

“The Mystery of Godliness”

“And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: 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,” I Timothy 3:16.

The Bible indeed is “**the** book of books!” It says so much in words so few. However, even in the Bible it would be difficult to select another verse which capsules more information than that stated in the verse just cited. Properly understood, this verse presents an outline of the life of Christ. It is our purpose in this article to examine the contents of this great text. It begins with these words:

“And without controversy.” Yes, there is much “controversy” in the religious world. However, as it relates to the contents of this verse the fact is obvious; it is indisputable; it is self-evident; it is so obvious that it should not be a matter of “controversy! And then the inspired writer said:

“Great is the mystery of godliness.” “Great,” from *megas* (Greek) is used to denote (1) external form, or size, as in Matt. 27:60, (2) degree and intensity, as in Mark 4:41; John 6:18; and (3) Rank, as in Heb. 4:14, where Jesus is referred to as “*a great High Priest.*” As it relates to our text, “great” (used to describe “*the mystery of godliness*”) pertains to “degree and intensity.” “*The mystery of godliness*” is “**great**,” it is no small matter; in fact, it capsules God’s plan for redeeming sinful humanity! Yes, “*Great is the mystery of godliness!*” “*Mystery*,” as used here, does not mean mystical or mysterious. “*Mystery*” is translated from *musterion* (Greek) and it denotes “that which being outside of the range of unassisted natural apprehension, can be made known only by Divine revelation,” **Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words**, by Vine. God’s plan of salvation for people living in this age, was described as a “*mystery*,” but which was “*revealed by the Spirit to the apostles and prophets*,” Eph. 3:5, which they wrote down, and which we can “*understand*” if we read what he wrote, and it is identified in Eph. 3:6 as being “*that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel.*” In our text, I Tim. 3:16, that which is called “*great*” is identified as “*the mystery of godliness.*” “*Godliness*” is from *eusebeia* and “denotes that piety which, characterized by a Godward attitude, does that which is well pleasing to Him,” Vine. The “*godliness*” alluded to in this verse “is godliness as embodied in, and communicated through the truths of the faith concerning Christ,” *ibid.* Now, as it relates to “*the mystery of godliness*,” there are six great truths which are set forth in the remainder of our text:

1. “God was manifested in the flesh.” Indeed, He was! This reminds us of John 1:1: “*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*” And then, in John 1:14, we discover that “*the Word became flesh and dwelt among us...*” Jesus, as He dwelt on the earth, was not a mere man; He was deity and divinity incarnate in the flesh! He was **God** “*manifested in the flesh*,” John 1:14 — not God the Father, but God the Son! Jesus, in coming to this earth, though He was “*equal with God*,” came “*in the likeness of men*,” so that He might suffer “*the death of the cross*,” Phil. 2:5-7, by which He was able to “*destroy him who had the power of*

death, that is, the devil,” Heb. 2:14. It is no wonder therefore that when Jesus was born an angel of the Lord spoke to Joseph, saying, *“they shall call His name Immanuel, which is translated, ‘God with us,’”* Matt. 1:23.

2. “Justified in the Spirit.” Please note these words from **Word Studies in the Greek New Testament**, by Weust: “The word ‘justified’ is *dikaioo*, used in the act of God justifying a believing sinner, that is, declaring him righteous. But here the meaning is ‘vindicated, endorsed, proved, pronounced as,” Vol. II, p. 64. Being *“justified by the Spirit”* could refer to the agency of the Holy Spirit, Who at Jesus’ baptism descended *“like a dove”* and abode upon Him, at which time *“a voice came from heaven, saying, This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased,”* Matt. 3:16-17. By the Spirit Jesus cast *“out demons,”* Matt. 12:28, and upon His return to heaven Jesus sent forth the Helper, or the Holy Spirit, to *“convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment,”* John 16:8.

3. “Seen by angels.” Indeed, He was! When Jesus was born *“an angel of the Lord”* appeared to certain shepherds, saying *“there is born to you this day in the city of David, a Savior, who is Christ the Lord,”* and then we read of that *“multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men,”* Luke 2:9-14. Following Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness, *“the devil left Him, and behold, angels came and ministered to Him,”* Matt. 4:11. When certain women visited His tomb early on the first day of the week, **angels** announced, saying, *“He is not here, for He is risen,”* Matt. 28:6; Luke 24:1-5. As the disciples looked up when Jesus ascended to heaven, two angels announced, saying, *“this same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven,”* Acts 1:11. Angels announced His advent, they ministered to Jesus while He was on earth. And **angels** announced that Jesus will return!

4. “Preached among the Gentiles.” The Law of Moses was given to the Jews, Deut. 5:1-5, but the gospel is for all mankind. Hence, Jesus commissioned His apostles to *“Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature,”* Mark 16:15. Through His death Jesus broke *“down the middle wall of separation”* between Jews and Gentiles, thereby enabling *“both”* to be reconciled to God in the *“one body,”* or church, Eph. 2:14-16; cf. Eph. 1:1-23.

5. “Believed on in the world.” This naturally follows the message being preached, for the Bible says that *“faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God,”* Rom. 10:17. When the apostles and elders came together in Jerusalem to discuss the issue of circumcision which (thanks to certain false teachers, was troubling the church), *“Peter rose up and said to them; Men and brethren, you know that a good while ago God chose among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe,”* Acts 15:7.

6. “Received up in glory.” Yes, Jesus, Who was *“God manifested in the flesh,”* after having *“finished the work which”* the Father had given Him to do, was *“received up in glory,”* John 17:1-5, Luke 24:50-52; Acts 1:9-11. God *“raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places,”* Eph. 1:20. Hence, thanks be to God, we have *“a High Priest, Who is seated on the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens,”* Heb. 8:1. Yes, Jesus was *“received up,”* and, yes, He was *“received up in glory!”* He now serves as our *“great High Priest,”* Heb. 4:14, and *“he always lives to make intercession”* for those *“who come to God through Him,”* Heb. 7:25.

Conclusion: In the words of Albert Barnes, “it would be difficult, if not impossible, to condense more interesting and sublime things into so narrow a compass as this.” Indeed, the *“mystery of godliness”* is rightly described as **“great.”** It capsules God’s plan for human redemption; it involved the might, wisdom, grace, mercy and love of God, the work of the Holy

Spirit, and the greatest sacrifice ever conceived — that of Jesus, “*taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men,*” and becoming “*obedient to the point of death, even **the death of the cross,***” Phil. 2:7,8! It was that which angels desired to “*look into,*” I Peter 1:12, even before its actual occurrence! Indeed, “*the mystery of godliness*” and all it involved depicts heaven’s great interest (**and** sacrifice!) to make human redemption possible. It was done in behalf — not of angels, but of humans (humans lost in sin), but sadly humans so often treat this great message with indifferences, and sometimes even with contempt! How sad. But, dear reader, I am persuaded better things of **you!** —B. Witherington
