

We always like to have answers to the question "why," because we want to know why things happen. Why does it happen this way and not another? So, for example, someone might ask: why does the sun rise in the morning? And we'd say, "Well, that's easy, of course, because the Earth is spinning. And whenever the side of the globe faces the sun, it looks like the sun is rising. And that's why it seems to happen." Or we might ask: why does it rain? And we'd say, "That's an easy question, too. The water vapor up in the clouds condenses, and it falls down to the earth where it evaporates and goes back up and starts the cycle all over again. We understand why it happens." And we might even do this with our technology, to answer the question "why." Why does it work? Why does this happen? Or maybe more often, why isn't it working? But even if we can't wrap our minds around the answer, even if we can't fully understand why it is, we know that there is an answer. We've just got to look for it, either by asking somebody for it who knows the answer or by working really hard ourselves. In that way, we will find an answer to the question "why."

But the trouble with that is that it takes all of the wonder out of the world. Because when we know why something happens, we don't often marvel at it. We know why the sun rises, so it's not something that causes us to wonder. Yes, it's beautiful, and it might even make us very happy to see the sun rising. But when was the last time seeing the sun rise caused you to reflect on the glory and the power of God? Or with the rain. We know why it rains, and so we don't always marvel at it either. Yes, we are thankful for it. And maybe we even give thanks to God for it. But how often do you see the rain as something which comes only from the hand of God? Or even with our technology, there is no wonder in that, either. Even if we don't understand how it works, we kind of expect technology to get better and better. It's always going to be improving, so that what we have right now is nice, but something better is on the way. And for that reason, it takes all of the wonder out of that as well.

And if there is any mystery about these things at all, well, we get rather impatient. Because we have lost this sense of wonder, we have little patience for mysteries, for things that we don't understand. We want to know why something happens, and we want to know it right now. And if we don't always have the answers as quick as we like, or an answer that we understand, then we might be speaking against it. Because mysteries often irritate us. Mysteries do not often cause us to wonder.

But Paul is talking about a mystery in our reading for today. And he says Israel had been hardened. They failed to believe in Jesus. And Paul earlier in Romans showed that not all of Israel had been chosen by God. Faith is something which comes from God alone. And he also showed us earlier that Israel did not seek after God. They failed to believe in him, and for that reason, were cut off. But now a great mystery has come. Israel's hardening is not permanent. It is temporary. It is partial. One day, this hardening will be removed, and then all Israel will be saved. All Israel being the Church, Jew and Gentile alike, united together into one body in Jesus Christ our Lord. And on that day, Israel according to the flesh will turn to the Savior. They will no longer fight against the Church. On that day, Israel according to the flesh will receive mercy instead of judgment, because they are turning to Jesus Christ our Lord. That is a great mystery, one that we wrestle with in our text for today.

But Paul doesn't give us a lot of answers to this mystery. He doesn't tell us how it's going to happen, and he doesn't tell us why it's going to happen either. Mostly because Paul doesn't know himself. All he knows is that it's going to happen. God one day will take Israel out of its darkness and bring them back to himself. We don't know when. We don't know how. All we know is that it will happen. But does not knowing bother you? Does not having a clear answer to this mystery cause you to wonder about it in the first place? God knows when it's going to be. God knows the day, just as he knows when the Last Day will come. That's something that only he knows. We don't know any of it, neither how nor when. All we can do, Christians, is to be patient, to wait for it, because God will do it in his good time.

But Paul does give us a little bit of an answer, answering the question why this will happen. But the answer that he gives is one that is also difficult for us to understand. Because we might ask: "Why was Israel hardened?" And he says: "So that God would show mercy to you." Verse 30, for example, says: "For just as you were at one time disobedient to God, but now have received mercy because of their disobedience." Israel's disobedience led to God bringing the Gospel to you. You are being saved today because Israel fell into unbelief. In this way, you will be saved. Israel rejecting and killing Christ leads to life for the entire world. But why, then, will they be unhardened one day? Because of the mercy that God now shows to you. Verse 31: "So they too have now been disobedient, in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may now receive mercy." Israel will one day receive mercy, because they will see the mercy shown to you and they will repent. They will turn away from their ungodliness, turn away from their unbelief, and turn back towards the Lord when they see what God has done for us, the Gentiles. They will come to him in humility, calling on Jesus Christ as their Savior. And in this way, they too will be saved. Mercy shown to us leads to life for Israel. But now we come to the heart of the mystery, the deepest part of it. Israel was condemned so that the world would be saved. As he says in verse 32: "For God has consigned all to disobedience that he may have mercy on all." Through our sin, in other words, through our disobedience, God has brought grace for all of those who believe in him.

And how badly we want to ask questions at this point! How desperately we want an explanation! Why? Why would God do this? Why would he save us in this way? Why not some other way? It doesn't make sense to us. And because mysteries irritate us, that can make us wonder: "Is this good? Surely there must be some other way! Surely there must be another answer! Surely there must be a different answer to the question why."

But Paul doesn't do this. Paul gives glory to God. He is caught up in wonder at this great mystery. "O the depth!" he says. The depth of the knowledge and the wisdom and the riches of God. It's like a boat sitting out on deep water. If you've ever looked down into deep water, you know that you can't see the bottom. It's far beyond your sight. You know there's a bottom down there somewhere, but you're not going to be able to see it. And because you can't see the bottom of that depth, it causes wonder, to wonder what's really down there, what's down there far beyond our ability to see. Maybe we do want to see to the bottom, to see clearly all the way to the ground below, but we can't. And that's what it means to have this kind of depth. But Christians, if we feel that way about deep water, how much more so with God whose knowledge has no limits! How much more so with God whose wisdom is bottomless! He is far beyond our ability to understand. And even if his ways don't make sense to us, even if God does something

that we can't understand, that is no reason for us to condemn him. Rather, we should put ourselves into his hands, knowing that he does all things well, that he is the one who knows the best way for everything. And even if that way seems foolish to us, it only seems foolish because God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise. God's foolishness, so to speak, is wiser than all the wisdom of men. And so, faced with these mysteries then, we can join with Paul in praising God, because he is the one who has done all things well.

So will we fully understand why God chose to save us in this way? No. We won't. But through it, salvation has come to us. And through the mercy shown to us, salvation will also come to Israel. Because God chose to save us through Jesus Christ, his Son. And because of Jesus, we can give all glory to the Father, who in his unsearchable wisdom has chosen to save us, consigning us all to disobedience so that he might have mercy on us all.

So from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever! Amen.