

ASCENSION DAY 2012
Scripture: Acts 1:1-11
Text: 1 Timothy 3:16

INTRO: For our text this morning on this ascension day we go to 1 Timothy 3:16. It says, "And without controversy, great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifested in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen by angles, preached among the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up in glory." What an incredible overview of the life of Christ! Now the reason I chose this text is because in all my years of preaching I have not yet preached on this text, and this text ends up at the ascension of Christ, "received up into glory."

1 Timothy is the first of three epistles called 'pastoral epistles'. They are called that because they are written to pastors. In this 3rd chapter Paul deals with the qualifications of pastors and deacons. Having laid out those qualifications, this chapter closes with verses 14-16 (read). Paul is instructing them on various things though he hopes to come to them shortly. But, probably realizing that this may not happen, he feels it best to send the letter on ahead. I am so glad he did, otherwise we would not have it either.

"But", he says, "if I am delayed, I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of truth." Paul wants this young pastor to know how to conduct himself in the house of God. He wants him to know how to run the church. And this letter gives pastoral instruction. Oh, to have time to preach through this book! I have talked to you about the temple and the tabernacle as being the Father's house. But in the age of the Church, it is the church that is the house of God.

So he says that he is writing so that Timothy might know how to run the house of God. Then he says this house of God, the church, is the church of the living God. All those people who belong to this particular church make up the house in which God dwells. They are His dwelling place. So, in Corinthians He calls Christians 'the temple (naos) of God'. That is, the place where He dwells. And each local church is a part of the universal Church, and all these Christians are the pillar and ground of the truth. I must preach on this verse some day. It has been on my heart for some time now. What an incredible truth is this!

And then he says, "And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifested in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, Seen by angles, preached among the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory." Now if you are using the NKJV you will find that this is written in poetic form, and

indeed it is. I think there is little doubt that we have a stanza of an early church hymn, something they would sing. And Paul says, "Without controversy, that hymn presents the truth." And that is what we want to look at this morning.

I. THE INTRODUCTION TO THIS HYMN

Paul gives in this verse first an introduction to this hymn. He says, "And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness..." This word translated 'controversy', is the word 'homologoumenws'. It comes from the word 'homologeō' which means to confess. We might translate it thus, "Confessedly, great is the mystery of godliness."

Now let me also explain briefly what a Biblical mystery is, and then go to the big question of the word 'godliness'. A mystery is something that is known only to one person or a special group of people. It is something to which the mouth is kept shut. That is why it is a mystery. And if it is made known, it is made known to a select few, called the initiated ones. In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul said, "Behold I show you a mystery. We shall not all sleep but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye." Here was something that had been unknown until God revealed it to him. And then he revealed it to the believer. But, the mystery spoken of in our text is something that at this point is known only to the Triune God. Neither angels nor man understands it. We do not know how it works, but we know it is so. Great is the mystery of godliness.

Now, to the question regarding the word translated 'godliness'. It is the word *eusebeia*. John MacArthur says, and I quote, "It refers to the great truth of salvation and righteousness through Christ, which produces **godliness** (*eusebeia*) in those who believe." If this is correct, the godliness referred to as the great mystery is the godliness salvation produces in people. But, MacArthur goes on to say, "It is also possible to understand **the mystery of godliness** as a reference to Jesus, who was the very revelation of true and perfect "godlikeness," since He was God."

So, here is the question: The great mystery of godliness, does it refer to the Christian or to Christ? Is Christ as God manifested in the flesh the great mystery of godliness? Or is it the godliness produced in people by the Gospel that is the great mystery? Is the mystery that God was manifested in the flesh? Or is the mystery that God produces godliness through what the rest of this hymn

says? From the original word 'godliness' euseebia, and its uses elsewhere, I conclude it has to do with that godliness that is worked in man by the Gospel.

A few lines of a hymn that is based on 2 Timothy 1:12, I think describes this passage as I understand it. It is the hymn, "I Know Whom I Have Believed." Here is the mystery described in that hymn in my understanding.

I know not why God's wondrous grace
To me He hath made known,
Nor why, unworthy, Christ in love
Redeemed me for His own.

I know not how this saving faith
To me He did impart,
Nor how believing in His Word
Wrought peace within my heart.

I know not how the Spirit moves,
Convincing men of sin,
Revealing Jesus through the Word,
Creating faith in Him.

That, to me, describes the mystery of godliness. I do not know how God produces godliness through the Gospel, but He does it. Paul has said elsewhere, "For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe" (1 Cor. 1:21). Now the message that is preached is not foolishness. It is foolishness to man. Man cannot understand how God does it in this way, but in the wisdom of God he hides the great things from the worldly wise and reveals them to babes. Some of the most learned men are the greatest fools: i.e., David Suzuki, Richard Dawkins. You will hardly find greater fools, though they are steeped in worldly wisdom.

I listened carefully to the sharing at Mother's Day. I heard some mothers say, "I didn't know I could get so angry until I had children." "I feel so ugly sometimes." And then that mother reads the Word of God or comes to church, and God ministers to that heart and godliness begins to form. Yes, she shall be saved in child bearing. There it is. Present tense salvation! Great is the mystery of godliness. In every stage of life whether in the man or the woman, God works godliness through what the message the ancient hymn of this verse gives.

II. THE PARTS OF THIS HYMN

A. Manifested In The Flesh

So, let us look at the parts of the hymn. The very first word has created incredible difficulties for commentators. The problem is the original text. Should it read, 'hos' or 'theos'? If it is 'theos' the text starts with the word 'God'. If it is 'hos', the text says, "Who". Albert Barnes says, "Probably there is no passage in the New Testament which has excited so much discussion among critics as this, and none in reference to which it is so difficult to determine the true reading. It is the only one, it is believed, in which the microscope has been employed to determine the lines of the letters used in a manuscript; and, after all that has been done to ascertain the exact truth in regard to it, still the question remains undecided."

Writers like John MacArthur say that the oldest and best texts say it is 'hos', or 'who'. I have told you numerous times there is no proven ground yet to say, "the oldest and best texts say." That is purely opinion. There is no proof. I hold to the majority text, or the Byzantine text from which the KJV and NKJV come and I would say that the word "God" is the original reading.

If I am correct in that, the text then reads, "God was manifested in the flesh." There is no difficulty in that as far as the Bible is concerned. When Christ came into the world, He was God manifested in the flesh. Through Christ, man got to know God because Christ, in the flesh revealed God to man. That is, He made God known by how He lived and spoke in the flesh.

When we talk about 'flesh' here we are not talking of the sin nature. We are talking about the incarnation of the Word of God when He became the Christ in the flesh. Jesus Christ made God visible in His flesh. We will soon be dealing with that in John 14 so I will forego more comment here.

But, let me ask you this question. If God had a body like we have, without the sin nature of course, how would He live? What would He do? Well, God veiled Himself in the very flesh of man and lived and walked and talked among us. If you want to know how He lived and how He walked and how He talked, all you have to do is read Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. There, in the life of Christ, God lived. He was manifested in the flesh.

B. Justified In The Spirit

Our second point is that God was justified in the Spirit. Again, this point has difficulties. First, why does He need to be justified? And second, was He justified in or by His own spirit, or by the Holy Spirit? We are of course, talking about Jesus Christ as God.

Now let me say here first that there are two ways of being justified. To be justified is to be declared righteous. We, as sinners, when we are converted, are justified by the righteousness of Christ. We are declared righteous by the righteousness we receive from Him. But we can also be justified by works. Abraham was justified by his faith in Genesis 15. This is what Paul speaks of in Romans 4. Then he was justified by his works in Genesis 22 when he offered Isaac on the altar of sacrifice. This is vindication and this is what James speaks of in the book of James. You see, I can be declared righteous even though I am a sinner, if I trust in Christ and His righteousness has been applied to me. But I can be justified on the basis of my own righteousness. That is vindication.

I explain that like this. Let us say that I am accused of robbing the bank in town last Sunday at 10:00 a.m. My van was seen there. A picture was taken of someone who looked just like me. Everything matches that it was me and I am taken in. Then I say, "It cannot be. I was teaching Sunday School at Living Hope Evangelical Church at that very time." So, they check it out with those who were here and 50 people show up to say I was teaching here at that time. I would be justified by my own life. Evidence would be given that I am righteous with regard to this charge. In this case, justification means vindication. It is this, that is meant here.

Jesus Christ was justified by His own life and works. Whether this proceeded from His own Spirit or the Holy Spirit is not so important to determine here. The facts are Jesus' own life justified, or vindicated Him in every way possible. The truth is that He was guided and directed by the Holy Spirit and He followed everything, and thus was justified.

So listen to Matthew 12:37, "For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned." When we speak right or do right we are justified by our own words or actions.

Jesus, during the time of His ministry, was speaking in one place. And when He was done, Scripture says this, "And when all the people heard *Him*, even the tax collectors justified God, having been baptized with the baptism of John" (Luke 7:29). In this instance, the obviousness of the truth by which He spoke caused 'even the tax collectors to justify God.' Incredible. Even those who hated truth said, "This Man is right! I have got to clean up my life." And so they got baptized. I thought, oh that David Suzuki and Richard Dawkins would come into such contact with truth. But on further thought, who has come to see greater evidences of God's truth than these men. They are simply very, very wicked unbelievers.

C. Seen By Angels

Third, He was seen by angels. The word used here for 'seeing' is important. It is the word 'horao'. It means to see and discern. It is a knowing seeing. It could almost have the idea of being attended by angels.

John MacArthur comments like this, "Throughout our Lord's earthly ministry, the **angels** observed Him, and attended to Him. They were there at His birth, announcing it to Joseph and the shepherds. They ministered to Him at His temptation, and strengthened Him in Gethsamane. At His death and resurrection, which is the focal point of this passage, **angels** observed Him... An angel rolled away the stone at the door of His tomb ([Matt. 28:2](#)). Angels appeared to the women, affirming that Jesus had risen ([Luke 24:4-7](#)). Finally, two angels attended Christ's ascension ([Acts 1:10-11](#)). Angels were involved in our Lord's earthly life from beginning to end. That, too, signified divine approval of the incarnate Messiah." He was seen of angels.

D. Preached Among The Gentiles

Fourth, God, through Christ, was preached among the Gentiles. Just before Jesus ascended to heaven He commissioned the 12 disciples. We have that commission stated in Matthew 28:16-20. The instruction is to disciple all nations, Gentiles. This word 'nations' is ethnee. We get our word 'ethnic' from it. Of its 160 occurrences in the NT 93 times it is translated 'Gentiles'. It is the same word as we have in our text.

Just before Jesus ascended, He instructed the disciples one last time. Turn to it in Acts 1:4-11, which was read

for us earlier. Here we see the instruction that the Gospel is to go to the ends of the earth. That end part is just past La Crete here. Well, I said something like that in a message and a man who had lived some years on the Queen Charlotte Islands e-mailed and said, "We thought we were at the ends of the earth." Well, four times the OT calls it the ends (plural) of the earth. So, there is more than one.

But, no matter where that end is, Jesus Christ has been preached all over the world among the Gentiles, and today that preaching is still going on. And the mystery of godliness is at work in the Gentile world.

E. Believed On In The World

Fifth, Jesus was believed on in the world. No matter where this Gospel goes, those who are interested in objective truth gravitate to it. Today hardly a nation in the world does not have at least some believers in it.

F. Received Up Into Glory

Last, God, in Christ, was received up into glory. Now it is interesting to me that the last point is that He was caught up into glory. But chronologically He was caught up into glory, then He was preached among the Gentiles, and then He was believed on in the world. So what we have is a poem that is not written in chronological order.

What we have here, I think, is a Hebrew poetical device where the first point corresponds to the last and the second to the second last and the third to the third last. In that way it makes perfect sense. And as I have thought this over, it may be because when Jesus was received up into glory, on ascension day, it was the last step He would take in procuring man's salvation until He returns and His enemies become His footstool.

Now it is simply interesting that He was received up into glory. The word 'received' here is analambano. But when He catches up His bride in John 14, he catches them up, paralambano. Jesus was received up. God was in heaven and received Him up. And after He was received up into glory, there He was seated at the right hand of God. When the Church, His bride, is caught up, He comes down to get her and goes back up together with her.

Now, when He was received up to glory, He there received that position the devil always wanted. The devil wanted to

be like the Most High. And to sit at the right hand of God is a very important matter. First, the place He is seated is in the Holy of Holies in that temple of all temples which is in heaven. From here, the entire universe is run and governed.

God had anticipated the moment Jesus would ascend to heaven in Psalm 110:1 (read). This is one of the most often quoted Psalms in the NT. It is a Messianic Psalm. It speaks of Christ. And God, foreseeing the ascension of Christ said the words of this verse, "The LORD, said to my Lord, 'Sit at My right hand, Till I make your enemies Your footstool."

I would like to point out another thing with regard to this. If I were to write that hymn, and possibly it had more stanzas, but I would have included the resurrection. Why is it missing? But when we recognize Christ's ascension, we cannot do so without realizing that He must have been resurrected. And when we realize He was caught up to glory, we must also come to another realization, namely that Scripture assures us He will be there until His enemies are made His footstool.

Look at our world today. It is as the hymn writer has said, "Truth is forever on the scaffold, and wrong is forever on the throne." Look at that which was once a small group of people, the gays and the lesbians. Their manner of life is twisted as far out of the natural as one can almost go. Yet, they raise their voice and cry foul. They treat themselves as victims of those who are what we call 'normal'. And then, by giving them the front page, they gain momentum until both politicians and preachers start to treat such an abominable practice with such care you would hardly think it is wrong. And then, in society, it becomes right.

Watch Islam and the Palestinians trying to butcher and bury Israel. Something so very obviously wrong gets billions of dollars of foreign aid, while Israel is criticized for providing places for her own people to build houses in their own home town. It makes you want to scream out of frustration.

But I want to tell you something. You see, the place Christ is sitting in heaven is in that temple that was the blueprint for the earthly temple. And in all the work of the priests here in the earthly temple, there was no place to sit. There was no chair for the priest. The reason was that the priest's work was never done. But Christ made one

sacrifice, once for all. And when that was completed, His work was done and He ascended into heaven and sat down on the throne at the right hand of God.

Jesus has ascended! He sits on high! He reigns! And as mankind waxes worse and worse, as even the president of the United States of America, Obama, so clearly shows by his own voice, I want to remind you of something, though you know it well. Make no mistake about it. Obama, Osama, Suzuki, and Dawkins, if they do not repent, they will come and kneel in greatest humility before the King of kings and the Lord of Lords, Jesus Christ, and there they will acknowledge Him as Lord!

In the days of the kings of Israel and Judah, in the days of Ahab, the Syrian king puffed himself up and put himself forward as though he could do with God's people what he wanted. He sent a message to Ahab and said, "Your gold is mine. Your silver is mine. Your wives are mine. Your children are mine." Well, Ahab trembled in his boots and said, "It's yours. Come and get it." And then Ben-hadad, the Syrian king waxed even more bold and sent to Ahab this message, "Oh, by the way, when my servants come, whatever else they find to their liking, that is also mine. My servants will come for it tomorrow." So Ahab consulted with his advisers and they said, "Don't do it." So, Ahab sent this message back to Ben-Hadad, "Let not the one who puts on his armor boast like the one who takes it off."

The Bible has a message from Christ to this wicked world. It is this: "Let not the one who puts on his armor boast like the one who takes it off." The Lord Jesus Christ has already taken off His armor and He has a victor's story. His work is already ended. Today He sits on the highest throne there is. Queen Elizebeth's throne looks like a clay model in comparison. The president of the United State's chair looks like a milk-stool in comparison to that throne. I am telling you today, "Christ ascended"! His work is done. His armor is off. And when He mounts His white steed for the last time, His victory is assured before He goes. His armor is His Word.

The preparation for that great day when all His enemies are made His footstool is going on today. Jesus ascended to heaven 40 days after the feast of first-fruits and today He is sitting at the right hand of God. As we watch the events of this world in growing wonder and amazement at how "Truth is forever on the scaffold and wrong forever on the throne", and evildoers wax worse and worse and gays as minorities win over majorities, we need to realize God

is on the throne and Christ is at His right hand, and nothing is out of God's control. He knew this day was coming and had to come before Christ's enemies could be made His footstool.

If it were not for our assured victory, when you watch what is happening in the world, it would be frightening. This past week, the president of the United States said that same sex marriage should be legal. One of the most frightful points of the downward spirals of societies has almost been reached by the United States of America.

But, our text is not quite done. It has a final word of encouragement for us. This final word can be taken two ways, but no matter which way we will see this, it will be most encouraging. You see, it says Christ was received up in glory! All commentators slide over this clause with barely a comment. But, like most passages, it has a question to it. And here is the question: was He taken up 'in' glory, or was He caught up 'into' glory? Was the way He was caught up, in glory? Or was the place He was caught up to described as glory? It depends if you translate the word 'en' as 'in' or 'into'. Some translations and some commentators take it as 'into' glory. The exegetical commentator, Lange translates it as 'into'. I have one translation that gives it as 'into'. The others translate it as 'in'.

Here is the difference. If he was received up *in* glory, it was His receiving up that was glorious. But that does not seem correct to me, since but a few disciples saw Him go. It makes a lot more sense to me that He was caught up 'into' glory. If that is the case, then heaven is a place of glory. That is what I think we have here. He was caught up into glory! The way to describe this place is glory.

When Jesus ascended into heaven, it was His eleven disciples that were present. Look at it in Acts 1:9 (read). But I wonder what happened in heaven when Jesus arrived in heaven, the victorious One! I have told you many times what glory is. It is when we recognize in someone else or others recognize in us something positive and they say, "Wow!" I wonder if heaven's arches ever rang more than that glorious day when He was received up into glory and the King of kings, and the Lord of lords arrived victorious in heaven! I wonder what celebrations took place there, and what festivities led to the day when He was crowned and was set down in the Holy of Holies in the Temple of temples, there to remain seated until His enemies become His footstool?

CONCL: Well, we have considered this Ascension Day, the hymn of 1 Timothy 3:16. "And without controversy, great is the mystery of godliness." And here is how heaven produced godliness from sinful and wicked people, "God was manifested in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, Seen by angels, preached among the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory."

In the last point we gave thought just briefly what it must have been like when Christ was received up into glory. From that, let me ask, what do you think it will be like to have lived the Christian life victoriously and to be taken up to glory? In closing I want to give you a little story that tries to explain to the human mind what it may be like. Some of you will remember this story since I have told it in the past. I took it from Gary Inrig's book, "A Call To Excellence." He was a pastor in Calgary years ago when we were still at Prairie Bible Institute. He writes:

What will it be like to reach heaven? A story out of the recent past may give us some idea. During June, July and August of 1965, an ordinary man from Cleveland Ohio lived out a dream. Forty-six-year-old Robert Manry purchased a thirteen-and-one-half foot, thirty year old, dilapidated boat. He repaired her, christened her Tinkerbelle, and learned how to sail. Then on June 1, 1965 his dream began. He set out from Falmouth, Massachusettes for Falmouth England, far across the Atlantic.

Manry's voyage was to take seventy-eight days, many of them cold, wet, and painful. Hit by storms, confused by hallucinations of hitchhikers and assassins, washed overboard, delayed by winds that were too great and becalmed by lack of wind at all, plagued by loneliness, and troubled by saltwater sores, he kept sailing.

Manry expected to sail into Falmouth Harbor quietly, let his family know of his arrival, secure passage for himself and Tinkerbelle, and return to the States. It did not turn out quite that way. Word of his voyage had reached England. As he neared the coast, Shakleton bombers from the Royal Air Forces 42nd squadron flew over in salute. Newspaper teams from both sides of the Atlantic vied for his story. Great ships hovered alongside with congratulatory messages.

During the last miles, a flotilla of ships and boats sailed out of Falmouth to greet him. Royal Navy helicopters formed an umbrella above. Boats circled and flocked about him and the people called out, "Good show!" "Glad you made it, Mate!" "Well

done. Well done!" Sailing along the quay, he could see crowds of cheering people jamming the ramparts of Pendennis Castle. Manry later wrote:

"People were everywhere; standing along the shore, perched on window ledges, leaning out of doorways, crowded onto jetties, thronging the streets, clinging to trees, and cramming the inner harbor in boats of every size and description. The whole place was teeming with humanity. I heard later that 50,000 people were there to see Tinkerbelle and me complete our voyage.

"I was dumbfounded, numbed by the enormity of it all, and not a little bewildered. It was just too much to take in all at once...every boat and ship in the harbor let go with its horn or whistle and shook the whole waterfront with reverberating sound as the crowd yelled. Royal Air Force Shackletons flew overhead in wigwagging salutes and a band...St. Stythians Silver Band, played 'The Star-Spangled Banner' and 'The Stars and Stripes Forever.'"

What will it be like to reach glory? In 2 Corinthians 12 Paul describes how he was caught up into paradise once. And he says he heard inexpressible words which it is not lawful for a man to utter. Just maybe it is not permissible to describe such things while we live here below. We will just have to make sure we get there to find out what it will be like.