

The mystery of godliness

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- [0 : 00] The Gospel of Paul to Timothy, chapter 3, and we're reading today at verse 16.
- 1 Timothy 3, at verse 16. And without controversy, great is the mystery of godliness.
- God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory.
- I want for the next three Sabbaths, when I'll be with you in the church here, that we concentrate our attention on aspects of the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ, as we seek preparation for the forthcoming communion season.
- And I know of no better place to begin than with this text of scripture that we have here.
- [1 : 33] Professor Murray, who was, say, probably the champion of the Reformed faith in the 20th century, states that in religion there are three great mysteries.
- There is what Professor Murray called the mystery of being. And that is the Trinity.
- The persons of the Trinity. And then there is what Professor Murray called the mystery of godliness.
- And the mystery of godliness centers on the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, and particularly on the incarnation of the second person.
- But then he said there is another mystery. The mystery of creaturely relations. And the mystery of creaturely relations is expressed for us in the union that exists between God's people in the world and Christ in glory.
- [3 : 04] Now these three mysteries are surely a suitable meditation for all the people of God in the world. And today, as the Lord will enable us, we're going to look together at the second of these mysteries.
- The mystery of godliness. The person of Christ. And particularly the incarnation of our blessed Lord.
- Now as I was scouring the work that has been done in literature on this text, I came across a very interesting section on this text in the works of Richard Sibbes, the English Puritan.
- Do you remember what was said about Richard Sibbes? The men used to say about Dr. Sibbes, Heaven was in Dr. Sibbes before Dr. Sibbes was in heaven.
- And Dr. Richard Sibbes, in dealing with this chapter, or in this verse, breaks it down, I think in a very interesting and illustrative manner.
- [4 : 24] He says to us that here you have perhaps three ways of looking at this text. You have first of all a preface and then particular.
- You have, he says in a second illustration of the text, a fountain and its streams. You have, he says, as a third way of breaking it down, a porch in front of a house, an entrance hall, and then the fabric of the house.
- And that's the way I want to deal with this text today. I want us first of all to come to the fountain and then we'll look at the streams.

First of all, we'll look at the fountain that says, without controversy, great is the mystery of godliness.

And then we'll look at the six streams that come out from this fountain. God manifest in the flesh, justified in the spirit, seen of angels, preached to the Gentiles, believed on in the world, and received up into glory.

[5 : 51] Now, first of all, we're going to look at this statement, without controversy, great is the mystery of godliness. And I think the first thing that we ought to look at in respect of the fountain that we have here is this concept that Paul uses here, godliness.

Now, those of you who are conversant, perhaps some of you more conversant, with the Gaelic Bible than you are with the English Bible, will notice that the word that is used, or the word that translates godliness, in our Gaelic Bible, is the word geogoch, which is the word that we use for deity.

But I think that that's a translation that is perhaps somewhat unhappy, because really what the Lord is telling us here through the lips of Paul isn't that it's the mystery of deity, it's the mystery of godliness.

And what is this godliness? Well, it's a piety that is based on the truth of Christianity.

It's the truth of Christianity applied to human lives. And that's the mystery of which the apostle is dealing here.

[7 : 30] He's dealing with a mystery of piety in human life. And how can we solve this mystery?

If mystery it is, well, let me tell you why it's called a mystery of godliness. Because it can't be solved by human ingenuity.

It can't be solved by philosophy. It's a mystery that must have the lid taken off by God himself. It's a mystery that must be revealed by God to human lives and human spirits if it's going to be revealed at all, this great, great mystery.

And it's interesting that the word mystery is a word that is used in Scripture for two things. It's used, first of all, for something hidden.

Something that you cannot see. Something that you do not know. And then it's used in Scripture in this way. Something that is unknown, that has been revealed.

[8 : 52] Great is the mystery of godliness. My friends, will you not stand back and wonder for a moment to realize that this mystery of godliness is a mystery that has been revealed to men and women and boys and girls in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And you see what the apostle is saying here. Without controversy, great is the mystery of godliness. You see, what we have in this text is really a confession of the church of Christ.

You know something, I'm sure many of you, of the history of confessions of faith and how they began. They began in a very basic way.

Perhaps the earliest confession of faith in the church of Christ is the confession that is made in Philippians 2, where you have these words, Jesus is Lord.

That's the earliest and perhaps the most basic confession of the Christian church. And as the church was growing and as the church was going on in its development, that confession was being fleshed out.

[10 : 24] It was being filled out. And here in this text, you have a universal confession of the church of Christ without controversy.

There's no one in the church of Christ who dared doubt this great confession. And isn't it interesting, my friends, that today the confession of this text is perhaps the confession that is most under threat in the whole of the Christian world.

Because the doctrine of the confession of Jesus is the doctrine that is most under threat by erroneous teachers of all Jews.

They're always going and chipping away at the doctrine of the confession of Jesus Christ. But here you have the early church and it's making a statement.

And the early church is saying, there's no controversy about it. There's universal harmony regarding this great confession that we've got to make.

[11 : 41] And it's a confession that centres itself on the passion of Jesus Christ. Now, so much of our time has been taken up on the porch.

because that's just the fountain. But now I want us to go to the streams that flow from the fountain. And there are six of them in this text.

And the first is this, great is the mystery of godliness. God was manifest in the flesh.

God was manifest in the flesh. I think it was Professor Patrick Fairbairn who tells us somewhere in his writings that there are two ways in which God was made manifest in the flesh.

He says to us, first of all, God was manifest in the flesh in the sense of his self-concealment.

[12 : 55] In the sense of self-concealment. The cruxess, as it's called in our theology. The fact that he put a veil over his glory.

So there is a sense in which God is made manifest in the flesh by way of a concealing of his glory. A hiding of his glory.

You see, my friends, when Christ came in our nature, as the hymn writer puts it, veiled in flesh the Godhead see.

So what was this veil of flesh? It was a veil that concealed the essential glory of the second person to a great degree so that only on occasions do you have the shining force of that glory.

I just want to mention two places where in the humiliation of Christ the glory of the Lord shines through.

[14 : 09] it shines through in signs and wonders. It shines through in its miracles.

Oh, friends, do you see the glory of God in the Christ who stilled the storm? Do you see the glory of God in the Christ who healed the paralytics?

Do you see the glory of God in the Christ who touched the blind eyes and who healed them? Do you see the glory of God in the Christ who raised the dead?

Of course you do. And it's almost as though for a moment in its miracles the veil of self concealment is as it were drawn aside so that the glory that is his shines through in the miracles that he performs in the world.

But then there's another place where his glory shines through and I want to take you now just briefly to the Mount of Transfiguration because you see there he was changed he was transfigured he was different and it's almost as though in these words his face shone and glistened you see something of the essential glory that is his the glory of God shining through the veil there on the mountain of Transfiguration you see the wonder of the one whose glory was concealed being revealed in a moment of time but just as there is in his taking our nature in his incarnation there is a self concealment so there is a self revelation oh the mystery of godliness my friend there's mystery in this that you've got self concealment and self revelation together both of these and what is christ the human christ the christ of the incarnation what is he he is god's revelation of himself to men veiled in flesh the godhead see my friend as you today consider the incarnation of the blessed lord jesus the incarnation of god in now taking our nature what do you have you have a sovereign revelation of god to man it's god's last revelation listen to the words of the apostle who writes to the hebrews he says god who had sundry times and in diverse manners spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets hath in these last days spoken to us by his son the effulgence of the father's glory the express image of his person god has spoken to us in the sending of his son this is the close of the prophetic word now that jesus has come he came in the flesh he came by taking our nature and who is it it is god that is manifest in the flesh and what is the real wonder of this confession well i think you've got to say that the wonder of this confession is true is surely this that the one who is manifest in the flesh had a be from all eternity he was manifest god was manifest in the flesh that is the confession it speaks of the pre-existence of jesus christ it speaks of the of the pre-existence of this one who was manifest in the flesh the pre-existence of the god the god man as the second person of the trinity great is the mystery of godliness

[19 : 11] that god was manifest in the flesh my friend do you realize what you owe to the incarnation of christ as you prepare yourself solemnly for a coming communion season do you realize that you have a great debt that you owe to the incarnation of course you do professor murray somewhere and rabbi duncan also who pays tribute to this fact that you must you must realize the glory of what happened at bethlehem before you can ever understand the wonder of what happened at calvary god taking our nature rabbi duncan puts it something like this he says we cannot go often enough to calvary but i fear he says that we go far too seldom to bethlehem we cannot go too often to calvary but i fear we go far too seldom to bethlehem what is who is he in yonder stall at his feet the shepherds fall tis the lord o wondrous story tis the lord the king of glory at his feet will humbly fall and will crown him lord of all god manifest in the flesh this is the mystery of godliness but then he goes on to say justified in the spirit and you know it's a very interesting form of argument we have here in this confession it's it's it's been stated that this confession could well have been integrated into a

Christian an early Christian hymn and I have no trouble in taking that view some of the commentators have said that what Paul is doing here is quoting a hymn that existed before his own time I doubt that and Professor Fairbairn states quite clearly that he doubted that too and he felt that what was happening here was that the church may well have taken the words of Paul in this confession and integrated it into a hymn now the argument the form of argument you'll notice it goes from the eternal world to time from time to the eternal world manifest in the flesh justified in the spirit seen of angels preached to the gentiles believed in the world received up to glory you've got this juxtaposition of the world and glory you've got this juxtaposition of humiliation and exaltation throughout the text and it seems very interesting to me that here you read he was manifest in the flesh that refers to his humiliation and he was justified in the spirit what does that refer to does it refer to his humiliation well there are senses in which the spirit justified

Christ while he was still in his humiliation but these moments of justification of vindication of Christ in the state of his humiliation are brief you remember for example at his baptism how the spirit came on him in the form of a dove and the voice of God was heard saying this is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased there he was being justified in the spirit as the heavenly dove came upon him as the spirit came upon him for his earthly ministry but all these moments when his his passion and his work were vindicated during the veil of his humiliation they were all too brief all too brief how was he justified in the spirit he was justified in the spirit in the glory of his resurrection the glory of his resurrection

I hear some people talking about the about the resurrection and they downgrade the resurrection of Christ no I don't believe for a moment that the resurrection in and of itself was part of the atoning work of Christ and I hope there's no one in this gathering believes that the resurrection in and of itself is what forgave you of your sins what forgave your sins was that Jesus died it is enough that Jesus died and that he died for me but today I do believe that there is a very very important place in the application of redemption as certainly as certainly as

I stand here for the resurrection of Christ now you ask me what part has the resurrection of Christ to play in my salvation if it is no part of the atoning work of Christ what is it well listen to the way Professor Duncan speaks about it he speaks about the resurrection of Christ like this and the death of Christ he says he died to procure my redemption that's the atoning work of Christ he died to procure it he rose to confer it he died to procure it he rose to confer it and without the resurrection of Christ my dear friend here today doesn't the

[26 : 31] Bible make absolutely plain that your faith would be in vain and you would still be in your sin without the resurrection of Christ it would be in vain and I hear some people telling me that the resurrection of Christ doesn't mean anything but the guarantee that God accepted him it means that God but it means more than that it means that God not only accepted Christ but he accepts all those for whom Christ died he rose to confer my salvation now we're going to look at this justified in the spirit how was Christ justified in the spirit the whole of his finished work was vindicated by the resurrection of Christ how do you know today that the work that Christ did for you in the cross is accepted by

God how do you know you know it because Jesus rose from the dead that's your proof that's your proof that's where it was as it were he puts the stamp of approval on the on the finished work of Christ in that he raised him from the dead he vindicated the work that he did while that Christ did while he was manifest in the flesh great is the mystery of godliness and the mystery of godliness hones in on the resurrection of Christ as it does on the incarnation and on the finished work of Christ on his dying on the cross and then the apostle goes on to say he was sin of angels great great great is the mystery of godliness god manifest in the flesh justified in the spirit sin of angels have you ever noticed the place of the angelic ministry in the in the in the of our lord jesus christ listen there were angels at his birth that sang the old glory to god in the highest and on earth peace good will toward men there were angels ministered to him at the outset of his earthly ministry when he was led to be tempted by the spirit to be tempted by the devil in the wilderness you've got a lovely lovely cameo of the of the temptation of christ in the gospel of mark that tells us after the temptation was over the angels came and ministered to him there in the wilderness at the time of the temptation you've got the angelic ministry again surrounding the agony of christ in the garden robbie duncan's favorite angel the angel that he longed for most to see when he would go to heaven to be with christ the angel that ministered to christ in the garden of gethsemane you've got that angel mentioned scene of angels you've got angels at his death you've got angels at his death and you go into the grave where he lay where he rose and there you have an angel sitting one at the head and one at the feet where the body of

Jesus had lain one at the head and one at the feet where the body of Jesus had lain my friend isn't it a great mystery that angels should minister to God manifest in the flesh I wondered why that angel was sent to the garden of gethsemane have you ever given thought what was that angel doing in the garden of gethsemane an angel came to the garden to strengthen him why did the angel come to the garden to strengthen him well the church has given many answers to that question and one of the answers that the church has sought to give to that question is this that that angel came into the abyss of his agony in the garden to worship him to worship him and the way in which

God's son was strengthened by the angel on the way to the cross was that one of the angels of God was there in the midst of his agony worshipping him worshipping him now one of the ways in which the old testament tells you and I to worship him is this give strength to God strength strength to the Lord give ye how can you strengthen God you can't strengthen God God is the almighty the all powerful the one who is all strong the one who is omnipotent you can't strengthen God the only way in which you can give strength to God is that you go to the place of worship and you ascribe to him the strength that is already is and imagine it my friend an angel winging his way from glory to the garden of

Gethsemane to strengthen God's son in the garden by ascribing to him the strength that was already his in the midst of the garden you have that angel coming in all the horror in all the agony in all that the garden meant to the son of God you have the son how with an angel ascribing strength to him telling him who he was reminding him of the glory that was his not that he was ever unaware of the glory that was his in the garden of Gethsemane he was as aware of his God head as he was in glory from all eternity but remember this my dear friends it was a comfort and a strength to the son of

[33 : 34] God in our nature that he was ascribed that worship that was due to him is it any wonder that the epistle to the Hebrews says and let all the angels of God worship and he seen of angels now in his exalted glory and the only fit occupation of the angels in the exalted glory of Christ is this that let all the angels of God worship and you know my friend the fact that he was seen of angels he was seen of them in a particular way in a different way to the way that he seen by faith by the church of Christ the angels it said of them when Peter is speaking of the sufferings of Christ and the glory that would follow he adds this things that the angels desire to look into now how there are a few words for looking in the

New Testament and this word things that the angels desire to look into it's a word that means this they're looking down and they're straining and peering in they're looking down and straining and peering in what are they're straining at they're straining to look into the sufferings of Christ and the glory that would follow them why the strain why the peering why the looking down because you see they're at their limits angels can't understand the sufferings of Christ and the glory that follows them the way the church of God joins in songs of acclamation for the finished work of Christ my dear friend he was seen of angels but the glory of it all is this he wasn't manifest in the flesh for angels he was manifest in the flesh for the sinful sons of

Adam in order that he might save a people from their sin thou shalt call his name Jesus for he shall save his people from their sin sin of angels preached unto the Gentiles that's another of the glorious mysteries of godliness there are two things that you can say that are mysterious about being preached unto the Gentiles first of all it's a wonder that this revelation wasn't confined to the Jewish nation oh the grace of God that the gospel went out to the Gentile world and there's also a glory in the heralding of the name of the saviour of the work of the saviour to the Gentiles my friend there's a glorious mystery in the preaching of the gospel just think of it that

God would take sinful lips like mine to proclaim the glory of this mystery to the Gentiles oh if it was only that isn't there a mystery attached to it isn't there a mystery attached to it and imagine that the gospel reached these islands of the sea and it reached in Vernais and in the year 1992 we're still preaching this gospel preached unto the Gentiles the wonder of it the mystery of it oh my friend is there not a proof positive when the gospel is still being preached 2000 years after the death of Christ is there not proof positive that great is the mystery of godliness preached unto the Gentiles do you know the preaching of the gospel from sabbath day to sabbath day is one of the miracles one of the miracles

I remember a conversation I had with another young student for the ministry the year before I finished college and this young fellow was going through on the train from Glasgow to Edinburgh with me and he said to me you know he said I think I've got enough to last for three weeks I think I've got what will keep me going for three weeks he said but then he said I don't know what lies before me and you know 13 years later 12 years later or 13 years later that man is still preaching the gospel and you know the wonder of it is this the stream hasn't run dry the stream hasn't run dry and the stream will never run dry it'll never run dry there was a minister in Ferintosh on a dry summer and in this century and the water supply to the manse dried up and he remembered reading in

[39 : 13] Dr Macdonald's story that there was a well in the glebe somewhere where he used to go to draw water and he made his way to the place where he thought that well would be and once he had cleaned and dug there was still water in that well and you know my friends that's the way with the well that the preachers of the gospel are drawing from it's never run dry and it won't run dry whatever you think and whatever I think and there are days you don't know the days that your pastor has during the week and he's wondering is the well going to run dry this sabbath but the wonder of it all is this the well hasn't run dry yet and the well will never run dry as long as God's Holy Spirit is ministering to the church and as long as the gospel is being preached to the

Gentiles as long as there's a purpose of God to reach Gentile lives with the gospel but there's another side there's another stream flowing from the fountain of the mystery of godliness today and you know what it is he's believed on in the world in 1992 there are still people who are coming to faith in Christ and you know one of my great concerns for you dear people in Grey Friars is this that in this congregation there will be those in 1992 who will be coming to faith in Christ how do they come they come through the old fashioned preaching preached on to the Gentiles believed on in the world oh the wonder of it all that faith is still being ministered to God's elect through the preaching of the gospel the reading but especially the preaching of

God's word are the means by which he effectually blesses the gospel to men and my friends today on this Sabbath day of 1992 the Lord from heaven is still ministering to the church and he's still saying to the church believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you'll be saved and he's still accepting men that come by faith to the cross he's still accepting men that come and close with him in the gospel my friend this is the message I've got for you today the Lord receives sinners he does I know it because he received me I know it because he reached into my life and he took me from a fearful pit and from the miry clay and he put a new song in my mouth and if he did it to me my friend he can do it to you he's believed on in the world oh sinner have you believed on this

Jesus the Jesus of whom it is said great is the mystery of godliness have you come to believe in him yet oh you say no not yet not yet oh well if that's the case my friend don't let another day go past without believing on him in the world because he still believed on in the world tonight today and then there's one other glorious thing received up into glory the world couldn't contain him the earth couldn't contain him he burst the bands of the grave and the resurrection and he walked for 40 days on the earth and then he led his church out to a hill at Bethany and he raised his hands over the church in benediction and he rose and he went into heaven and you know

I love to think of his going into glory his being received into glory with his hands outspread over the church his hands outspread in dominical blessing on the church and you know my friends the hands that were spread over the church when he was received into glory are in glory still raised over the church and they're raised over the church in unending blessings