definite action. *God is a mystery, but he will reveal himself.* The eternal mystery is disclosed through a definitive action. God can't be known without an act of God.

*So, how exactly does God do this? How does he reveal the mystery?*

Theologian Gerald Bray points out in his book *The Doctrine of God* that the fact that we know God through revelation demonstrates his relational nature. We can learn many things by watching someone act, but we learn much more by listening

to them speak. Similarly, we learn some things through God's actions, but we learn about him most accurately through his Word. That's his self-disclosure. Bray explains, "*We may have our ideas about [God], but in the final analysis our perceptions must be open to correction by what he tells us about himself*" (15). God reveals himself by speaking.

The writer of Hebrews teases out this divine self-disclosure, perhaps more directly than any other biblical writer. *Read Hebrews 1:1-2 ... Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.* Notice, there are two ways God has revealed himself through his Word and through history. Or we might say there are two aspects of God's Word: the spoken Word and the Incarnate Word. Every word God spoke through the prophets was a growl or scratch or sound in the dark ... Christ is God jumping out to find us. God can't be discovered, but he makes himself known through his Word—mysteriously through the prophets and then most fully through his Son.

That's the *nature* of the mystery. It's God's revealed Word.

## **Movement 2: The Effect of the Mystery (vv.25,26, 2 Corinthians 5:19, 1 Corinthians 13:12-13)**

Now, *why would God do that? Why would God hide? Why wouldn't he just reveal the complete story from the very beginning? Why all this set up of long ago and many times and many ways? Why was Jesus kept a secret?* Answering these questions give us an idea of the *effect* of the revealed mystery has on us in this fractured and split-level world.

Sin entered the human story back in the garden (see Genesis 3:6). Thousands and thousands of years pass before Christ. Generations of generations are born and die in sin without the clarity of the cross. They had to wait. They had to wonder. They had mystery. They only had the spoken Word of God. We had to wait. We had to sit in the un-revealed mystery. Specifically, God's people had to endure false and corrupt prophets, the misguided care of a fractured priesthood and sacrificial system, and messy monarchies. All the while longing and pinning for the mystery to be revealed, for the Messiah to come, for the God who was hiding to make himself known. *Are you with me?*

*Why would God do that? Why all the hiding?*

- Well, through the disappointment of corrupt prophets, God taught his people about his truth (see Micah 2:1-10).

- Through the repetition of fractured sacrifices, God taught his people about his holiness (see Hebrews 10:1).
- Through the pain of messy monarchs, God taught his people about his power (i.e. 1 Kings 1:5-10).

*You see?* Like my dad playing hide-and-seek ... the waiting was fostering love and intimacy and joy. In their waiting and in God's hiddenness ... he *was* paradoxically revealing himself. He was making himself known. Through his spoken word he was preparing them to see and savor his Incarnate Word—the one who would come as the fulfillment of every broken earthly system and false hope. Sinclair Ferguson brilliantly connects the particular ways Jesus (the Incarnate Word of God) is the true and better version of every institution of Ancient Israel (the spoken Word of God). He explains that ...

- Jesus is the true and better prophet who speaks and embodies God's truth in the flesh (see John 1:14,18).
- Jesus is the true and better priest who doesn't simply make a sacrifice, he is the holy and perfect sacrifice of God (see Hebrews 10:10).
- Jesus is the true and better king who leads his people with complete integrity and eternal power (see Colossians 1:15-20).

The *nature* of the revealed mystery is instructive to us because we still wait for God. *Don't we?* Though we have seen Christ, we still find ourselves in relationships and situations and seasons in which God's power, holiness, and truth



seem hidden and mysterious. *Right?* This is how and why the mystery has an *effect* on us. God teaches us in our waiting. God shapes us through his silence and in our anticipation in ways that can't be learned or embodied or enjoyed after revelation. Therefore the mystery is actually a grace. Particularly because the Incarnate Word breaks down the split-level world. Jesus is not dividing the world into the holy and the unholy. Paul says, *Read 2 Corinthians 5:19 ... in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself*.

Contrary to Epicureanism, Reverend Fleming Rutledge says that "*the New Testament message ... takes bodily life seriously*" (*The Bible and the New York Times*, 148). The way God has chosen to reveal himself demonstrates that God isn't removed from our everyday life. He doesn't submit to our split-level paradigm. Quite the opposite. In Christ, the sacred invades the secular. Through Christ, God entered our daily, fleshy, bodily, and mundane lives. The mystery took on flesh. *Are you with me?*

In her Easter sermon in 1997, Rutledge explained that, "*God's life has appeared in the world in Jesus Christ, in a form that could be heard, seen, and touched*" (148). This is fantastic. God is a mystery. And yet ... he speaks ... he's visible ... he's physical. The *nature* of the mystery completely transforms our understanding of its *effect*. Look again at Romans 16. *Read Romans 16:25 ... Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages*. There are two key *effects* of this revealed mystery. The first is that it

strengthens us. The gospel makes us strong. That word, *strengthen*, really means to establish or give grounding. The gospel stabilizes our lives.

Let's think about about Jesus as prophet, priest, and king ... *how does the revealed mystery, the Incarnate Word stabilize us in a fractured world?*

- Because Jesus is the true and better prophet, we can trust his word. In a split-level world it's tempting to trust the wisdom of the day (which changes all the time) and think God's Word is disconnected from reality. But Jesus does not show up in sterilized and religious spaces. Jesus shows up and invites us to follow him in the complexities of a deeply human life.
- Because Jesus is the true and better priest, we can trust his salvation. In a split-level world we may trust God with our personal religious life, but we look to ourselves for global, mental, emotional, and physical healing. But Jesus doesn't save our souls and leave our lives and bodies and earth to rot. His salvation is wholistic.
- Because Jesus is the true and better king, we can trust his lordship. In a split-level world we're tempted to be our own authority. Let's be real. It's one thing to sing a song about Jesus or listen to a sermon about him. It's another thing to trust him with bedtime. It's another thing to let him tell us where to live, what job to take, and who to date. *Right?* That's lordship. Only Jesus

lordship empowers us to face the daily challenges making war with our calendars and with our souls and our families.

This is the *effect* of the revealed mystery. It makes us strong. It stabilizes us in a fractured world. That helps us see the secondary effect: *we learn to obey. Read*

***Romans 16:26 ... but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith.*** The fact that the Son of God took on

flesh empowers us to obey without all the information ... while we're waiting.

That's faith, *right*? In other words, God knows that Jesus' arrival would not mean all our questions would be answered and that all mystery would be gone. That was never the point. Faith is the act of trusting and obeying amidst the mystery. That's what he has taught his people for generations, not just Israel. Notice Paul says "*all nations*". Paul leaned into this tension when he wrote to Corinth. ***Read 1***

***Corinthians 13:12-13 ... For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known. So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.*** The

gospel empowers us to live in a fracture and undone world with wisdom, love, hope, joy, and faith by grounding us in ultimate reality ... even when ... especially when we don't see the full picture.

That's the *effect* of the revealed mystery.

We are stabilized in a fracture and undone world.

## **Movement 3: Our Response to the Revealed Mystery**

### **(vv.25a,27, ref Romans 1-16)**

This passage is not first and foremost a lesson. Fundamentally, it's a doxology. A doxology is a transcription of a compound Greek word. The roots *doxa* (glory) and *logia* (words) are mash together, giving us this idea of *words of glory*. This tells us about our *response* to the revealed mystery. If the revealed mystery is the glorious self-disclosure of God's Word, then our *response* is the reciprocation of words of glory. That is, worship.

Notice, Paul begins and ends this passage with instructions to worship. ***Read Romans 16:25a,27 ... Now to him who ... to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen.*** Suffice it to say, the right *response* to God's gracious revelation of himself, making himself known through Christ in such a way that stabilizes us in a fractured and undone world ... the right response is worship. Specifically, we worship him for his wisdom. While there is much left for us to discover ... mystery will persists in our live ... but there's also so much that God has shown us about who he is, what he's like, and what he's up to.

According to his perfect wisdom he remains hidden.

According to his perfect wisdom he has revealed himself.

That's the mystery our souls long for and we should respond in worship.

That's our *response* to the revealed mystery. I think this ought to be our response to the entire book of Romans. Think about all that God has told us about himself.

We began our study of Romans on April 19, 2020 ...

- Romans 1: The righteousness of God was revealed to us from faith for faith ... and the righteous shall live by faith (v.17). And so, we worship God for his righteousness.
- Romans 2: The work of God is inward, at the level of the heart by his Spirit (v.29). And so, we worship God for his work in our hearts.
- Romans 3: The righteousness of God justifies us because it's manifested in Christ, apart from the law (v.21). And so, we worship God for his justification by love.
- Romans 4: God's righteousness was given to Abraham by grace through faith (v.9). And so, we worship God for his salvation by grace.
- Romans 5: The peace of God has been given to us through Christ (v.1). And so, we worship God for his peace.
- Romans 6: God gives us life as a free gift in exchange his Son takes the wages of our sin--death (v.23). And so, we worship God for his life.

- Romans 7: God meets us in our daily battle of desiring both good and evil (vv.18-19). And so, we worship God who meets us in our suffering.
- Romans 8: God promises that in all our sufferings we are more than conquerors because he loves us (v.37). And so, we worship God for his love.
- Romans 9: The salvation of God is a matter of his election not our perfection (v.11). And so, we worship God for his election.
- Romans 10: God is the same Lord of all nations, so no one is put to shame (vv.11-12). And so, we worship God for washing away our shame.
- Romans 11: The mercies of God are gifts of his calling and they're irrevocable (vv.29-31). And so, we worship God for his mercy.
- Romans 12: Through his mercy God is transforming us by the renewal of our minds (v.2). And so, we worship God for his renewal.
- Romans 13: By his Spirit, God empowers us to walk in love and resist making provisions for the flesh (v.14). And so, we worship God for his indwelling Spirit.

- Romans 14: God is our judge, therefore we learned not to judge others and live as those who would be judged by him (v.10). And so, we worship God for his perfect judgement.
- Romans 15: The God of endurance and encouragement makes us one and enables his people to live in harmony (v.5). And so, we worship God for his unity.
- Romans 16: God has revealed all his glorious nature and character through his Son (v.25). And so, we worship God for the revealed mystery ... his Son, Jesus Christ.

My brothers and sisters ... God has revealed so much to us about himself. Let's respond in worship. There's so much yet to be revealed. Let's worship him for that too. Theologian Marva Dawn explained that worship was the goal of the Christian life ... *"that for more and more seconds of each day what we think and do and say is to God's glory, that every moment is worship of the true God instead of various idolatries of our making or of our culture's"* (*In the Beginning God*, 17). Worship is our stabilizing response fractured and undone world. Worship is our embrace of Christ who is reconciling, renewing, redeeming, and making all things secular and all things sacred brand new.

To be sure, you may still feel like you're wandering around in the dark, following faint sounds but never quite discovering God or his plans and purposes. It may feel

pointless. But don't eradicate the mystery. Embrace it and allow it shape love and intimacy and joy in your spirit. Rest assured that at just the right time God will make himself known.