

1 TIMOTHY 3:16

THE MYSTERY OF GODLINESS

“Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness:

He was manifested in the flesh,
vindicated by the Spirit,
seen by angels,
proclaimed among the nations,
believed on in the world,
taken up in glory.”¹

Mysteries are a favourite genre in books, movies and television entertainment for contemporary culture; and the New Testament speaks of “mysteries” rather frequently. However, when the writers of the New Testament spoke of a mystery, they didn’t mean precisely what we mean today when we think of a mystery. In contemporary language, a mystery is an enigma—an unexplained or unsolved phenomenon—for which the skein must be unraveled in order to discover the cause of some action we have observed. Often, the term refers to an action that is hurtful or harmful, an action resulting in loss, even loss of life, or the term refers to an action that threatens health and/or life.

The writers of the New Testament used the term *mustérion*, “mystery”—twenty-eight times. However, in that Greek tongue, the concept conveyed by the use of *mustérion* speaks of a truth that was previously unknown and which is now revealed. For instance, Jesus explained to the disciples why He spoke in parables. He said, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand” [MATTHEW 13:11-13].² The word translated “secrets” in my translation of this passage is the Greek term *mustérion*; Jesus taught His disciples that the “mysteries of the Kingdom” were deliberately obscured with parables. Disciples would understand what was meant; outsiders would be clueless.

Paul spoke of the refractive attitudes of Israel toward the Good News of the Messiah as a *mustérion*;³ their recalcitrance was a “mystery.” According to the Apostle, the Gospel was a *mustérion*.⁴ That Gentiles would be included in the salvation of God was a divine mystery.⁵ The lawlessness of the wicked one is a mystery, and especially is the knowledge that this lawlessness is restrained by God’s Spirit a mystery.⁶ And the truth that not all believers shall die—many will be raptured, translated into the presence of the Risen Master—is a mystery.⁷

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible: English Standard Version**. Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers, 2001. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

² See also, **MARK 4:11; LUKE 8:10**

³ **ROMANS 11:25**

⁴ E.g., **ROMANS 16:25; 1 CORINTHIANS 2:1** (“the testimony of God” in the original tongue is “the mystery of God”); **EPHESIANS 1:3-10**

⁵ **EPHESIANS 3:3-12**

⁶ **2 THESSALONIANS 2:1-12**

⁷ **1 CORINTHIANS 15:51-57**

In our text today, Paul speaks of the “mystery of godliness.” The term is intriguing, perhaps the more so as we read the Apostle’s recitation of what appears to have been a hymn that was apparently known to Timothy. I believe Paul is quoting a hymn that would have been familiar to many Christians during that time.

Before tackling the text, I want to take a moment to speak about Paul’s citation of what I believe to be a hymn. From earliest days, the people of God have been a singing people. John Wesley instructed circuit riding Methodist preachers to carry the Bible and a hymnal. To this day, the churches of our Lord sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. In fact, we are instructed to be a singing people. For instance, Paul writes in the Ephesian Letter, “Be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” [EPHESIANS 5:18b-20]. Was this the only place where such instruction was given, it would be enough to encourage us to sing; however, Christians are instructed elsewhere, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” [COLOSSIANS 3:16, 17].

Indulge me for a brief moment as I make a statement concerning the music of the Faith. My early years of higher education were funded with music scholarships. I say that to establish that I appreciate music—all music. Thinking about the music of the Faith, I recognise two aspects of music that will serve to honour God. Good music must be harmonious—it must be melodic, pleasing to the ear. Whether a song is syncopated or whether the melody is uncomplicated is immaterial. Discordant music may characterise some of what is presented as music in this day; but harmony speaks of unity and of the Faith. Likewise, the lyrics must have meaning. Music that ennobles the singer and the listener will combine these two elements—harmony and meaning. This is not an “either/or” situation—it is a “both/and” requirement.

Many songs that are popular among the churches lack theological fidelity, though the tune may be catchy and perhaps even easy to sing. From the standpoint of making the singer or listener nobler, a theologically imprecise song has about as much depth as some of the songs that were popular when I was a child. One such song that became quite popular in the early 1960s was an NBC radio announcer’s test put to music; the song became a hit with teenagers of the era.

One hen
Two ducks
Three squawking geese
Four limerick oysters
Five corpulent porpoises
Six pair of Don Alverzo’s tweezers
Seven thousand Macedonians in full battle array
Eight brass monkeys from the ancient sacred crypts of Egypt
Nine apathetic, sympathetic, diabetic old men on roller skates with a marked
propensity towards procrastination and sloth
Ten lyrical, spherical diabolical denizens of the deep who haul stall around the
corner of the quo of the quay of the quivery, all at same time.

Good music—music that will stand the test of time, honouring God through encouraging those who sing and those who listen while building them in the Faith—will present biblical truth in melodic fashion. When we sing or present music in the services of the congregation, we are responsible to make every effort to glorify God just as we do in every other aspect of worship, and we do this through thoughtful selection of what is to be sung. In short, our hymnody should be instructional as well as pleasant.

Now, I invite you to join me in exploring the mystery of godliness as presented through a song that was popular among the faithful at the time Paul wrote to Timothy. My prayer is that together we will be encouraged and strengthened in this most holy Faith.

HE WAS MANIFESTED IN THE FLESH — From earliest days of the Faith, the central message of all who will honour God has been Christ Jesus. The mystery of godliness is centred in a Person, Jesus Christ. The Master promised to send the Holy Spirit as the Divine Comforter. He taught His disciples concerning the Spirit, “The Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you” [JOHN 14:26].

Jesus also taught His disciples, “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you” [JOHN 16:12-15]. It is apparent that according to Jesus’ words, the preacher who fails to point his listeners to Christ is not energised by the Spirit of Christ; he is failing the primary task of prophetic preaching, which is revealing the Son of God to this age. Christ Jesus must be central to all that we declare among the saints and before outsiders who may share our service.

Thus, Paul points to the confession that was, and still is, common among the faithful. He uses the Greek term, *homologouménos*, which would literally mean “to say the same thing.” His point is that what he is about to present is a common confession among the saints. In fact, some translations render what this verse, “By common confession, great is the mystery of godliness” [e. g. NASB, 1995 UPDATE]. The Apostle is presenting truth that is revealed in the New Testament—truth that defines the Christian Faith.

It is not clear whether Paul is giving a statement presenting a chronologic account of Jesus’ life and ministry, a statement that has two stanzas each consisting of a triplet or whether there are three couplets, in each of which there is a deliberate antithesis. What is apparent is that Paul sees this hymn as taking us through the full account of Jesus’ life from birth to ascension while giving both the human and divine aspects of His life and ministry in Judea. Admittedly, the hymn does not speak of Jesus’ return, focusing on His ministry and return to Heaven.

The first truth is that *Jesus Christ was manifested in the flesh*—He was revealed as very man. Jesus is truly and fully God. John testified of Him, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made” [JOHN 1:1-3]. Paul testified of Jesus, “To [the Jews] belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen” [ROMANS 9:5]. And Peter addressed his second Letter to the saints in the Diaspora, appending an affirmation of Jesus’ divinity when he wrote, “To those who have obtained a faith of equal standing with ours by the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ” [2 PETER 1:1]. Very God took on human form.

The testimony of the Word is that Jesus was truly man. Listen to some of the testimony about who He was and is. John, in the Gospel that bears his name, writes of Jesus, “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” [JOHN 1:14].

“Though he was in the form of God, [Jesus] did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” [PHILIPPIANS 2:6-8].

The author of the Letter to Hebrew Christians has written of Jesus, “Since ... the children share in flesh and blood, [Jesus] himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil” [HEBREWS 2:14]. For this reason, “He is not ashamed to call [us] brothers” [HEBREWS 2:11].

Jesus was truly and fully human, and yet without sin, just as that same author testifies. “We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin” [HEBREWS 4:15].

When we allow ourselves to think about what this means, we are stunned. Max Lucado has challenged modern Christians to reflect on the full humanity of Jesus when he wrote, “Angels watched as Mary changed God’s diaper. The universe watched with wonder as The Almighty learned to walk. Children played in the street with him. And had the synagogue leader in Nazareth known who was listening to his sermons....

“Jesus may have had pimples. He may have been tone-deaf. Perhaps a girl down the street had a crush on him or vice-versa. It could be that his knees were bony. One thing’s for sure: He was, while completely divine, completely human.

“For thirty-three years he would feel everything you and I have ever felt. He felt weak. He grew weary. He was afraid of failure. He was susceptible to wooing women. He got colds, burped, and had body odor. His feelings got hurt. His feet got tired. And his head ached.

“To think of Jesus in such a light is—well, it seems almost irreverent, doesn’t it? It’s not something we like to do; it’s uncomfortable. It is much easier to keep the humanity out of the incarnation. Clean the manure from around the manger. Wipe the sweat out of his eyes. Pretend he never snored or blew his nose or hit his thumb with a hammer.”⁸

HE WAS VINDICATED BY THE SPIRIT — Paul’s assertion that Jesus was *vindicated by the Spirit* is less clear in intent than the first assertion. I suspect that Paul is using this hymn to contrast Jesus’ human nature with his divine nature. If I am correct, and obviously I believe I am, then the attestation directs our attention to the intersection between Jesus and the Spirit of God at the times of transition—His baptism, His resurrection and His ascension.

The Holy Spirit was visibly manifest at Jesus’ baptism. The Father spoke and the Spirit descended as a dove [MATTHEW 3:13-17; LUKE 3:21, 22]. From that point, Jesus conducted His ministry in Judea “in the power of the Spirit” [LUKE 4:14]. His resurrection from the dead is the ultimate vindication of His ministry, as Peter states: “Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit” [1 PETER 3:18]. Paul states the same truth when he writes, Jesus “was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead” [ROMANS 1:4]. In the Spirit, God was proven right in the Son.

⁸ Max Lucado, **God came Near: Chronicles of the Christ**; cited in George Guthrie, **Hebrews, The NIV Application Commentary** (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI 1998), 118.

These two stanzas, taken together, present Jesus as the unique God-man. There has never been, nor shall there ever be, another individual who can lay claim to being the unique Son of God as was Jesus. This is the import of John's statement concerning His coming. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John bore witness about him, and cried out, 'This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.'") For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known" [JOHN 1:14-18]. His sinless life and the testimony of the Holy Spirit prove God right in all that He has declared of the Son.

HE WAS SEEN BY ANGELS — When we read that Jesus as *seen by angels*, our mind turns almost automatically to His birth and the angelic announcement to the shepherds. However, it is doubtful that this incident was what Paul had in mind when citing this portion of the ancient hymn. Throughout His ministry on this earth, Jesus was watched by angels. One can only marvel at what must have been their wonder as they witnessed Him, the Lord of Glory, as He thirsted, as He hungered, as He spent sleepless nights and as His own people rejected Him.

While in the desert, fasting for forty days and after the Devil had tempted Jesus, we read that "angels came and were ministering to Him" [MATTHEW 4:11]; in fact, throughout the time in the wilderness, it would appear that "the angels were ministering to Him" [MARK 1:13]. When Jesus was in the Garden, His sweat became like "great drops of blood." At that time, we read, "There appeared to him an angel from heaven, strengthening him" [LUKE 22:43]. While in the tomb, it was an angel of the Lord who rolled back the stone. Listen to Matthew's account. "There was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, 'Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him. See, I have told you'" [MATTHEW 28:2-7; LUKE 24:4-7].

Peter pens an enigmatic statement concerning the holy angels. The Apostle to the Jews writes, "Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look" [1 PETER 1:10-12].

Though angels observed the Master and marvelled at those to whom He came, it is not clear to me that this is Paul's reference. As I study the Book of Hebrews, I read of the intersection of angels with the Son of God. Listen to the opening verses of that ancient letter. "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

“For to which of the angels did God ever say,

‘You are my Son,
today I have begotten you?’”

...“And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says,

‘Let all God’s angels worship him.’

“Of the angels he says,

‘He makes his angels winds,
and his ministers a flame of fire.’”

...“And to which of the angels has he ever said,

‘Sit at my right hand
until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet?’

“Are they not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation” [**HEBREWS 1:1-5a, 6, 7, 13, 14**]?

May I employ some sanctified imagination? The angels had wondered at the Prince of Glory, how He had emptied Himself and made Himself nothing. He had stepped out onto the rim of the universe, travelling past billions of stars, through the Milky Way and into the womb of a virgin. There, he nestled and grew until His birth one cold and lonely night. He passed the years in the obscurity of a small Galilean village where He grew to manhood. For thirty-three years the angels had witnessed the Lord of Glory experience the deficits and weakness that you and I know all too well. Throughout that time, the angels had wondered, ministering as required, but otherwise watching and wondering what it could all mean.

They had witnessed Him in humility brutalised and finally nailed to the Cross. More than twelve legions of angels had stood ready to rush to His aid had He only spoken the request [**MATTHEW 26:53**]. They had waited, tense and ready to spring into action even as they heard Him speak those awful words, “It is finished” [**JOHN 19:30**]. How could an angel understand these things, for angels cannot be redeemed? When angels fell, they were forever banished from the presence of the Lord God, so angels could not experience redemption.

Then, when the Master had conquered death, breaking the bonds of death and conquering the Devil, He had come forth out of the tomb; and angels witnessed His triumph. I can only imagine that they were unable to speak as they observed in mute astonishment. After walking among those to whom He would reveal Himself for those days on this earth, the Christ ascended into glory, lifted up as a cloud took Him out of the sight of the watching multitude. As the Son of God again walked the sacred precincts of Heaven, approaching His seat at the right hand of the Father, I can imagine myriads and myriads of angels thronging the streets of Glory, ascribing praise and glory of the Risen Son of God. The wondering eyes of the hosts of heaven must have shone with astonishment and wonder as He took His rightful place at the right hand of the Father. No wonder they are now worship, saying “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing” [**REVELATION 5:12**]!

This is Paul's citation of this hymn, revealing in these initial stanzas the incarnation, the resurrection and the glorification of the Son of God. Paul has cited a powerful hymn that must have been sung with fervent joy by those first Christians. In this, the hymn was not unlike the hymn that we sing and which was written by Evangelist John Wilbur Chapman—"One Day." That hymn gives us the Good News of Jesus in hymnic form; it journeys from His birth to His crucifixion to His resurrection and looks forward to His coming again to receive us to Himself.

HE IS PROCLAIMED AMONG THE NATIONS — Since His ascension, *Jesus is proclaimed among the nations*. Before ascending into Glory, the Master commanded His disciples, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age" [MATTHEW 28:18-20]. In ACTS 1:8, Jesus is recorded as instructing His disciples, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

The disciples were less than enthusiastically obedient; in this, they were not unlike most of us modern Christians. They remained in Jerusalem where the Spirit had been poured out, preaching and teaching and trusting that the world would come to them. However, God had commanded, and He would shortly thrust them out as a mother eagle thrusts her young out of the nest [cf. DEUTERONOMY 32:11-13]. A rude preacher named Saul from Tarsus rained such violent persecution down on them that all the church, except for the Apostles, was scattered. Among those thrust out of the comfort of mother church was a deacon named Philip who brought the Good News to Samaria, where God blessed mightily [see ACTS 8:1-25].

Now, the Jewish Followers of the Way had evangelised Jerusalem and Judea and even Samaria. However, they still hesitated to evangelise the Gentiles. First, God found a willing servant in Deacon Philip, who obeyed when an angel of the Lord commanded him to go down into the desert. There, Philip found an Ethiopian court official who had been prepared to receive the Gospel of Jesus Christ [see ACTS 8:26-39]. Again, God intervened to send the Apostle to the Jews to evangelise Gentiles! The account of the conversion of a Roman Centurion named Cornelius is given in ACTS 10:1-48. Though the churches of our day are no more obedient than was that first congregation in fulfilling the Great Commission, God is still stirring up His people to go and tell others of the message of life. May He stir us! No nation will be overlooked, for God is still sending men and women to bear the message of grace into the whole world.

That Gentiles would be included in God's salvation was a scandal to the Jewish mind. Elsewhere, Paul speaks of "the mystery of Christ" [see EPHESIANS 3:4], which he identifies as revealing "that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel" [EPHESIANS 3:6]. The proclamation is an official announcement. The man of God stands and proclaims, not a theory, nor even a creed; rather, the man of God proclaims a Person—Jesus Christ the righteous! This is the declaration of the Apostle, "We preach Christ" [see 1 CORINTHIANS 1:23].

Let me ask a few simple questions: Is Christ Jesus our Lord the Saviour of the world? If He is Saviour of the world, should we not be busy about His work? The Word of God is quite adamant that He *is* Saviour of the World! John has testified, "We have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world" [1 JOHN 4:14]. This builds on what he wrote earlier, when he said, "[Jesus the Christ] is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world" [1 JOHN 2:2].

This testimony affirms what Paul wrote in **2 CORINTHIANS 5:17-20**, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.”

John’s Gospel presents two verses that merit attention when thinking of the proclamation about Jesus. After Jesus had revealed who He was to the Samaritan woman who had come to the well for water, she hurried back into the village, telling everyone she could find that she had met the Messiah. The entire village hastened out to see this Messiah. Meeting Jesus, many of them believed. After meeting Him, this was their testimony to the woman who had first told them of Jesus, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world” [**JOHN 4:42**].

How could I speak of proclaiming Jesus as Saviour of the world without citing what is arguably the most recognised verse in the entire world: **JOHN 3:16**? “God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” Because He loved the world, He sends us to tell the world that they may believe.

HE IS BELIEVED ON IN THE WORLD — I hold to the doctrines of grace. Some argue that because I so believe, I will be dissuaded from evangelistic efforts. Nothing could be more foolish than such an accusation. I believe God is in the business of saving lost sinners. I believe that He sent Jesus, His Son, into the world to provide His life as a sacrifice for sin. I believe that the death of Christ is sufficient to provide atonement for all mankind. I believe the testimony of Isaiah:

“Surely he has borne our griefs
and carried our sorrows;
yet we esteemed him stricken,
smitten by God, and afflicted.
But he was pierced for our transgressions;
he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with his wounds we are healed.
All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned—every one—to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.”

[**ISAIAH 53:4-6**]

With the Apostle, I am confident in attesting, “For to this end we toil and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe” [**1 TIMOTHY 4:10**]. Each time I preach, I am confident that God has hearts prepared to believe.

At Pentecost, Peter and the other disciples preached in the power of the Holy Spirit. About three thousand people believed, and believing, they identified with the Risen Lord of Glory through baptism, just as He commanded [see **ACTS 2:41**]. In the days that followed, thousands more believed the message of life. The message of life was preached throughout Judea, then in Samaria, and at last it was carried to the Gentiles by Paul and his associates.

The charge levelled against the first missionaries was, “These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also” [ACTS 17:6]. The same charge was brought against them in Ephesus: “You see and hear that not only in Ephesus but in almost all of Asia this Paul has persuaded and turned away a great many people” [ACTS 19:26]. The charge against the first disciples grew out of the proclamation of Jesus as the Saviour of the world and the fact that some believed this message. The charge was powerful evidence of the veracity of the divine promise, “Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” [ROMANS 10:17].

The message of grace reached even to a rabid rabbi who once sought to extirpate the Faith from the earth. Yet, here is the testimony of that same rabbi. “The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life. To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen” [1 TIMOTHY 1:15-17]. Amen, indeed.

HE WAS TAKEN UP IN GLORY — One of the most exciting portions of the Word is surely that which Paul wrote to the Christians in Philippi. There, in that letter to saints struggling to honour the Lord Christ, Paul encourages them by pointing to Christ. “Being found in human form, [Christ Jesus] humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” [PHILIPPIANS 2:8-11].

It is far too easy for us to focus so intently on the death and resurrection of Jesus, rushing forward to His return, that we neglect the truth of His ascension. The account of His ascension has already been cited, but it is worthy of reflection yet again. “As they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven’” [ACTS 1:9-11].

The ascension of Jesus is vital to our Faith—His ascension is the evidence that God the Father was pleased with His work. The ascension of Christ the Lord is evidence that the Father has accepted His labours. For this reason, one particular statement was included in the Letter to Hebrew Christians. In HEBREWS 2:10-18, we read, “It was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering. For he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one source. That is why he is not ashamed to call them brothers, saying,

‘I will tell of your name to my brothers;
in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise.’

“And again,

‘I will put my trust in him.’

“And again,

‘Behold, I and the children God has given me.’

“Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham. Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.”

The hymn Paul cited is about Christ Jesus. Christ is the mystery of godliness revealed. The opponents of the cross are wrong. Earlier in this letter, we are charged to ensure that our church is “a pillar and buttress of the truth” [see **1 TIMOTHY 3:14**]; and it shall continue as such so long as Christ is preached here.

John MacArthur tells a story of an old church in England. A sign on the front of the building read “We preach Christ crucified.” After a time, ivy grew up the walls, obscuring the last word. The motto now read, “We preach Christ.” The ivy grew some more, and the motto read, “We preach.” Finally, ivy covered the entire sign, and the church died. Such is the fate of any church that fails to carry out its mission in the world.⁹ Let us determine that we shall fulfil our mission in the world. Amen.

⁹ John F. MacArthur Jr., **1 Timothy, MacArthur New Testament Commentary** (Moody Press, Chicago, IL 1995) 142