

“THE MYSTERY OF GODLINESS”

I. Introduction

- A. The 20th century Presbyterian minister Donald Grey Barnhouse once preached a sermon, which was later broadcast on CBS radio, in which he offered his thoughts on this question: ‘What would a city look like if it was completely taken over by Satan?’
1. Barnhouse’s answer was not what you might expect.
 2. He did not imagine a city that was overrun by immorality and sheer unbelief.
 3. Instead, he described a city where all the bars were shut down, where pornography was outlawed, where all the neighborhoods were kept clean, where people always smiled at each other, where nobody swore, where children were taught good manners, and where, on Sundays, everyone flocked to churches *where Christ was not preached*.
 4. Of course, this is not the only way of answering the question that Barnhouse posed, but it does make an astute point.
 5. It calls our attention to the fact that the distinguishing feature of the Christian religion is not its system of ethics, though it certainly has one.
 6. The heart of the Christian religion is Jesus Christ as he is proclaimed in the apostolic gospel.
- B. This is the point that the apostle Paul is making in 1 Timothy 3:16.
1. In the preceding verse, Paul referred to the church as “a pillar and buttress of truth.”

2. As we saw in last week's sermon, this means the church is God's appointed instrument for the dissemination and defense of his truth.
3. Here in verse 16, Paul makes it clear that this message of truth is focused on the person and work of Jesus Christ.

II. Our Great Confession

- A. The string of statements contained in this verse is introduced by Paul with the words, "Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness."
 1. The phrase "mystery of godliness" is being used by Paul to describe the gospel.
 2. There are a number of places in his letters where he speaks of the gospel as a mystery.
 3. He does so in order to call our attention to the fact that though the gospel was previously hidden, it has now been revealed.
 4. The clearest example of this is found at the end of the epistle to the Romans in these words of concluding doxology: "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." (Rom 16:25–27)
 5. The gospel is the mystery that was long kept secret but has now been made known.
 6. Of course, there is also a sense in which it still remains a mystery, since it will always be beyond our full comprehension.
 7. This is why Paul says in this letter to the Ephesians that he prays that they "may have strength to comprehend with all the saints

what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge." (Eph 3:18–19 ESV)

- B. It is interesting that Paul refers to the gospel as the mystery of *godliness*.
1. The term "godliness" means religion, or piety, or living to God.
 2. The thing that is striking about Paul's use of this term here is that the lines that follow do not say anything about how we are to live.
 3. When we hear Paul speak of "the mystery of *godliness*," we expect him to say something about the nature of godly living, or how to live a godly life.
 4. But he says nothing of the sort.
 5. Instead, he talks about Christ.
 6. This reminds us that the ethical aspect of the Christian life is grounded in the person and work of Jesus Christ.
 7. The thing that is of first importance is not what we do for God, but what God has already done for us in Christ.
 8. In the words of Geerhardus Vos, "The entire Christian life, root and stem and branch and blossom, is one of continuous fellowship with Christ." [*Grace and Glory*, 121]
 9. Only when we have grasped Christ by faith can we respond to God with grateful obedience.
 10. Otherwise, any amount of striving after godliness will always be a futile effort by people who are still under the curse of the law.
- C. The remainder of verse 16 is organized in three couplets that express contrasting ideas.
1. In the first couplet, the flesh is in contrast to the Spirit.

2. In the second couplet, angels are in contrast to the nations.
3. And in the third couplet, the world is in contrast to glory.
4. This saying was probably a creedal statement or hymn that was used by first-century Christians in public worship.
5. It was meant to be memorized and meditated upon as a means of impressing God's truth upon the hearts and minds of God's people.
6. The fact that the early church composed a statement like this, and the fact that it was approved and made use of by the apostle Paul, lends support to the use of creeds, confessions, and biblically-rich hymns in the church today.

III. Manifested in the Flesh; Justified by the Spirit

- A. The first couplet in the saying begins with the statement, "He was manifested in the flesh."
 1. This is referring to the incarnation, along with everything that Jesus experienced in his estate of humiliation.
 2. Both the divine and human natures of Christ are included in this phrase.
 3. On the one hand, the fact that he was "manifested" clearly implies that he had an existence before he came into this world.
 4. On the other hand, the term "flesh" refers to his taking on a real human nature.
 5. The incarnation of the Son of God is a truth upon which we should frequently meditate.
 6. It is one of the most astounding and momentous elements of our faith.

7. Consider how it is described in this quote from John Murray: “The infinite becoming finite; the eternal and supra-temporal entering time and becoming subject to it; the immutable becoming mutable; the invisible becoming visible; the Creator becoming created; the Sustainer of all becoming dependent; the Almighty becoming weak; God became man.”
 8. Not only is the incarnation a matter of overwhelming awe, it is also the very foundation of our salvation.
 9. We would never be able to ascend up to the Most High God in our miserable estate as sinners.
 10. Our only hope is if God comes down to us.
 11. Furthermore, we would never be able to find acceptance with holy God in our state of rebellion against him.
 12. We need a perfect Mediator who truly shares our weak human nature, who truly shares our flesh.
- B. The second half of the first couplet says that Jesus was “vindicated by the Spirit.”
1. As the footnote in the ESV points out, the term that is translated as “vindicated” here is the same term that is translated in other passages as “justified.”
 2. There is really no good reason not to translate it as “justified” here.
 3. While it may sound odd to speak of Jesus being justified, this is exactly what happened at his resurrection.
 4. In fact, his justification serves as the basis of our justification.
 5. In his death, Jesus was numbered with the transgressors.

6. If he had remained dead, it would have meant that death had a valid claim on him as a transgressor.
7. But by raising him from the dead, God announced that Jesus is righteous.
8. In his mediatorial office as the last Adam, by his perfectly upright life and substitutionary death, Jesus merited the verdict of 'just,' both for himself and for all whom he was given to save.
9. This is why Romans 4:25 says that Christ was raised for our justification.
10. It is why 1 Corinthians 15:17 says that if Jesus has not been raised, we are still in our sins.
11. In the words of Geerhardus Vos, "As the curse laid upon him had assumed the visible form of separation between body and soul, it was necessary that in the same physical sphere, in the same palpable form, the divine absolution should be solemnly pronounced and placed on record. By raising Christ from death, God as the supreme Judge set his seal to the absolute perfection and completeness of his atoning work. The resurrection is a public announcement to the world that the penalty of death had been borne by Christ to its bitter end and that in consequence the dominion of guilt has been broken down, the curse annihilated forever."

IV. Seen by Angels; Proclaimed Among the Nations

- A. The second couplet begins with the statement, "seen by angels."
 1. This is primarily a reference to how Jesus' resurrection was witnessed by angelic beings, though it could also include the notion that angels saw his ascension and exaltation at the right hand of God.
 2. That the resurrection is especially in view here is supported by the fact that whenever the term "seen" is used in reference to Jesus in

the New Testament it is always in connection with his resurrection appearances.

3. The New Testament accounts of the resurrection tell us that angels were the first witnesses of the resurrection, as well as the first to announce it.
 4. This emphasized the cosmic scope of what Christ accomplished.
 5. It was unlike anything else that has ever happened in the world.
 6. It was so unique that it required emissaries from heaven to first make it known.
- B. The second half of this couplet says that Jesus was “proclaimed among the nations.”
1. While Christ’s resurrection was *seen* firsthand by angelic witnesses (as well as by a select number of human eyewitnesses), the gospel of the risen Christ was not made known to the world by sight but by proclamation.
 2. This is consistent with the primary way God has chosen to make himself known to people throughout history.
 3. Words are an adequate means for God to reveal himself to people.
 4. He is able to transcend the limitations of human language and ensure that his truth is conveyed and received.
 5. And take note of the fact that it is proclaimed to “the nations.”
 6. This is the same term that is sometimes translated as “Gentiles.”
 7. While Paul is not saying that Christ was *only* proclaimed to Gentiles, he is certainly underscoring the global extent of the proclamation of the gospel.

8. Not even the barriers created by the differing languages spoken by the nations of the world have been able to hinder the gospel from going forth and bearing fruit.

V. Believed On In the World; Taken Up In Glory

- A. We come now to the third and final couplet in our verse, which begins with the statement, “believed on in the world.”
 1. This is describing the response to the proclamation that was the focus of the preceding line.
 2. Even when Paul was writing this epistle, which was just a few decades after the outpouring of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost, the gospel was being so widely proclaimed that Paul could say that Jesus has been believed on in the world.
 3. It is truly remarkable that the message of Christ has been embraced by so many throughout the world, especially in light of its obscure roots in Judaism.
 4. This testifies that the gospel really is the power of God unto salvation for them that believe.
 5. The gospel is also the fulfillment of what was foretold in the Old Testament.
 6. As it says in Psalm 72 of the heir of David, “May he have dominion from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth! May desert tribes bow down before him, and his enemies lick the dust! May the kings of Tarshish and of the coastlands render him tribute; may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts! May all kings fall down before him, all nations serve him!” (Psa 72:8–11 ESV)
- B. The final line of the last couplet is, “taken up in glory.”
 1. This is referring to Christ’s ascension back into heaven forty days after he was raised from the dead.

2. The ascension does not get nearly as much attention as Jesus' incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection, but it is still an indispensable element of the Christian confession.
3. This is why it is included in both the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds.
4. Consider the reasons given by the Heidelberg Catechism for the significance of the ascension: "First, he pleads our cause in heaven in the presence of his Father. Second, we have our own flesh in heaven— a guarantee that Christ our head will take us, his members, to himself in heaven. Third, he sends his Spirit to us on earth as a further guarantee. By the Spirit's power we make the goal of our lives, not earthly things, but the things above where Christ is, sitting at God's right hand." [HC 49]
5. The ascension means that, in his office as our mediator with God, Jesus has now received all authority in heaven and on earth.
6. Everything is at his disposal, which means he can ensure that his saving work is applied to our lives and brought to completion.
7. Moreover, he is continually interceding for us on the basis of his finished work.
8. When Paul says in Colossians 3 that our lives as believers are hidden with Christ in God, he is not telling us that we should imagine this to be true.
9. He is telling us that it is an objective fact.
10. Because Christ is seated in glory at God's right hand, you and I can know for certain that God's purpose to bring us to glory cannot be thwarted by anything.