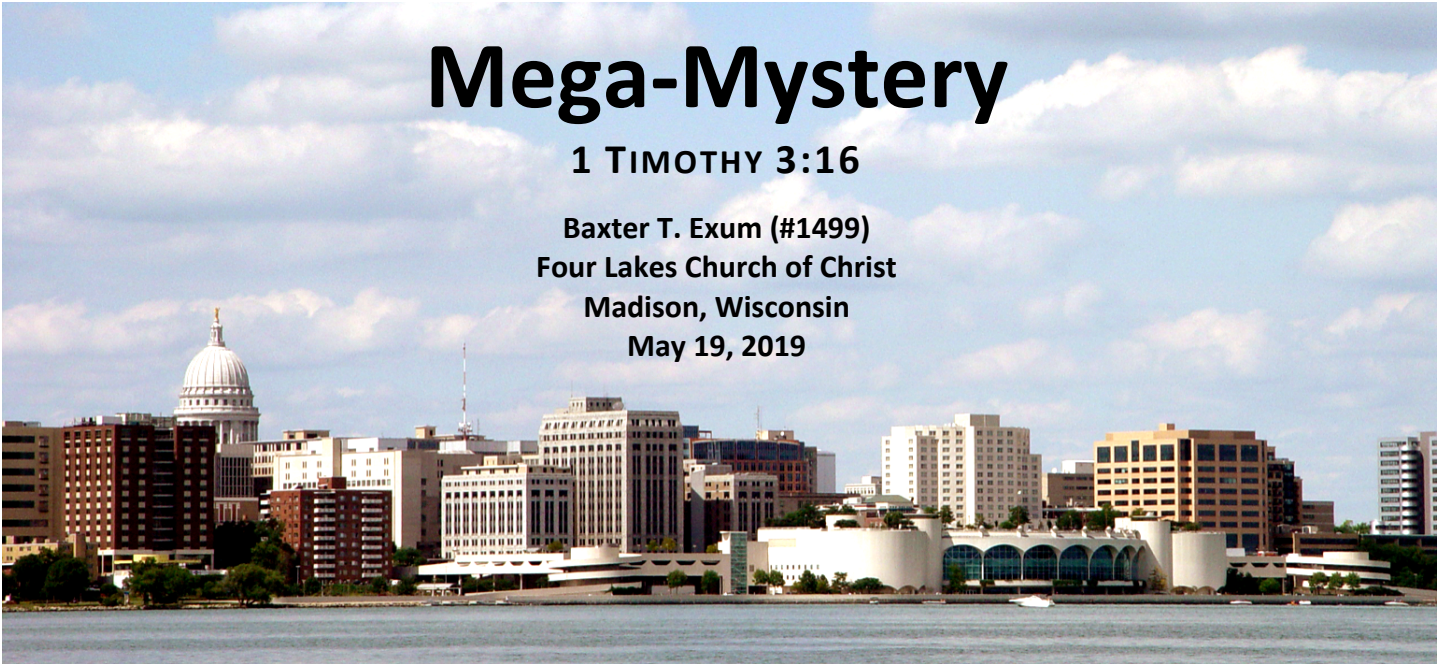


# Mega-Mystery

1 TIMOTHY 3:16

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This morning we return to our series of lessons from the book of 1 Timothy, and we come to a passage (a single verse) that seems to have perhaps been a song. The verse is 1 Timothy 3:16 (p. 1856), and when you get there, depending on your translation, you might notice that it is set apart almost like poetry. In what we commonly refer to as the Old Testament, we have many songs. We have the song of Moses, the song of Deborah, the Song of Solomon, and then we have an entire book of songs, a collection of 150 songs, in what we refer to as the book of Psalms. In the New Testament, we do have a few scattered references to singing, but very few actual songs. 1 Timothy 3:16 is a rare exception.

Some have suggested that these lines were something of a memory tool, a summary of Jesus' life, a song of praise that might have been well known in the early church. We won't make too big of a deal over the possibility of this being a song, but as we look at what Paul wrote here, I think you might agree that the passage is a bit unusual. It's not really connected to the surrounding verses, and it comes across as separate, as if it could very easily stand on its own. If you will, please look with me at 1 Timothy 3:16,

***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.***

Before we get to what seems to be the song itself, we have something of a preamble, an explanation, "***By common confession, great is the mystery of godliness.***" Some translations might start out by saying, "***Without controversy.***" Others might say, "***We confess.***" The word refers to speaking with others in agreement. It refers to speaking about something that is beyond question. So, we are talking about a true statement that all of us agree to. So, these are some very basic and foundational ideas here.

And the other part of this brief introduction is the statement, ***“great is the mystery of godliness.”*** ***“Great”*** comes from a word we might recognize as “mega.” And the ***“mystery”*** part of this isn’t so much something “mysterious,” but as we have noted before, this word refers to something previously unknown that has now been revealed. We studied the same word a while back as it is used by Paul in Ephesians 3, with reference to the ***“mystery of the gospel.”*** The word was used in the ancient world to refer to an initiation ritual. The ritual is known to those on the inside, but is unknown to those on the outside. To us, the gospel has been made known. It isn’t a Hardy Boys or Nancy Drew or Scooby kind of mystery, but it refers to something previously unknown that is now known. And it is the mystery of ***“godliness.”*** ***“Godliness”*** is basically what we owe God - piety, religion, a system of good behavior, devotion.

So with this in mind, Paul is introducing these lines about Jesus, and he is basically saying, “All of us agree, and we all say it together, that what we now know about Jesus is absolutely huge. It is an amazing story. The secret to Christian living, the secret to pleasing God is Jesus.” We now have these six true statements about Jesus. Jesus is the great mystery that has now been revealed.

#### I. And he starts by referring to Jesus as **“HE WHO WAS REVEALED IN THE FLESH.”**

***“Revealed”*** has also been translated as ***“manifested”*** or ***“appeared.”*** Jesus appeared in the flesh. We think of those opening lines in John, ***“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God,”*** and then verse 14, ***“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.”*** We saw God in the form of Jesus. Or in that passage from Philippians 2 that we hope to cover this Wednesday evening, ***“although He existed in the form of God, [He] did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped [or held onto], but [He] emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men.”*** Jesus, then, ***“emptied himself”*** into human form; he ***“poured himself out,”*** into human form, as some translations put it (Philippians 2:6-7). He existed beforehand, he existed from eternity, but he ***“appeared”*** in the flesh, revealing himself to us in the form of a man.

God came to this earth and lived a human life. He was tempted in every way just like we are, but he never sinned (Hebrews 4:15). He came in the flesh not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Matthew 20:28). He came here to lead us to God, to teach by his example, to show us how to live. And because he came in human form, he is able to sympathize with our weaknesses. He came to this earth, not arriving on horseback, not living in a gold-covered palace, not surrounded by bodyguards, but he was born into poverty, raised in a poor family living in an oppressed nation, and he came not as a king, or a scholar, but as a carpenter. God himself was ***“revealed in the flesh,”*** and this is something for us to sing about! This is the great mystery that has now been revealed.

#### II. We also find that he was **VINDICATED IN THE SPIRIT.**

Some of the other translations say that he was ***“justified”*** or ***“declared righteous.”*** We hear the word ***“vindicated”*** in the news all the time. Someone is accused of a crime of some kind, but for whatever reason the evidence starts pointing in another direction, and the person is ***“vindicated.”*** Sometimes a public statement is made, clearing the person of all charges.

We think of Jesus, and we remember how he was constantly accused of blasphemy. Over and over again, the Jewish leaders were upset that Jesus was claiming to be God (John 5:18, 10:33, and 19:7). They also accused

him of being gluttonous and a drunkard, and yet as Jesus turns this back on them, he says (in Matthew 11:19), ***“Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.”*** So, even in his lifetime, Jesus was vindicated. He was convicted by a human court, but he was truly innocent. And as God’s people, we know this. This ***“mystery”*** has been revealed to us. We know that although Jesus was considered guilty, he was actually vindicated in the Spirit. He did not deserve the death that he suffered. He was wrongly convicted, unjustly executed. But he was vindicated through the resurrection. We think of what Paul wrote about God’s Son in Romans 1:4, ***“[he] was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead, according to the Spirit of holiness, Jesus Christ our Lord.”*** His resurrection from the dead is the ultimate vindication. He was ***“vindicated in the Spirit.”*** And like the early church, we sing about this.

### III. We also find that he was SEEN BY ANGELS.

In fact, the angels had eagerly anticipated the arrival of Jesus on this earth from long ago. Speaking of our salvation, this is what Peter said in 1 Peter 1:10-12,

***<sup>10</sup> As to this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that would come to you made careful searches and inquiries, <sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> 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 at world history - they want to see the story unfold, and they can hardly wait to see what comes next. And so, when we get to the New Testament, we see that angels are deeply involved from beginning to end. They announce the Lord’s coming to Joseph (in Matthew 1:20-21), they make a similar announcement to Mary (in Luke 1:30-33). At his birth, angels make the announcement to the shepherds in their fields at night (Luke 2:10-11). Later, an angel warns Joseph to flee to Egypt to escape Herod’s plot (Matthew 2:13). A number of years later, as Jesus starts his ministry, angels came and served him as he was tempted in the wilderness (in Matthew 4). The angels were with him again on the night he was betrayed (in Luke 22:43). As Jesus is betrayed, Jesus rebukes Peter for chopping the guy’s ear off, and the Lord says, ***“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 around 6,000 men. Twelve legions, then, would have been 72,000 angels. He could have called these angels to save him from the cross, but he did not. The next reference to angels is at the resurrection. As the witnesses started arriving, they saw angels guarding the empty tomb (John 20:12). An angel had rolled away the stone (Matthew 28:2). An angel told the women that they were not to be afraid but that they were to go tell the others that Jesus had risen from the dead (Matthew 28:5-7). And then we also have angels at the Lord’s ascension back into heaven in Acts 1. But the point for us here is: Jesus was seen by angels. And this is something we sing about, just as the early Christians did. This mystery has been revealed. Jesus was seen by angels.

### IV. As we continue in this song, we also find that he was PROCLAIMED AMONG THE NATIONS.

Usually in the Bible ***“the nations”*** refers to the gentiles - there are the Jews, and then there is everybody else, ***“the nations.”*** Jesus, then, was ***“proclaimed among the nations.”*** And remember: This is coming from Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles. This is Paul’s mission: Preaching Jesus to the nations. And, in fact, this letter is written to ***“the nations.”*** The church in Ephesus was a combination of Jews and Gentiles, so they are a part of

this. They are ***“the nations.”*** And this mission of reaching out beyond the Jewish people goes way back. In the Old Testament, we think of books like Jonah and Obadiah. God has always cared about all people. In the New Testament, the gospel started with the Jewish people. In Matthew 10:5-6, when Jesus first sends out the twelve apostles, he says to them, ***“Do not go in the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter any city of the Samaritans; but rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”*** The gospel starts with Israel, but it quickly spreads from there. Even during his earthly ministry, Jesus alludes to this as he praises the Syrophenician woman, the foreigner who refused to take “no” for an answer, the one who argued with the Lord about the dogs eating the scraps from under the master’s table. Jesus praises her and says, ***“O woman, your faith is great....”*** The word ***“great,”*** there, by the way is this “mega” we have up here. But, she is a Gentile. Later, in John 10:16, as Jesus describes himself as the Good Shepherd, he refers to sheep he has that are ***“not of this fold.”*** The door cracks open just a bit, and we have a hint that Jesus has something much bigger in mind than just a plan to save the Jews. And then, of course, we have the various accounts of the Great Commission, after his resurrection, as Jesus sends his disciples out into the world, ***“Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation”*** (Mark 16:15). And in Acts 1, as he tells them to take the good news first to Jerusalem, then to Judea and Samaria, and then to the ***“remotest part of the earth.”*** And this is what they did. The first few chapters of Acts focus on Jerusalem, and Judea, and Samaria, we then have Peter preaching to the first Gentile, a Roman centurion by the name of Cornelius. He is baptized. And 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. And now, as Gentiles, in ***“the nations,”*** we have jumped into this story. We are a part of this. As we get the word out, as we tell people about our faith, we are preaching Jesus among the nations, just as the early Christians apparently sang about. The mystery has been revealed, and we are a part of it.

#### V. We continue with the reminder that Jesus was **BELIEVED ON IN THE WORLD.**

And we think back to one of the first people to ever confess his belief in Jesus as being God. As we have discussed before, this particular man has a rather unfortunate nickname. Many refer to him as “Doubting Thomas,” but that is about as far as we can get from the truth. Toward the end of John (in John 20), Thomas apparently misses meeting with Jesus on that first Sunday, the evening of the resurrection. We pick up in John 20:24,

***24 But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came. 25 So the other disciples were saying to him, “We have seen the Lord!” But he said to them, “Unless I see in His hands the imprint of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe.” 26 After eight days His disciples were again inside, and Thomas with them. Jesus came, the doors having been shut, and stood in their midst and said, “Peace be with you.” 27 Then He said to Thomas, “Reach here with your finger, and see My hands; and reach here your hand and put it into My side; and do not be unbelieving, but believing.” 28 Thomas answered and said to Him, “My Lord and my God!” 29 Jesus said to him, “Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed.” 30 Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; 31 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.***

So, before he believed, Thomas wanted to see the evidence, and once he saw Jesus walking around with spear and nail holes, he became the first to actually praise Jesus as being God. He is not “Doubting Thomas,” but he

is “Believing Thomas.” And going back to our song here, Jesus was **“believed on in the world.”** And in that passage we just read, John goes on to explain that he is writing his book so that those of us who have NOT seen might still be able to believe, based on his words. The mystery has been revealed in Jesus through this book.

VI. **And that brings us to the final thought in this song, that the Lord Jesus was TAKEN UP IN GLORY.**

And it seems that the big idea here is that Jesus continues to live! His life did not end either at his death or at his resurrection, but he lives on! We think of that scene in Acts 1 when Jesus was taken up into the clouds. The text tells us that, **“...He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. And as they were gazing intently into the sky while He was going, behold, two men in white clothing stood beside them. They also said, ‘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.’”** Jesus, then, continues to live on **“in glory.”** The author of Hebrews uses this to suggest that Jesus is so much better than the priests under the Old Covenant, because unlike them, Jesus never dies - he lives on. He says, in Hebrews 7:23-25,

***<sup>23</sup> The former priests, on the one hand, existed in greater numbers because they were prevented by death from continuing, <sup>24</sup> but Jesus, on the other hand, because He continues forever, holds His priesthood permanently. <sup>25</sup> 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 glory, with the Father, Jesus always lives to make intercession on our behalf; that is, he speaks up for us. He brings our prayers to the Father. This is why we pray in Jesus’ name - not just in God’s name (generically), but we pray in Jesus’ name. Jesus intercedes on our behalf. And he does this because he was **“taken up in glory.”** And once again, this is worth singing about!

### **Conclusion:**

Most of us have some favorite songs. Most of us have some songs we really don’t prefer. Even with church songs, I can think of some in both categories. I am not a fan of, “It is Well With my Soul.” Not that it’s not well with my soul - I just don’t prefer that one. I am not a fan of, “Jesus is Coming Soon.” Yes, he might be coming soon. I hope he comes back soon. But then again, it might be a long, long time! But then, there are some songs I love, “How Deep the Father’s Love for Us,” “Anywhere with Jesus,” and many more. This morning, though, we have studied what seems to have been a song that was known by the early church, a song summarizing the life of our savior Jesus Christ,

***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.***

All of this was for our benefit. We respond to his love with faithful obedience. We believe the good news, we believe that he died and was buried and that he came back from the dead on the third day. We then do what he has told us to do. We repent, we turn away from sin, and putting our faith in his blood, we allow ourselves to be buried with him in baptism, for the forgiveness of our sins. At that point, we are born into God's family. The mystery of godliness has been revealed, and the answer is Jesus. If we can in any way encourage you or help you make things right with God through Jesus, we invite you to get in touch. But if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can come talk to me right now as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

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