

Feb. 26, 2017

The Mystery of Godliness

1 Timothy 3:14-16

In the household of God everyone believes in absolute truth; the mysterious truth of the incarnate God.

LTS: Psa. 119:17-32

Read 1 Tim. 3:14-16

This passage is about the greatest mystery story ever told! Everybody likes a good mystery. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle became a world-renown author when in 1887 he released the first of his four novels. They were all detective stories and murder mysteries. The first of which was released under the title A Study in Scarlet a story that marked the first appearance of Sherlock Holmes. I don't know about you, but when I think of mysteries I think of Sherlock Holmes. But there are many other famous mystery tales

Many a young reader has cut his/her teeth relishing such mysteries as the Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew. There is just something about the "Who-Done-It?" genre of literature that people from all walks of life find compelling. And even today, television programming and movies in the theater are cranking out mystery stories as fast as they can write them.

Of course, most mystery stories are fiction and contain characters and plots that are purely the product of the author's imagination. But the best mysteries are the ones that are true. And the one that Paul references in our text this morning is the truest, most exciting, engaging, and profoundly life-changing of them all. It is the mystery of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

In our passage this morning there are two mysteries that the apostle Paul touches upon. The first is the mystery of truth. The second is the mystery of Godliness.

I. The Mystery of Truth:

1. Now if you know anything about literature you understand that every story has a problem to be resolved. If it doesn't have a problem then it's not a story – it's a documentary. In detective mysteries the problem is figuring out "who done it." In spy mysteries the problem is figuring out how one man can possibly undermine an evil government power, or how a good government can track down and capture an evil spy. In the mystery of truth, however, the problem is "How can we know what is true or whether there is such a thing as truth at all?"

2. This is just about the most relevant mystery of our time. We live in an age that is often called Post-modern Times. The previous age was called the Modern era. It was a time when science was making all kinds of discoveries that explained things that previously seemed unexplainable. For example, in the mid 1800's Louis Pasteur discovered tiny organisms, invisible to the naked eye, that he called germs. He figured out that germs were the source of Smallpox. No one believed him at first, but his scientific experiments led him to develop a vaccine for small-pox also

derived from “germs” by which he was able to protect live-stock and eventually people from the disease.

3. It wasn't until the early 1900's that science was able to cure a sick person of an infectious disease. And this also was brought about by scientific experimentation. By the time this happened people were already beginning to conclude en-mass that it was just a matter of time before man would discover all truth. But it didn't work quite out that way.

4. In the realm of ethics and morality, the scientific method proved useless. Moral truth was determined by religion. But then people began rejecting religion as a reliable source of truth. When I was a boy in the 1960's authority of every kind was being rejected. The motto of the younger generation was “Question Authority.” Then it became “reject authority.” And with the rejection of authority came a rejection of the very notion of truth. Since it seemed no authority could be trusted, absolute truth must not exist.

5. What resulted was a historical slide into moral relativism that said truth is whatever is true for me. I have my truth and you have your truth. You may believe homosexuality is wrong while I believe it's right and my truth is just as true as your truth because at the end of the day there really is no such thing as truth.

6. How can anyone justify the killing of an unborn baby in its mother's womb? How can homosexuality be branded as normal? How can there it be that a doctor can look at a healthy newborn and be unable to declare whether it is male or female? That's easy. All you have to do is remove truth from the equation. Once truth is out humans can live however they please and claim the moral high- ground.

7. Perhaps a historical overview would help. In Premodern times, people believed that religion was the source of truth. In Modern Times people believed science was the source of truth. In Post-modern times, however, man had given up on the notion of truth. But within the heart of every man there is woven into the fabric of our spiritual DNA a longing to know truth. There simply has to be something that gives meaning and direction to life! But it's a mystery... or so it seems.

8. Practically speaking in our day people seek truth and meaning in human reason. Others look for it self-achievement and success. Many look for it in social justice or environmental activism. Some have sought it in drugs, alcohol, and personal pleasure. A few think they would find it in some kind of esoteric cosmic conscientiousness. But truth remains a mystery to our world.

9. This is the sad reality of our age. But there's actually nothing new here. The Romans were skeptical about absolute truth. At his trial Jesus said, to Pontius Pilate, “I have come into the world to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to Me.” To which Pilate skeptically demurred, “What is truth?”

10. To Pilate truth was a mystery. In Paul's day the Athenians created thousands of carved idols representing their so-called “gods” They even had a monument dedicated “to the unknown god” (Acts 17:23). This is evidence that to the Greek Philosophers of the day Truth was a mystery.

11. But it's not as though the "Mystery of Truth" is difficult to solve. The Truth has always been available to anyone who has ears to hear and eyes to see. Proverb 30:5 declares "Every word of God is true." To those who trust in it, it is "a lamp to their feet and a light to their path" (Psa. 119:105). And Jesus prayed to the Father on behalf of his people as follow:, "Sanctify them in Your truth; Your word is truth" (Jn. 17:17).

12. Beloved, this is why the church is so important in our time. In the darkness of a culture that has dismissed and condemned the very thing it needs most, there stands the church holding the blazing beacon of the Word of God, the revelation of eternal truth.

13. Notice how Paul speaks of the church here in 1 Tim. We are the "household of God." A "household" in the OT consisted of Mothers, Fathers, children, grandparents, servants, in-laws, and those who have been adopted. The church is like that. It's God's big family. In Gal. 6:10 Paul calls it the "household of faith." We are a group of people who are all united by our faith in what God has revealed; namely, the truth.

14. We are the "household of God" also called the "church of the living God." When He says "living God" he is using an OT term that distinguished God from idols. What are idols? They are lifeless and ugly hunks of wood or stone that men have artificially beautified by covering them with gold and silver and precious stones. They are just the kind of gods the world can embrace because a lifeless "god" is something that can be manipulated. That's the kind of religion the world loves.

15. But the God who gave us the Scriptures is NOT a lifeless hung of wood or stone. He is the "Living God." He exists! He's Alive! And He is not silent! He has spoken and He has given his word to the church.

16. The church's responsibility, then, is to hold up God's truth like a pillar holds up the roof. Paul, however, was not thinking about propping up a building about to collapse. Rather, he was thinking of a vigorous, triumphant church commending the gospel to the world. God has designated the church as guardian and proclaimer of the truth.

17. There is a sense in which the church guards the truth by remaining on the lookout for false teachers who would derail people's faith. But in reality, the church doesn't need to protect the truth. As Spurgeon once said, the word of God is like a lion in a cage. You don't have to protect it. Just let it out! It will take care of itself. And that's what the church does. We live and proclaim the truth.

18. This week I heard Alistair Begg say, "We can't allow a post-modern world to back us into a corner because they have give up on the notion of truth." And he is right! Yes, it is probably the case that the majority of people you work with during the week don't believe in absolutely truth. And they may make you feel uncomfortable when you live by convictions you have derived from God's word. But my friends, the truth you have is exactly the truth they need! How will they ever be reconciled to God without the truth? How will they ever escape the judgment of eternal Hell without the truth? How will they ever come to know your Savior, Jesus Christ, unless you (and we as the church) proclaim the truth.

19. You see, the mystery of the truth was solved a very long time ago. And you already have it.

The Bible you hold in your hand is the truth – eternal truth! The truth all men search for by never find apart from Jesus Christ who said, “I am the way the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me” (John 14:6).

20. That brings us to the second mystery:

II. The Mystery of Godliness:

Read 3:16

1. The word for “great” here is “mega.” So the Mystery of godliness is NOT just a mystery, it’s a mega-mystery! It is the most important mystery in the world. And what is this mystery? Well Paul gives us six pithy statements that we can all remember.

2. If you read the literature on this verse every commentator will tell you that it is commonly believed that what we have before us is the lyric of an ancient hymn that was already being sung in the first century church. If it wasn’t a song then it was surely an early confession of the church that could easily be committed to memory by every member of God’s household.

3. The first clue we discover about this mystery (the mystery of godliness) is that it’s about a Person. Notice in the first statement it says, “He was revealed...” All of the modern versions use the pronoun “He” indicating that Paul is speaking NOT so much of a proposition but of a Person.

4. The question we need to ask is how does the discovery of a Person unravel this mega-mystery? And in what sense can that Person be called “godliness.” The answer of course is that if that Person is Jesus Christ, then it is appropriate to refer to a Him as “godliness” because He is the very essence of Godliness. The term “godliness” then, means the entirety of Christian truth that is wrapped up in the Person of Jesus. And it is a “great mystery for two reasons. First, the world is blind to who Jesus is. As long as they reject the truth of His role in the history of the world He will forever remain a mystery. Second, He is a mystery to believers because even though we know and love Him, the fullness of His glory will always be infinitely greater than we can comprehend.

5. Let’s look at these statements one at a time.

3. First we have Incarnation:

- A. Notice what he says (16). “He was manifest in the flesh.” Now here is a mystery? How can God become man? Moreover, why would He ever want to?
- B. Nevertheless, Paul tells us (Gal. 4:4-5) that “in the fullness of time..., God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, ⁵ to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.”
- C. Again, he writes (Phil. 2:6), that though He [existed] in the form of God, he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”

- D. This, beloved, is a “great mystery.” And behind it is and even greater one because the fact that He is God points to the reality that God is triune. And how can you explain the trinity? How do you unravel the truth that “within the godhead there are three united Persons without separate existence – so completely united as to form one God.” And that “The divine nature subsists in three distinctions – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”¹
- E. The mega-mystery is that for the salvation of sinners God became man, and because of His great love and rich mercy He died in our place. In the Person of Jesus Christ we see God. That’s the incarnation.

4. Second, we have Vindication:

- A. Paul says, “He was vindicated by the Spirit.”
- B. Vindication certainly must relate to Jesus claims to be the promised Christ (Messiah) of God. The Jews rejected Him. Roman Soldiers mocked and murdered Him. But the Holy Spirit vindicated His claim through all the miracles He performed and by His resurrection.
- C. Luke tells us that after the resurrection Jesus was seen again and again, and at one time by some 500 people who were still alive as witnesses when Luke’s book was circulated.
- D. Our trust in Jesus Christ is NOT a blind faith. Many proofs, evidences, and credible witness testimony substantiated it.
- E. Moreover, God Himself vindicated Jesus – at his baptism (“this is My beloved Son); and at His Transfiguration (“this is My beloved Son).

5. Third, we have Observation:

- A. Paul says, He was seen by angels.
- B. Throughout Jesus’ life he was seen, visited by, and attended to by angels. They were their to announce His birth to Shepherds near Bethlehem. They ministered to Him at His temptation, and they came to strengthen him in the garden of Gethsemane.
- C. At His resurrection an angel rolled away the stone that sealed the tomb. Angels spoke to the women who arrived at the tomb saying, “Why do you see the living from among the dead. He is not here. He is risen, just as He said” (Matt. 28:6).
- D. At His ascension two angels escorted him into heaven (Acts 1:10-11).

6. Fourth, we have Proclamation:

- A. Paul says, “Proclaimed among the nations.”
- B. By the time Paul had written 1 Timothy, the gospel of Jesus Christ was spreading across the Roman Empire like a Texas brush fire. The H.S. was sending Christ-proclaimers everywhere, and people were being irresistibly drawn to faith in Jesus.

¹ Paul Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology*, (Chicago, Moody Publishers, 2014), 205

- C. This was not merely a gospel for the Jesus. As Donald Guthrie reminds us, “It must never be forgotten that a Hebrew Christ became a Curse for the nations.”
- D. And the question today is the question that was relevant in Paul’s day, “Who will go to the nations to take the gospel to those who do not wish to hear it? Who will dare to believe that preached, taught, read, and spoken Gospel still has the power to save everyone who believes. This is Proclamation

7. Fifth, we have Affirmation:

- A. Paul says, “Believed on in the world.”
- B. At the first public preaching of this gospel 3,000 souls believe in Jesus and were baptized ((Acts 2:41). Soon after that number would grow to 5,000.
- C. When Stephen was stoned the Christians scattered all over the Empire and took the Gospel with them. And the gospel has been spreading ever since.
- D. The reason you believe is because someone believed before you and told you what they knew. They took this mega-mystery and unfolded it before you. And by the power of the Spirit and the Word by the grace of God you too were saved.
- E. And that brings is to...
- F.

6. Sixth we have Glorification

- A. Paul concludes with – “Taken up in glory.”
- B. In Acts 1:9-11 we read, “when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. ¹⁰ And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”
- C. And Paul tells us that “God highly exalted Him and gave Him a name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil 2:8-11).

7. These six short statements are a summary of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the mega-mystery of all time. It is the ultimate truth of humanity which has been entrusted to the church to guard and proclaim.

8. Have you trusted in Jesus Christ for salvation? If you have then you are part of the “household of God” the family of the Lord Jesus.

And In the household of God everyone believes in absolute truth which is grounded in the mysterious revelation of the incarnate God – Jesus Christ.