

Epiphany  
Ephesians 3:2-12  
1/7/18

Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. (2 Pt 1:2)

### **Ephesians 3:2-12**

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

The New Year has come. So what are your plans? Do you have any plans for a big trip, maybe this next summer? Do you have plans to make a career change? Do you have plans for a big family change, maybe a wedding or a baby? There always seems to be lots of planning for the year ahead. The same is true for businesses and corporations, congregations and synods, and even government at every level. The arrival of a new year often means making new plans.

Today, as we celebrate the Epiphany of our Lord, God has a master plan to reveal for us. This plan is more than a New Year's resolution, or travel plan, or business plan. You see, this plan has already met with success for generations. In fact, this plan has addressed and continues to address the greatest need you and I and every other human being have ever had. And it's the only plan that does address our greatest need. Through his apostle Paul, God Unveils His Master Plan.

But why do we need it? What is that greatest need which every one of us has? Few people understood the need better than Paul. He wrote, **"I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me..."** Paul knew how badly he needed God's grace. He had seen God's plan of grace carried out in his own life, when he was still known as Saul.

At that time, he persecuted Christians. He believed that if Jesus claimed to be God, then surely he was blaspheming or dishonoring the holy God of Israel. All who followed this Jesus were, therefore, just as guilty. Wiping out, eliminating, all Christians became Saul's obsession. He hunted them down, arrested them, gave approval to their deaths – all to protect the honor of his god. Paul made plans to track down Christians wherever they could be found.

On his way to the city of Damascus for that very reason, Jesus appeared in glory and stopped Saul in his tracks. **"Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"** (Acts 9:4), Jesus asked. Saul failed to realize that by persecuting Christians, he was really attacking God himself. **"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting...I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show you...I am sending you to [the Gentiles] to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me"** (Acts 26:14-18).

God addressed Saul's greatest need – his unbelief, his sin, and the death he deserved – by pouring out his grace upon him, and so, Saul became Paul. With undeserved love, Jesus forgave Paul's sins and changed his life forever. Then he made Paul a part of his master plan. Paul was to share with everyone, especially the Gentiles (or non-Jews) the good news that they did not have to earn God's favor, but by grace Christ had done it all. Paul had proclaimed that same good news to the Ephesians, so he reminded

them, **“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...”**

Are we really any different than Paul? Ever since Adam and Eve disobeyed God, every one of us has sought his or her own way in rebellion against God’s holy will. By nature, every single one of us would prefer to blindly follow the whims and desires of our sinful natures and the sinful world in which we live. The prophet Isaiah described us well, **“We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way...”** (Isaiah 53:6). Paul himself described us in this way, **“As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins...All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath”** (Ephesians 2:1,3). That blind rebellion would only end in God’s rejection and eternal punishment.

That’s why God had to have a plan, and what exactly is this plan? God’s master plan is centered in Christ. Paul wrote, **“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.”**

God spent many centuries preparing to carry out his plan to save us. He had revealed the first details to Adam and Eve when they willingly disobeyed him in the Garden of Eden. He continued to reveal detail after detail through his holy prophets, even as he guided human history to fulfill his plan. He chose the family, the nation, the location, and the timing. He never missed a single detail. If the fulfillment of God’s plan was ever put in danger, God kept his promise safe, even stepping in with miracles when necessary. Finally, **“when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law”** (Galatians 4;4,5).

God’s master plan was centered in Christ, who came to live and die as our Substitute, who came to pour out the **“unsearchable riches”** of God’s undeserved loving kindness on undeserving souls like yours and mine. Jesus came to fulfill God’s master plan – to be the Savior, the Lamb of God, the King of Kings, the Prince of Peace. Through Christ, God has changed hearts so now through faith in Christ, people are able to approach the holy God **“with freedom and confidence”** like never before.

God’s master plan of salvation played out in the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Christ, but for whom did he create that plan? Who would be impacted by that plan? When the time had fully come God’s plan was revealed not just to Jews in Palestine or Lutherans in Germany or WELS Lutherans in Colorado. No, the plan was created for all people.

Paul explains, **“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 of Christ Jesus.”** God brings all people together under Christ. We see that in how God revealed his truth to the Magi, who traveled many miles to bring a toddler gifts worthy of a king. We see that in how Christ carried out most of his ministry in Galilee – a region where Jews and Gentiles lived side by side. Above all, we see that in how Jesus commanded his people to **“make disciples of all nations”** (Matthew 28:20) after his resurrection. We see that in how Jesus gave Paul his part in God’s master plan. **“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, and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things...”** We see that in how God made the Gospel spread throughout

the Roman Empire in less than 100 years, how the Gospel spread throughout Europe and Africa and Asia, how that Gospel traveled across oceans and across our own nation to us here. God created his master plan of grace for all people to bring us and make us **“sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.”**

That also means there’s one more important part of God’s master plan. Who will put it into effect now? Who will spread the good news of Jesus now? Paul leaves no doubt. **“His intention 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.”** God’s master plan is to be carried out by the church.

That means God wants you and me to be part of his master plan. Too easily, though, we convince ourselves that, like Paul, we are **“less than the least of all God’s people”**. “Who am I to be part of God’s master plan? I’m a sinner and God knows what I’ve done. Even if I could, I still stumble over my words and I’d probably say something wrong. I’m not trained and besides I couldn’t face rejection. I’d much rather just stand on the sidelines and let someone else more qualified take that great responsibility.”

Yes, by nature, each of us is **“less than the least of all God’s people”**, but consider the part God has given you in his master plan. Like Paul, God has given you **“the unsearchable riches of Christ”** to share with people you love, people you know, people you meet. In Christ and his Gospel, he has given you the tools to raise the spiritually dead, forgive the eternally guilty, give hope to the hopeless, and wisdom to the foolish. Oh, and he’s the One doing the work anyway as he accompanies you every step of the way, so that even through us, God carries out his master plan.

In this New Year, it’s time for us as Christians and as a congregation to realize that we are all part of God’s master plan of grace through Christ for the nations. With Christ’s help and confidence in his Gospel, I pray that every one of us takes an active role in that master plan – revealing the riches of God’s grace with other people. You are part of God’s master plan! May God bless you as you reveal his grace to the world.

Amen

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Ph 4:7)

Amen