

## “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 in glory,”* I Timothy 3:16.

The above scripture constitutes the last verse in the third chapter of I Timothy, a book penned by the apostle Paul to Timothy, his “*son in the faith*,” I Tim. 1:2. As is true of all the chapters in the Bible, the third chapter of this epistle contains very important information — especially as it relates to God’s people in this the gospel age. For example, in the first seven verses the apostle set forth the qualifications one must possess in order to be scripturally appointed to serve in “*the position of a bishop*,” v. 1, in the local church. In verses 8-13, the apostle listed the qualifications men must possess in order to “*serve as deacons*” (v. 8). In verse 15 he stressed the importance of oneself exercising proper conduct “*in the house of God*,” which he described as “*the pillar and ground of the truth*.” And now in verse 16 he outlined “**the mystery of godliness**,” the topic under consideration in this article. Herein it is our purpose to analyze this very comprehensive scripture more thoroughly than that of just giving it a passing mention. We now begin:

“**And without controversy...**” Some things are so obvious that there should be no room for doubt, or for “*controversy*.”

“**Great is the mystery of godliness..**” “*Great*” is translated from *me-gas* (Gk) and refers to that which is unusual, or extraordinary. For example, *with regards to faith, hope, and love, “the greatest of these is love”* (I Cor. 13:13). Sadly, genuine *agape* (N.T. love) is unusual, and it is extraordinary. “*Mystery*” is translated from *musterion* which “in the N.T. refers to truth previously hidden, which when revealed is understood by the believer,” **Weust’s Word Studies**. It does not denote that which is mysterious, but to truth “previously hidden” in the mind of God, but which is now “*revealed*” to inspired men “*by the Spirit*,” and recorded in the New Testament. Cf. Eph. 3:3-6. Interestingly, in the third chapter of I Timothy mention was made of **both** “*the mystery of the faith*” (v. 9), “*the mystery of godliness*,” v. 16.

“**God was manifested in the flesh.**” Indeed He was! With this in mind, please note John 1:1. “*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word **was God**.*” Now we skip down to John 1:14 and read that “*the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.*” Jesus was both “*with God*,” and He “*was God*” (John 1:1), in that He was on an equality with God the Father (cf. Phil. 2:6), possessing those same qualities of Deity and Divinity. When Jesus came to this earth, He was “*God*” (deity and divinity) incarnate in the flesh! The reason for Deity appearing in the flesh is briefly set forth in Heb. 2:14, wherein the inspired writer had this to say about Jesus Christ: “*Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy Him who had the power of death, that is, the devil.*”

**“Justified in the Spirit.”** He was “justified” in that He was declared righteous and just. On separate occasions God the Father said of Jesus Christ, “*This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased,*” Matt. 3:17; 17:5. There is some question as to whether “*in the Spirit*” in our text refers to the Holy Spirit, the third Person in the “*Godhead,*” or to Christ’s own spiritual nature. Inasmuch as “*in the Spirit*” is herein contrasted with “*in the flesh,*” I believe the latter position is more in keeping with the text being examined. For that matter, the divine nature of Jesus was conclusively documented by the miraculous works He did (John 3:1-2), the testimony of John the Baptist (John 1:29; 5:33), the Old Testament Scriptures (John 5:39), the testimony of Moses who prophetically “*wrote about*” Jesus (John 5:45-46), and the testimony of God the Father Who “*sent*” Him (John 5:36-37).

**“Seen by angels.”** Indeed, He was! When Jesus was born a “*multitude of the Heavenly host*” praised God, saying, “*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men,*” Luke 2:14. After Jesus successfully resisted every temptation Satan put in His path, “*angels came and ministered to Him,*” Matt. 4:11. After Jesus had prayed so fervently in the garden of Gethsemane, “*an angel appeared to Him from heaven strengthening Him,*” Luke 22:43. Early on the first day of the week following Jesus’ crucifixion “*certain women...came to the tomb, bringing the spices which they had prepared,*” but to their surprise the body was missing, and then two angels in the form of men, said to them “*Why do you seek the living among the dead,*” Luke 24:1,3,5. Later, as the resurrected Christ was ascending to heaven and while the apostles watched “*two men*” (angels) “*stood by them in white apparel, who also said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? 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 1:9-11.

**“Preached among the Gentiles.”** Not just among Jews, but also among the Gentiles. This was done in obedience to the Lord’s great commission to “*Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations...*” Matt. 28:19. The Law of Moses was given to “*all Israel,*” Deut. 5:1-2, and it served as a “*tutor*” to bring the Jews to Christ, Gal.3:24, but (as the song says) “the gospel is for all.” Jesus Christ is “*our peace, who has made both*” Jew and Gentile “*one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation*” between Jews and Gentiles enabling “**both**” to be reconciled unto God in the “*one body*” or church, Jesus purchased with His “*own blood.*” (Eph. 2:14-16; 1:22-1:23; Acts 20:28.

**“Believed on in the world”** — referring to the “*world*” of people. Of course, this point naturally follows the one immediately preceding it, for “*faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God*” (Rom. 10:17). Regarding this point, Adam Clarke in his commentary appropriately said: “*This is a most striking part of the mystery of godliness, that one who was crucified as a malefactor, and whose kingdom is not of this world, and whose doctrines are opposed to all the sinful propensities of the human heart, should, wherever his Gospel is preached, be acknowledged as the only Savior of sinners, and the Judge of quick and dead*” (Vol. 6, p. 600). In the light of the remarks just made, it is a “*striking point*” that Jesus would be “*believed on in the world,*” but thank God there are multitudes who do possess genuine faith in the One referred to as

**“God...manifested in the flesh!”**

**“Received up in glory.”** Prior to His crucifixion, Jesus prayed to the Father, saying, *“And now, O Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was,”* John 17:5. When Jesus departed this earth *“He was received up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God,”* Mark 16:19. Yes, Jesus *“has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, angels and authorities and powers having been made subject to Him,”* I Pet. 3:22. And even now, Jesus serves as our High Priest, seated at the right hand of God the Father, and *“He always lives to make intercession”* for those *“who come to God through Him,”* Heb. 7:25.

**Conclusion:** This verse, I Tim. 3:16, is a very, very comprehensive verse. It capsules in one sentence the glorious truths in God’s wonderful scheme of redemption as it is centered in and through the Person of Jesus Christ. Yes, *“the mystery of godliness”* is indeed **“great,”** and it surely behooves all of us to obey that precious Savior Who was **“God manifested in the flesh,”** and to *“exercise”* ourselves *“toward godliness,”* I Tim. 4:7.

\*\*\* —B. Witherington