

“Mega-Mystery”

1 TIMOTHY 3:16

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In Ephesians 5:18-19, the Bible tells us that we are to be ***“...filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with [y]our heart[s] to the Lord.”*** As Christians, we do a lot of singing, and most of us probably have some favorite songs. Perhaps some songs are especially important because of the way they are worded. Others may be special to us because of the music. Perhaps others are special to us because we associate certain songs with important events. I remember the song we sang after my dad’s lesson on the day I obeyed the gospel nearly 30 years ago. I remember the song we sang as my bride walked down the aisle. Perhaps you associate a favorite song with a loved one or maybe with a good experience like camp. Some songs are especially meaningful because of the message that is conveyed. Perhaps you sang a particular song at the congregation where you grew up. Music has a powerful way of communicating.

This morning, I would like for us to consider a passage that appears to be one of just a small handful of songs that are recorded for us in the New Testament. In the Old Testament, we have an entire book of songs, the book of Psalms, with 150 chapters. We have other songs scattered throughout the Old Testament (some of them are one or even two chapters long), but the New Testament is different. We read about the early Christians singing, but we rarely have the words to their songs. So we have a rare treat this morning. In fact, the song is found in the verse that comes immediately after the two verses that we studied in last week’s lesson. The passage is found in 1 Timothy 3 (p. 1856). Last week, we looked at verses 14-15, but when we get to verse 16, it is almost as if the apostle Paul...breaks into song! He is talking about the church being the family of God. He is talking about the church being the pillar and support of the truth, and then he breaks into a section of poetry – there appears to be some structure, and rhyme and rhythm, and that is what causes many people to consider 1 Timothy 3:16 to be one of the only songs ever recorded in the New Testament. The music has long since been forgotten, but the words live on in the inspired word of God. When we get to heaven, I hope we can sit down with Paul and have him teach us the tune. But for now, we only have the words.

As we focus our thoughts on verse 16, I want us to back up and look at verses 14-15 again just to give us a little sense of context. Let us notice, please, 1 Timothy 3:14-16, the words of the apostle Paul to the young preacher Timothy,

¹⁴ I am writing these things to you, hoping to come to you before long; ¹⁵ but in case I am delayed, I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth.

¹⁶ By common confession, great is the mystery of godliness:

***He who was revealed in the flesh,
Was vindicated in the Spirit,
Seen by angels,
Proclaimed among the nations,
Believed on in the world,
Taken up in glory.***

So we have a description of the church in verses 14-15, and then when we get to verse 16, we start reading about a **“mystery.”** We love mysteries! We love television shows where there is some great unknown that is eventually solved in the end. Not long ago, I read about some high school students who created a mystery. I don’t know whether I should be giving you some of you guys any ideas, but near the end of the school year, they got three goats and let them loose in the school. But before they let them loose, they painted numbers on the sides of the goats: 1, 2, and 4. And apparently, the staff at the school spent most of the day looking for Goat #3! Of course, there was no Goat #3!

That, however, is not the kind of mystery Paul is talking about here. When we look up the original word, we find that Paul is referring to a kind of secret. We have talked about this word before in another context, and you might remember we referred to some kind of initiation ritual – like we might do with a club, or a fraternity, or a sorority. The initiation ritual is unknown to the person being initiated; it is a mystery to them, until they experience it. And maybe in a slightly similar way, Paul refers to the **“mystery of godliness.”** It’s not like it’s top secret, but it is something you can’t really understand until you experience it. And he says that the mystery is **“great.”** The word translated here as **“great”** is the basis for the word “mega.” So, he is talking about a **“mega-mystery.”** The mystery of godliness is great. What, then, is the mystery? What is the secret to godliness? What is the key to living a godly life? This is where the song starts. The key to the mystery is Jesus! The key to godliness has been revealed through Jesus Christ! It is no longer a secret, but it has now been revealed through Jesus Christ. What was previously unknown has now been made known through Jesus.

And as the apostle Paul points out at the beginning of verse 16, all of what he is about to write is by **“common confession.”** The idea here is: What he is about to write is something that all Christians agree upon. These statements about the Lord are without a doubt. There is no dispute on these things – even to the point where the early church sang about these things. And with that, Paul outlines six undeniable facts about the Lord – facts that cause us to break out in song!

I. And the first amazing fact about the Lord in this song is that he was REVEALED IN THE FLESH.

As John said in the opening verses of his gospel account, **“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.... And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth”** (John 1:1,14). Last week, we studied the **“church of the living God.”** This **“living God”** came to earth in human form. He was **“revealed in the flesh.”**

In Philippians 2 (in another one of the rare “songs” in the New Testament), we read about **“Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men”** (Philippians 2:5-7). He **“poured Himself out,”** as some translations put it. The eternal God **“emptied Himself”** into human form, just as I would take a pitcher of water and pour it into a glass, the Lord **“poured Himself out”** into human form. He was **“revealed in the flesh.”**

He lived a human life. The Bible tells us that he was tempted in every way (as we are), yet he was without sin. And he did this for us. He came to seek and to save the lost. He came in the flesh not to be served, but to serve. The eternal God came to this earth to serve His own creation. He came here to lead us to God, to teach by example, to show us how to live. He was **“revealed in the flesh.”** And because he came in the flesh, he knows exactly how we feel and what we’re going through. He can sympathize with us in every way. He is merciful and forgiving. All of this is absolutely amazing! The mystery is great! The God of the Universe came to this earth to live with us. He walked and talked and when he lived here he didn’t insist on arriving on horseback and living in a gold-covered palace. He didn’t come down with vast armies and bodyguards and royal robes. Instead, he chose to be born into a poor family living in an oppressed nation, born to a young woman, his earthly father a carpenter – not a king, or a scholar, or a politician, but a common laborer. God himself was **“revealed in the flesh.”** That is something to sing about!

II. In verse 16, the song continues as Paul says that Jesus was **VINDICATED IN THE SPIRIT.**

The word **“vindicated”** refers to someone being declared right. At one point, maybe somebody appeared to be guilty, but as additional facts are revealed, the person is declared right in the end. I went online and did a quick search for the word **“vindicated”** in the news this week. There was a teacher in New York who had been accused of some inappropriate contact with a student, but in the course of the trial, it became obvious that the kid was making it up, and so the conclusion of the trial was that the teacher was vindicated. He was declared to be right. The word also came up with reference to the Tea Party. Over the past two years, various Tea Party groups have been saying, “Hey, we’re being targeted here.” This week, when the IRS publicly apologized for targeting conservative groups, the Tea Party was **“vindicated”** in that regard – once thought to be making things up, once thought to be exaggerating, they were declared this week to be right. We think of the Amish farmer accused of selling raw milk. He was found guilty, of course, of selling some product that the state told him to destroy, but on the charges of selling raw milk, the verdict early yesterday morning was “Not Guilty.” On those counts, the man was vindicated. He was declared to be right. These three stories from the news this week simply illustrate what happened throughout the Lord’s earthly ministry. Once thought to be wrong, once thought to be blaspheming God, once actually declared guilty by a human court, the Lord was eventually vindicated. He was declared to be just and righteous in the end.

We think of what Paul said in Romans 1:4 – he spoke of Jesus, **“...who was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead, according to the Spirit of holiness, Jesus Christ our Lord.”** The Spirit declared Jesus righteous by raising Him from the dead. There is no arguing with the resurrection. Peter said something similar in 1 Peter 3:18, where he said, **“For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the Spirit.”** The world said that Jesus was guilty, but the Spirit of God declared him “not guilty” by raising him from the dead. This is something to sing about! The world may think that Jesus is guilty, but he has been declared innocent by the Spirit of God. The resurrection proves that the Lord is innocent. He was revealed in the flesh and vindicated by the Spirit.

III. Notice, Paul gives a third important line in this song with the statement that the Lord has been **SEEN BY ANGELS**.

In fact, the angels had anticipated the coming of Jesus from long ago. Speaking of the prophets in Old Testament times, the apostle Peter (in 1 Peter 1) spoke of our salvation, and he said,

¹⁰ As to this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that would come to you made careful searches and inquiries, ¹¹ seeking to know what person or time the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating as He predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow. ¹² It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves, but you, in these things which now have been announced to you through those who preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven — things into which angels long to look.

In my mind, I picture the angels eagerly looking in on world history – they were looking in with eager anticipation – they could hardly wait for the coming of Christ. And so, we find in the New Testament that angels were deeply involved in the earthly life of Christ. He was seen by angels from beginning to end. When the Lord planned his arrival on earth, the angels were those who announced it. An angel spoke to Joseph, ***“Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins”*** (Matthew 1:20-21). An angel spoke to Mary, ***“Do not be afraid, Mary; for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end”*** (Luke 1:30-33). Once the Lord was born, an angel spoke to the shepherds watching over their fields at night, ***“Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord”*** (Luke 2:10-11). Later, an angel warned Joseph to take his young family to Egypt, and when the threat was passed, an angel told him that it was safe to go home. How amazing it must have been to those angels that the Son of God would willingly be poured out into human form. How amazing it must have been for those angels to see the God of heaven being wrapped up and secretly taken to safety from nation to nation.

But of course, it doesn't stop there. Once the Lord began his earthly ministry, we find that angels served him after he was tempted in the wilderness (Matthew 4). We find that the angels were with him again as he struggled in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night before he was murdered. On that night, the Bible tells us in Luke 22:43, ***“Now an angel from heaven appeared to Him, strengthening Him.”*** The angels, of course, were held back during the crucifixion. As they witnessed the Lord suffering on the cross, certainly they wanted to step in, but as we know, their services were never requested. In fact, when the Lord was first arrested in the garden, Peter lopped off the ear of one of the men who came to help, and the Lord rebuked Peter and said, ***“Or do you think that I cannot appeal to My Father, and He will at once put at My disposal more than twelve legions of angels?”*** (Matthew 26:53). A ***“legion”*** was a Roman army unit of 6,000 men. Sometimes we sing the song, ***“He Could Have Called 10,000 Angels.”*** I'm not too good at math, but my calculator tells me that if you multiply 12 by 6,000, the total comes out to 72,000. I guess we could sing, ***“He could have called 72,000 angels.”*** Maybe 10,000 sounds better, I don't know. But we do know that the Lord Jesus was ***“seen by angels”*** during his life on this earth.

Not only that, but the angels were also an important part of the resurrection. As the witnesses started showing up early on the first day of the week, they found angels guarding the tomb. An angel rolled away the

stone and sat on top of it. An angel told the women that they were not to be afraid but that they were to go and tell the others that the Lord had risen from the dead (Matthew 28). And then we also know that angels were present at the Lord's ascension back into heaven. In Acts 1:11, those two messengers said to the apostles, ***"Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven."*** Truly, the Lord was ***"seen by angels."*** Angels watched him from birth to death, from resurrection to ascension. It is truly amazing that the Lord was ***"seen by angels."*** We understand why the early church sang about it.

IV. As Paul continues, he also points out that the Lord was PROCLAIMED AMONG THE NATIONS.

And remember: This is coming from the apostle to the Gentiles! Early on, the gospel was only directed to the Jews. Even Jesus himself focused his efforts on the Jewish people, but we had clues early on that the mission would expand. Several months ago, we studied the Syrophenician woman, the woman who refused to take "no" for an answer and argued with the Lord about the dogs eating the scraps from under the master's table. We have another little clue as we hear Jesus discussing the fact that he is the Good Shepherd, and in that discussion, he refers to sheep that he has that are ***"not of this fold"*** (John 10:16). The door cracks open just a little bit, and we get a clue that he has something much bigger in mind than just a plan to save the Jews. And then, as the Lord was getting ready to ascend back into heaven after the resurrection, he told the apostles to take the good news first to Jerusalem, then to Judea and Samaria, and then to the ***"remotest part of the earth."*** In fact, some of the Lord's last words on this earth were his instructions to, ***"Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation"*** (Mark 16:15). And that is exactly what they did. In the book of Acts, Peter preaches to the first Gentile, a Roman centurion by the name of Cornelius. At around the same time, Paul obeys the gospel and is commissioned as the apostle to the Gentiles. Paul then goes out and preaches all over the Mediterranean world.

The Lord came to save the world, he did exactly what he came to do, and the early Christians all pitched in and helped get that message out there – not just elders, and deacons, and preachers, but everybody. We read in Acts 8 that the church in Jerusalem was persecuted. The members of that congregation had to run for their lives, and the Bible says (in Acts 8:4) that, ***"...those who had been scattered went about preaching the word."*** I would point out here: The angels are not responsible for preaching the word – we are! As Christians, it is up to us to tell the story. We do not tell our story; instead, we tell his story. As Paul says, Jesus is to be ***"preached among the nations."*** What a blessing it is to participate in the preaching of the gospel!

V. As we go back to our song in 1 Timothy 3:16, we see another phrase with a reference to the fact that Jesus was BELIEVED ON IN THE WORLD.

Once again, we have this amazing summary of the Lord's life, and one of the amazing things is that people like us believe on the Lord. We are a part of it! We believe his message. We believe what the Bible teaches about the miracles he performed. We believe that his blood covers our sins. We believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.

We think of Thomas who had to see the wounds in the Lord's hands. When he saw the evidence, Thomas answered Jesus and said, ***"My Lord and my God!"*** We remember what John says next in that account (in John 20:30-31), ***"Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name."*** We believe based on what we have seen in the word of God, and that is amazing! The Lord Jesus has been ***"believed on in the world."***

VI. **As we look back at 1 Timothy 3:16, there is a final thought in this song, and that is, the Lord Jesus was TAKEN UP IN GLORY.**

The main idea here is that the Lord continues to live! His life did not end at the crucifixion. In fact, his life did not end at the resurrection. But instead, he was taken up in glory, he was taken up into heaven. We already discussed this with reference to the angels being there as the Lord was taken up into the clouds, but I believe the main point here is that the Lord Jesus lives on in heaven. Yes, he was *“taken up,”* but he continues to live on *“in glory.”* Jesus living on in heaven right now is a glorious thought to consider. We think about the words in Hebrews 7:23-25, as the author pointed out how Jesus is so much better than the priests from the Old Testament system. Notice the argument he makes; he says,

²³ The former priests, on the one hand, existed in greater numbers because they were prevented by death from continuing, ²⁴ but Jesus, on the other hand, because He continues forever, holds His priesthood permanently. ²⁵ Therefore He is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.

In heaven, Jesus always lives to make intercession on our behalf. When we pray, Jesus takes our concerns to the Father. As Paul says, he was *“taken up in glory.”*

Conclusion:

Our goal this morning has been to spend some time looking at Jesus. Jesus is why we are here. And what better way to think about Jesus than to study a song that was originally sung by the early church. We all have our favorite songs – we may love the words in a song, we might love the tune, or we might have some other reason for loving the songs that we do. But we have looked this morning at a song that was important enough to the apostle Paul to include in an inspired letter, and the entire song (every line) keeps us focused on Jesus.

- Because he was revealed in the flesh, we know that God understands what we’re going through.
- Because he was vindicated in the Spirit, we know that he was truly innocent of all charges that were brought against him.
- Because he was seen by angels, we know that he could have avoided death, but he willingly chose to go through with it for our salvation.
- Because he was proclaimed among the nations, we as Gentiles can now have a part in God’s kingdom.
- Because he was believed on in the world, we have the story written down for us, and we can also believe the testimony of others.
- And because he was taken up in glory, we know he lives on in heaven and is always willing and able to intercede – he serves as a go-between and constantly takes our concerns to God the Father.

As Paul said, *“By common confession, great is the mystery of godliness.”* In a somewhat parallel passage (in Colossians 1:26-27, the apostle Paul also spoke of *“...the mystery which has been hidden from the past ages and generations, but has now been manifested [or shown] to His saints, to whom God [wishes] to make known...the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.”* The mystery of godliness has been revealed, and the answer is Jesus! The answer is having Jesus in us, *“Christ in you, the hope of glory.”* Here at this congregation, we love Jesus, and we would invite you to be a part of it. God sent his only Son as a sacrifice for our sins. We respond to that sacrifice with awe, with love, and with obedience. He has commanded that we turn away from sin and that we be immersed in water for the

forgiveness of our sins. If you have any questions, please, speak to us after the service, but if you are ready to obey the gospel immediately, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let's all stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com