

The Great Mystery

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1 Timothy 3:16

Have you ever looked at someone and said to yourself, "I wonder what makes him tick? What prompts him to act the way he does? Why does he do the things he does in the way that he does them? Very often, nowadays, it is said, "It's in the genes." To put it in the old fashioned way, "He's a chip off the old block." In other words, he has inherited certain characteristics from previous generations of his family that are reflected in his behaviour. That is, it's in his nature.

In this study, we have to think on similar lines when we consider our subject, "The Great Mystery". Let me remind you of the setting in which the phrase is found. Listen to this wonderful declaration, given in 1 Timothy 3:14-16:

"These things write I unto thee, hoping to come unto thee shortly: But if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth. 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 in glory."

The Apostle Paul, a very distinguished and experienced servant of God, was hoping to see the younger man, Timothy, very soon. However, in case that was not possible, some things were too important to allow for delay. The alternative to waiting until he saw Timothy was for Paul to write to him, conveying in writing the important truths Timothy needed to learn and apply. As we have read in verse 14, "These things write I unto thee, hoping to come unto thee shortly. But if I tarry long ... "?

The house of God

What is the subject that is so important that it cannot wait? Verse 15 tells us, "if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth." In a nutshell, the Christian church has a vitally important role to play in the world. Throughout the Bible, Old and New Testaments, it is made plain that God in heaven wishes to make Himself known to people living on earth. He does this through those on earth who already know Him. A distinctive term

is used to describe this special group. God is pleased to dwell amongst them, in a spiritual way of course. For that, amongst other, reasons, the Bible describes them, collectively, as "the house of God". At the present time, indeed since it was inaugurated on the day of Pentecost, this role is fulfilled by the Christian church. That is why the term "house of God" is used here. Then, in order to explain how this is done, the Christian church is further described as the "pillar" and "ground" of the truth.

Pillar

There are two main kinds of pillars in common use. There is the kind that is very strong and supports great weight without giving way under the strain. A very useful and important kind of pillar, but that is not the kind referred to here. What we have here is that other kind of pillar, what we might term a monumental pillar. You will have seen the kind of thing. When it is desired to commemorate a great person or event, an imposing pillar is erected. The relevant details, the person, the place, the event, the date, are all inscribed on the pillar. It is significant that the outstanding details are clear from a distance, so that an appropriate initial overall impression is gained. Then, the closer you get to the pillar, the more readily you are able to read the story in closer, finer detail. Indeed, it is not till you get really close up to the pillar that you are able to read the small print and the full story is told. This is a wonderful picture of the fact that God intends people who know nothing about Him to get to know Him by watching, indeed examining, even scrutinising closely, the lives of Christians of their acquaintance. The closer they get to us, and the better they get to know us, the more they should be able to learn about God.

You know, most people don't know God at all. They could find out about God by reading the Bible. Sadly, very few people do that. They don't read the Bible at all. But, and it is a very important but, they do read the lives of Christians they already know well. The same writer, in a letter written to Christians at Corinth, put it in this way, "Ye are our epistle, written in our hearts, known and read of all men" (2 Corinthians 3:2). In other words, the Christian's life should be a monument to the truth he says he believes.

The first of these six parts is an amazing declaration, in itself.

Ground

The other term used, "ground" or "base", is not so very far removed from the more usual meaning of the term "pillar". In the Old Testament, we read about the Ark of the Covenant, which, during the journeys of the people of Israel, was carried on the shoulders of living Levites. No man-made carriage was allowed to support it. Neither was it permissible for the Ark itself to be actually touched. The Ark was carried on wooden staves which were supported by the shoulders of the Levites (for example, 1 Chronicles 15:15). No other nation had such an ark, which signified that only Israel, of all the nations of the world, enjoyed the presence of God in their midst. Any knowledge of the true God that the nations gained came through their contact with Israel, God's special people. Similarly, at the present time, the responsibility for bearing a true witness to God rests fair and square on the shoulders of living Christians who know Him and love Him. Their lives tell the story of the God in Whom they believe, and in Whom they have put their trust.

A sublime statement

Having made that plain, Paul gives us one of the most sublime statements in the whole of the Bible, verse 16 of our chapter. "Without controversy, great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in flesh, justified in the spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up in glory."

The statement begins by saying that the greatness of this mystery is beyond dispute. This, then is the heart of the matter we are thinking about. This is The Great Mystery. How possibly can ordinary men and women, alive in the world today, be the instruments in God's hands to bear witness to the sort of God He is? How possibly can the knowledge of God be propagated in the world through scrutinising their lives. What is the secret spring of such behaviour? How can it possibly be produced?

Here we have the declaration. Only the knowledge of the revelation of God in the Person of His Son can produce such a life, and such a witness. Overall, this means that the knowledge of God has been displayed in the Person of His Son, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. It is the privilege and responsibility of Christians generally to make that revelation of God known in their lives and conduct, so that others might be brought to a knowledge of God through the witness of the Christian's lifestyle, attitude and behaviour. Let us now examine the substance of this revelation of God, as detailed in verse 16.

First of all, it is a help to me to understand that the statement is split into six parts. These six parts are presented as three contrastive couplets. The first couplet contrasts flesh and spirit. The second contrasts angels and men. The third contrasts earth and heaven.

"God has been manifested in flesh"

It is an astounding thing that the Son of God became a real man. We are told in Hebrews 2 that He did not become an angel to help angels. He became a man to help mankind. To help mankind, indeed to save sinful men, it was necessary for the Son of God to become a man. That is, it was necessary for Him to enter into a condition in which it was possible for Him to die. By dying the death that men deserved, He became their redeemer.

What a tremendous statement this is, "God has been manifested in flesh". There has been a life lived on earth which was a perfect declaration and exhibition of the nature and character of God in a person, the Person of Jesus, the only begotten Son of God. All that shall ever be known, or knowable, about God, made known to all those who were let into the secret, in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ. As foretold by the prophet Isaiah in chapters 7 and 8 of the prophecy which bears his name, and quoted in Matthew chapter 1, "Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel, (God with us)" (Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:23). We can give thanks to God that there has been one life lived on earth that was always and in every way fully pleasing to God in heaven, the life of the Lord Jesus when He lived on earth. God manifest in flesh, indeed.

"Justified in the spirit"

Outwardly, there was very little to vindicate the life and service of the Lord Jesus Christ while He was here on earth. The more He did, and the purer He showed Himself to be, the greater the opposition against Him. However, at all times, in all things, He had a deep inner conviction that all that He did, indeed all He was, in Himself, was well pleasing to His God and Father. This inner sense of vindication was in the realm of the spirit, the spiritual realm, certainly not in the physical or material realm. In His perfect manhood, all the Lord Jesus did on earth was done in the power of the Holy Spirit. So, as to this inner vindication, it was in the power of the Holy Spirit that His personal spirit rejoiced in being well pleasing to God. What a wonderful consolation, in His life, in His service, as He moved onward, ever onward, to His unique death, the death of the cross!

"Seen of angels"

The Bible records very occasional examples of God making Himself visible to His creatures. Those occasions are all short-term, transient, rather mysterious and always

for a very special purpose. As a group, these incidents are called "Theophanies", appearances of God in a form that was recognisable to at least some of His creatures living on earth at the time. As it is part of the role of angels to observe what happens on earth, it must have been absolutely fascinating for them to be given those fleeting glimpses of God, Who was normally withheld from their gaze.

With the advent of the Son of God into the world, all was changed. Not now a fleeting glimpse! Not now a quickly passing moment! Not now an obscure vision! For over thirty years, in a continuous, sustained way, God was visible to the angels, in the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ. They rejoiced at His coming into the world at Bethlehem (Luke 2:13,14). They took account with joy of His departure out of the world from the Mount of Olives to go back to heaven (Acts 1:9-11). In between, it was the immense privilege of the angels to behold Him, day by day, even moment by moment, for the whole of that period. What a volume of truth is contained in those three words, "seen of angels"!

"Preached unto the Gentiles"

Before Jesus died and rose again, "Salvation was of the Jews" (John 4:22), as the Lord Himself said on more than one occasion. Gentiles could only enjoy the blessing of God in a secondary way, through their links with the nation of Israel. From now on, the narrow confines of one nation, even Israel, could not limit the immense blessing accruing from the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. Jew and Gentile alike could trust Him and know Him as Saviour and Lord. The middle wall of partition between them had been broken down. So, one of the marks of God having made Himself fully known in Christ is that He is "preached unto the Gentiles".

"Believed on in the world"

In John 14:1, we read the Lord's statement to His disciples, "Ye believe in God, believe also in Me." They had never actually seen God. He was not available for them to see with their natural eyes. He was an object for their faith. Up to this point, the Lord Jesus had been with them physically. They could actually see Him. But that was to end. He was to be with them no longer. He was going back to heaven. Their link with Him was going to be the same as they had always enjoyed with God. "Ye believe in God, believe also in Me." He, too, was to be the object for their faith.

Paul here broadens out the principle. The Gospel was to be preached. Those on earth who believed on the Lord Jesus would have a link with Him in heaven. Their link with Him was to be as firm and definite as if He were still on earth, except that it would be a spiritual link and not a physical or material link. "Believed on in the world!"

What a wonderful privilege the believer has: living on earth, yet linked by faith to Christ in heaven.

"Received up in glory"

The Gospel of Mark records the moment when the Lord Jesus ascended from earth to heaven: "So then, after the Lord had spoken to them, He was received up into heaven, and sat on the right hand of God" (Mark 16:19). In Mark, the ascension is looked on as God's seal of approval on the work of God's perfect Servant. Luke 24:50-53 also records the ascension of the Lord Jesus. In that case, it is God's tribute to the life of the perfect Man. In Acts 1 (verses 2,9,11 and 22), again there is the clear record of the Lord's ascension. So, how are we to understand this lovely phrase, "received up in glory". What is being considered here is not so much the fact of His ascension, but the manner of it. He was received up "in glory". As we might say, He was given a "glorious reception" as He went back into heaven. Again, a final tribute to the full, final, perfect revelation of God given in the Person of God's glorious Son.

The six things that are said about the Lord Jesus, in verse 16, are more or less sequential. They trace His life on earth from His coming into the world as a Baby at Bethlehem to His departure out of the world from the Mount of Olives. However, careful consideration of these statements highlights a rather strange thing. The purpose of His coming into the world, the climax of His life on earth, His death on the cross at Calvary, receives no specific mention. Why should that be so? Again, the personal, bodily resurrection of the Lord Jesus, so vital to the Christian faith, receives no direct mention. Why should that be so?

To me, at any rate, it confirms the whole point of this climactic statement. Down the ages, God has made known more and more of Himself. He has now finally and fully revealed Himself in the Person of His beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Only those who are in the good of His death and resurrection can know anything about it. His death removed the penalty of sin for all those who trust Him as their Saviour. His resurrection demonstrates God's entire satisfaction with the sacrifice Christ made in offering Himself without spot to God. They believe, quite rightly, that "Christ died for their sins, according to the scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day, according to the scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:3,4). They have been the recipients of the mercy of God. Their sins are forgiven. Their place in heaven is assured. God has put His Holy Spirit within them to give them an understanding of spiritual things. And all because of the value to God of the death and resurrection of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Notwithstanding all that, the Lord Jesus in Person, and not His work as such, is the epitome of the revelation of God. He is the living embodiment of all that God is. He is, in Person, the substance of the revelation of God because He is, in Person, God. How privileged we are to be able to

take account of it in such a Person. As we read in Hebrews 1:1, "God, Who at sundry times and in divers manners, spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us in His Son."

What response from you and me has God had to this amazing revelation of Himself in the Person of His Son? He can do no more. The Great Mystery has been revealed. The secret has been declared. He has fully, finally made Himself known, in Person, in the Lord Jesus, His beloved Son. It is now up to us, you and me, to respond to this revelation by trusting the Lord Jesus as our personal Saviour. The challenge, personal to you and me, is plain. As we read in Romans 10:9,10, "If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised Him from the dead, thou shalt be saved." Having done that, we are then so to live that other people in their turn will themselves be attracted to the Lord Jesus, and trust Him as their own Saviour and Lord. The Great Mystery, the revelation of God in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, His beloved Son, is the secret of the universe, a Great Mystery indeed.