

I want you to think of a present under your Christmas tree. Maybe it has a funny shape, maybe it makes a strange sound when you shake it, or maybe the lumps and bumps just make it feel interesting. You just know it's going to be good, don't you?

That's the whole old testament: ever since God's first promise to Eve that her seed would crush the serpent's head, ever since God's covenant with Abraham to bless the whole world, ever since God's covenant promise to David that He would put one of his descendants on the throne forever, ever since Isaiah spoke of the root from Jesse's stump, the child born unto us, the suffering servant, the light to the Gentiles, ever since all of those promises, hints, and blessings, the great gift of God was wrapped in mystery and kept secret for long ages.

Our text from Romans is a doxology, a word of glory and praise that celebrates the fact that that mystery, the mystery of how God would bring redemption and blessing to the world, has now been disclosed and revealed. Christmas has come! The nativity of Jesus was the event that started unwrapping that secret gift and giving it the world. Paul writes these happy words of praise because he has opened that gift, and because he is overjoyed at what was in the box.

The mystery of salvation was that God planned to save the world from sin and bring about the obedience of faith by sending His Son Jesus, the second person of the eternal Trinity, to take on human flesh and be born into a human family, to live and die and rise again in fulfillment of every prophecy and promise of God! That's the mystery that the gospel revealed, the secret that the apostles' preaching disclosed to the world.

And Paul gives glory to God for revealing this mystery, because the contents of the mystery, the gospel that was hidden in the promise box, *strengthens* you. The joyful good news of the mystery now revealed encourages you and builds you up and takes away your fears and worries and doubt. The joy of the Lord is your strength, and since the mystery was hiding an overflowing amount of joy, the revealing of the mystery strengthens you.

And so Paul says: Glory to the One who makes you strong! That's the main point: Glory to God for putting the iron of the gospel into your weak souls, so that you can stand up in faith-filled obedience against the forces of sin and darkness and death. *Without* the resources found in the mystery, we were weak. Our faith was frail. Obedience was difficult. But *now that the mystery has been disclosed*, we can be strengthened by it.

So how does God make us strong through the mystery revealed in the gospel? Three ways: through preaching, through missions, and through obedience to God's commands.

Paul praises God for His ability to strengthen you according to the gospel that Paul preaches about Jesus Christ. This doesn't mean that "according to Paul's gospel, God is able to strengthen you", as if it might be different in someone else's gospel. No, "according to" means something like "through" or "in line with". The strength God gives is a *gospel preaching* sort of strength, a *revealed mystery* sort of strength.

And so when you hear the preaching of the gospel, when the mystery is revealed as the word is explained and applied, you are being strengthened by God, so that you can obey God through faith. Praise God for preaching! Paul says, because God makes you strong as the gospel comes to you.

So if that's the case, and if you are weak in your walk with God, what should you do? You should listen to the preaching of Jesus Christ. This is not just a Christian duty, or a component part of Christian discipleship. It is medicine for sick souls, strength for those who are weak in faith. Many people find that their faith has weakened and withered because they stopped hearing the gospel preached. Maybe they still came to church, but they stopped paying attention, they didn't give full, eager, active attention to the revelation of the mystery of Jesus, and their faith grew weak. And since their faith was weak, their obedience suffered, too, because faith strengthens you to obey.

So maybe you are struggling to obey God. Maybe you are having a hard time believing His Word and keeping His commands. If that's you, then you need to listen, to really listen to the preaching of Jesus Christ. Don't just show up to church and make it through. Pay attention. Listen carefully, and after the preacher stops talking, don't stop hearing. Keep the preaching alive in your heart by meditating on the Word that you heard, and by discussing it with others. The work of hearing a sermon starts when the preacher stops; that's when you take what you've heard and apply it to your own life. And that's how God will strengthen you to trust and obey.

God also want to strengthen the Church by spreading the good news *to all nations*. Missions is the work of taking the mystery of the gospel to the world. That is, sharing the good news that Jesus is the savior of the whole world, and that all who put their trust in Him will be saved, whether Jew or Gentile. The prophets always foretold that the nations would come to worship Israel's God, and now it's happening as the mystery is made known to all nations, just as the eternal God commanded. Paul calls Him the eternal God to highlight that fact that this was always His plan. Even though it was kept as Israel's secret for long ages, God always meant to save the world, not just Israel. And now is the time for that to happen.

And as the nations come to bow before Jesus, the Church grows stronger and stronger. This is true of the Church as a whole – she is stronger because more and more nations have joined her; and it's also true at a more personal level: what does it do to your faith to hear a report from a far country that a new church has sprung up where no one ever worshiped Jesus before, or that many people have come to faith in Jesus in Russia or China or Latin America? Your faith is strengthened, and you are more eager to obey God, and like Paul, you are moved to give glory to the only wise God, who planned this missionary movement from the beginning. How can you *not* glorify God when His gospel covers the whole earth?

God commands us to preach, and He commands the Church to take the gospel to all the nations, and as the great commission says, that means teaching them to obey everything that Jesus commanded. When we obey God's commands and teach others to obey His commands, the Church grows strong. God strengthens us through His commands; as if they were our workout instructions: lift these weights, do these exercises! When we obey in faith, we become strong and our faith becomes strong, and the stronger we get, the more we obey, and on and on it goes.

And what kicked off this whole cycle of growth and strength and the spreading of the gospel was the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages. The gift that God gave at Christmas contained everything we needed to grow in faith, and now that that gift has been opened, the obedience of faith is deepening in our lives and is spreading all over the world.

Now, this passage is not mainly a list of instructions. We can find them in there, and we can make these applications: be strengthened by God through gospel preaching, make the gospel mystery known to all nations, and give glory to God by obeying His commands by faith. But this section of Scripture is a doxology, a word of praise and glory, and so the primary way to receive a doxology is to join with Paul in shouts and songs of praise: to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ!

That's what our celebration of Christmas is all about. We already know what was in that present that God placed under Israel's tree for thousands of years. But that gift was so wonderful, so glorious, so powerful, that it is still blessing the world to this day. When Jesus was born of Mary in the little town of Bethlehem, the mystery of the gospel began to be revealed, and that revelation continues to fill the world even now.

So let us join our brother Paul in giving glory to God for the great secret now made known, that God became a man in Jesus Christ to bring salvation to the world, to strengthen us for the obedience of faith, and to bring glory to God forevermore. Let this be what your feasting and celebrating and rejoicing is all about this Christmas season: to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen.

- *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.*