

THE CENTRAL GLORY

by Ray C. Stedman

This morning we recited together the Nicene Creed, which came from the fourth century. We joined with the confession of faith of Christians from those struggling days of the church, when they were hammering out on the anvil of controversy the theological viewpoints and teachings of the church. But in the passage from the third chapter of First Timothy, which we will be studying today, we are looking at a single verse that comes right out of the 1st century, clear back to the very beginnings of the church. Many scholars feel this verse constitutes a confession of faith which the early church recited. In fact, because of the rhythm of its phrases, the scholars think that this was sung as a hymn.

The Apostle Paul has reminded Timothy, whom he left in Ephesus, of the awesome possibilities of a church that exists in the midst of a pagan and sexually-degraded society. Paul said that the church is "the household of God," "the assembly of the living God" (Chapter 3, Verse 15). By that, Paul clearly indicates that God dwells among his people. They are the channel for the release of the power and the life of God into the world. No other channel is possible; God has chosen his church, his people, for that purpose.

In the same verse, Paul goes on to say the church is "the pillar and bulwark of the truth." That is, it is the business of the church to tear down the illusions men are seeking to live by, to show these illusions up for what they are, and to open men's eyes to the realities of life. A church that is doing its work is a church where realism is coming into focus again, whose people are facing life the way it really is. That is the business of the church.

In one verse the apostle goes on to give us the very heart of that truth, the central fact around which everything else is built. This verse contains the key truth of the universe. Nothing is more important than this; it is the ultimate foundation of knowledge and wisdom, expressed in this ancient hymn from the early church.

First Timothy 3:16:

**Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of our religion:
He was manifested in the flesh,
vindicated in the Spirit,
seen by angels,
preached among the nations,
believed on in the world,
taken up in glory. {1 Tim 3:16 RSV}**

Do not miss the way the apostle underscores the importance of this great truth: "Great is the mystery of our religion." Every one of those words is significant. When Paul says it is a great mystery, he does not mean that it is hard to understand. We might say today, "Women are a great mystery; we men cannot understand them." By that we mean women are difficult and obscure, hard to comprehend. (Whether you agree with that or not, that is an example I chose to use.) But that is not what Paul means when he says, "This is a great mystery." He means it is of supreme significance; it is basic truth; nothing is more important than this.

But it is a mystery. That does not mean a riddle you have to puzzle over. As we have seen many times already, this word "mystery" is used in the New Testament of an insight into reality that is hidden from secular wisdom. The secular mind does not understand this mystery. It is something only revelation makes clear, so it will never be part of man's compendium of knowledge. You will not find it elucidated in any encyclopedia of human discovery; it is not to be found in our great universities, by and large, except as it is introduced by the church. It is a mystery, a secret about life, that is hidden from the secular mind and made known only to believing hearts.

Yet this mystery is the answer to the puzzles of life. Anyone alive today knows that there are obvious gaps in men's knowledge that keep us groping in darkness, unable to solve our problems. That is why every generation deals with the same dilemmas over and over again. Hegel's dictum, "History teaches us that history teaches us nothing," is true. We review the past continually, but never learn from it.

The reason is that we are missing elements of truth about ourselves, about God, and about the universe; and those missing elements are found only in the pages of Scripture. That is what makes the Bible the most important book in the world. There is no book like it, ever, anywhere. Nothing reveals this truth except the mind and will of God through the Spirit of God. This is the heart of that mystery. So it is indeed the great mystery, a significant and important truth.

The third word the apostle employs is that it is "the mystery of our religion," as this translation has it. That word, "religion," is a very poor translation. The same Greek word appears again in Chapter 4, Verses 7 and 8, where it is translated *godliness*: "Train yourself in godliness; for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come." That is a better translation than "religion." Religion does not help anybody. Religion is man's faltering, fumbling search through the darkness to find something beyond himself, something greater than himself, that he can believe in. Religion is nothing more, and never has been any more than that.

Godliness is something greater, ("Godlikeness" is the English root of the word.) But that does not really convey what this word means either, for actually, the name of God is not part of this word at all. It is not *godliness*; it is *goodliness*. Goodliness is what Paul is talking about. The closest English word we could use to translate this is the word *wholeness*. This word has the thought of balance about it. William Barclay says that the word in Greek means, "a consciousness of what is due both God and man"; living in such a way that you are aware of what life requires of you.

Every human being in this world wants to be a whole person, wants to "get it all together," we say. We want to find all the elements possible within ourselves and put them together so they function properly, and we become whole persons. The secret of wholeness -- that is what Paul is talking about: "Great indeed is the revelation of the secret of wholeness."

Paul goes on to tell us what that secret is: It is Jesus. It is not a philosophy, it is a Person. That secret is Jesus himself: "He was manifested in the flesh." (Some versions have the word "God" there: "God was manifested in the flesh." It is difficult to know which word was used in the original writing. Some manuscripts have "God," some have "He," and some even have the word, "Which." But it does not make any difference, because the noun that it refers back to is, "the living God." Notice that in the previous verse: "The church of the living God" ... "He was manifested in the flesh.")

In this hymn we have six unfoldings of the mystery of Jesus, what it is that is unique about him. The hymn divides into three couplets of two verses each. These are contrasting truths about Jesus, a mixture of the visible and the invisible that contains the secret of his perfect life. Let us look at them in that way.

The first couplet is:

**He was manifested in flesh,
justified in spirit,**

I have taken out the word "the" -- manifested in the flesh, justified in the spirit." They do not belong there; they are not in the Greek and there is no justification for having them there. I have also changed the word "spirit" from a capital to a small "s." The translators evidently thought this meant the Holy Spirit, but I do not think so. Also, I have changed the word vindicated to justified, because that is the common, ordinary word that is translated justified throughout the rest of Scripture.

What the hymn says is that Jesus was outwardly manifested in flesh and inwardly justified in spirit -- his human spirit. "Manifested in flesh" means he appeared as a normal human being. Jesus was not different than us. He entered into life as we do. He knew the joys of family life and the restrictions of hard work; he knew

what it meant to lose a loved one because his father, evidently, passed away. He knew what sorrow, pain, poverty, rejection and separation meant. He understood life.

Jesus appeared in flesh, real flesh, just like yours and mine. You are I are here in flesh (some more so than others). We do not mean that in the bad, theological sense of the word *flesh*, but in actual meat and bones. We have bodies that are subject to reactions, to pain, hurt, joys and sorrows, and so did Jesus. He was a normal human being. That is what this means. He ate and slept just like we do; he discharged the wastes of his body the same way we do. He even bled and died and was buried like a man.

Within Jesus, however, was a hidden glory that kept breaking out in remarkable ways that arrested the attention of those who knew him. Somebody has used the phrase that Jesus "had a daily beauty which made us ugly." That is what attracted people to Jesus. John speaks of this:

The Word was made flesh ... full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Begotten of the Father. {cf, John 1:14}

That was the glory in Jesus -- grace (compassion, love, mercy), and truth (reality that did not deceive itself in any way, but dealt honestly and forthrightly with life).

This is what is meant by the phrase, "justified in spirit." We are being given here the secret of the inner life of Jesus. The word "justified" means the same thing here that it means in Romans 5:1:

Being, therefore, justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Justified is what is true of us, and it was also true of Jesus. It means, "made righteous." There was a continual witness being borne to the spirit of Jesus that he was righteous before God. That means he was fully accepted and acceptable to God. He was loved and cherished and desired and looked after with deep affection and concern. That was the secret of his serene and untroubled character. That is what kept him calm and panic-proof in the midst of all the pressures and dangers in which he walked.

The reason this truth is so remarkable, and why it is incorporated in an early Christian hymn, is because that is true of us as well. We, by faith, are justified in spirit. Jesus was justified in spirit in reality; he did nothing wrong. The Spirit bore witness to him at all times that he was acceptable to God: "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased," {Matt 3:17, 17:5, Mark 1:11, Luke 3:22}. But the wonderful good news is, we are justified in spirit by faith. We too are acceptable to God, loved and cherished, so that as God looks at us he says, "This is my beloved child in whom I am well pleased." That is what keeps us serene and untroubled, calm and able to keep our cool under pressure, danger and disaster. That relationship remains absolutely unchanged despite our behavior. That relationship was the secret of the life of Jesus.

The second couplet says,

**[He was] seen by angels,
preached among the nations**

Once again, here is a blending of the invisible with a visible reality. Jesus was "seen by angels" (nobody could see that happening), but, "He was preached among the nations" (that was visible everywhere).

The word "seen," as it is used here, is the word from which we get our English word, "eyeball." Jesus was eyeballed by the angels. They watched him all the time. They studied him; that is the idea. He was constantly under observation by angels.

The record tells us that angels were present at his birth. They sang when a tiny, scrawny baby was laid in a manger in a cold and dirty cave. How their eyes must have reflected the incredible aspects of that situation, that the great God, the Lord of Glory, should be born as a baby in a manger! They were with him to strengthen him at his temptation by the devil after those forty days of fasting in the wilderness. They went with him

through his ministry. They were there with him in the agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, watching as he sweat drops of blood in his physical agony. They stood guard at his tomb. They stood beside the disciples as they watched him ascending into glory; and they sent the disciples back into Jerusalem, their hearts burning with hope again of his return.

The angels knew his majesty, his power, and his greatness, but they did not know his forgiving love. How amazing it must have been to them to watch their great God acting as Jesus did! They watched the cross with incredible eyes. They knew the critical issues that were being worked out in that death grapple in the darkness with the powers of hell and evil. Out of it, at last, they watched as there came a triumphant message to be sent out to all the nations; that the stranglehold of evil in human hearts was broken by the death of Jesus and his resurrection from the dead; that in Jesus there is a place of release and relief and recovery. That is the good news that has gone out through all the world.

We often sing:

There is a fountain filled with blood
Drawn from Emmanuel's veins;
And sinners, plunged beneath that flood,
Lose all their guilty stains.

That is the message preached, not by angels, but by pardoned men and women who triumphantly bear witness to the redeeming grace they themselves have experienced. That is why these two truths are put together; angels learned, but men are sent to tell the story.

I remember an old hymn that we used to sing when I was a new Christian:

Holy, holy, holy, is what the angels sing,
And I expect to help them make the courts of heaven ring.
But when we sing redemption's story, they must fold their wings,
For angels never felt the joy that our salvation brings.

Only men can preach this gospel throughout the nations. What a privilege it is to be a part of that great proclamation that has been going out to all nations! This proclamation is no longer confined to the narrow limits of Judaism and Jewry, but now to every nation on earth is given the tremendous promise that in Jesus Christ there is a place of recovery from the hurts and heartaches of life.

Then the last couplet:

**Believed on in the world,
Taken up in glory.**

For the third time, there is a linking of the evident with the invisible. "Believed on in the world " was evident everywhere in that 1st century. Everywhere this good news was preached, new communities of transformed men and women (called churches) were springing up, transforming the moral climate of every city. Slaves and patricians alike were bearing robust testimony to the changes that came in their lives when they believed in Jesus.

That is the way the world is yet today. There is a profound wisdom in some of the nursery rhymes we all learned as children. It is interesting that the world has always reflected the condition described in Humpty Dumpty:

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall.
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.
All the King's horses and all the King's men
Couldn't put Humpty Dumpty together again.

That is a description of the human race. There is described the fall of man: Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall --

and then he had a fall. When he fell, all the wisdom of men (all the king's horses and all the king's men) could never get that splattered, shattered egg back together again -- although they have been trying for centuries.

But what was impossible to the king's horses and the king's men is easy for the King. He puts men back together again. That is the good news, that is the gospel -- that in Jesus there is power to lay hold again of all the possibilities of life. No matter how bad our failure has been, how broken we have become, how foolishly we have acted, how godless we have been, how hateful we have become, in Jesus Christ there is the possibility of change; in fact, the certainty of change.

As we begin the Billy Graham Crusade in San Jose this afternoon, my mind goes back to 1958, when Billy first came to the Cow Palace in San Francisco. This church was very much involved in that Crusade. We took a lot of people up and watched them as they listened to the good news. One night my wife and I took Joan Baez up to the Cow Palace and watched her sit under the preaching of Billy Graham. We watched the tenseness in her face as she obviously felt the impact of that message, struggling with what she should do. She refused it, turned aside from it, and has gone on to other things. There were many like that.

I remember one couple I met shortly after that, John and Helen Edrington. John was a dental surgeon in this area. His marriage had fallen apart; he and his wife were on the verge of divorce. They hated each other; they could not stand to speak to one another. There was a deep bitterness of spirit between them and they had separated.

John Edrington had a nurse who was a Christian, and she asked him again and again to go to the Crusade. He refused, saying he was an atheist. But at last, under her urging, he decided to go. He went that night, then came back the next night and again the next night. Somewhere along the line John Edrington responded to the invitation and went down and turned his life over to Jesus Christ.

There was an immediate change in John. His attitudes were different; he started thinking about his marriage again, and within a week or so he went back to Helen and confessed his sins to her and asked her forgiveness. They were reunited, and she too became a believer. That marriage was so fully restored that it became almost a joke here at PBC. We laughed about the new honeymooners we had in our congregation. They fell in love again and for many years they grew in grace and strength. John became an elder here in the congregation, a teacher of the gospel, and an excellent counselor. He went to be with the Lord just a few weeks ago.

What a testimony to the power of Jesus to change lives! That is what this phrase, "Believed on in the world" means. It is an amazing miracle and it has been happening for two thousand years. It is no different now than it was in that 1st century when this amazing message went out, that in Jesus there is hope; in Jesus there is recovery; in Jesus there is deliverance and forgiveness of sins.

The last phrase of the couplet,

Taken up in glory

explains the miracle. Do not read that, "taken up into glory." It means more than that Jesus went into heaven. It says that he was taken up in glory. That is, he was already glorified when he was taken up. It is that glorified state of Jesus that constitutes the explanation for the miracles of transformed lives through two thousand years of ministry.

I do not think anyone has explained that any better than these words from William Temple in his Readings in St. John's Gospel. He says:

In the days of His earthly ministry, only those could speak to Him who came where He was. If He was in Galilee, men could not find Him in Jerusalem; if He was in Jerusalem, men could not find Him in Galilee. But His Ascension means that He is perfectly united with God; we are with Him wherever we are present to God; and that is everywhere and always. Because He is "in Heaven" He is everywhere on earth; because He is ascended, He is here now. Our devotion is not to hold us by the empty tomb; it must lift up our hearts to heaven so that we too "in heart and mind thither ascend and with Him continually dwell"; it must also send us

forth into the world to do His will; and these are not two things, but one.

That is why, throughout these two thousand years of church history, Jesus Christ has been the answer to the puzzles of life. You find yourself when you find Jesus. He can put you together. He can mend the broken egg of our lives and put us back together again. That, Paul says, is the central fact of history. Nothing is more important than that. Jesus is available to us and we live our lives by his power daily made available.

A businessman of my acquaintance has said this in a very effective way:

Jesus did the most ordinary kind of jobs. It takes all God's power in me to do the simplest things -- his way. Christianity is not a way of doing special things. It is a special way of doing everything. Can I talk to a woman as Jesus did? Or ask for a drink of water? Or cook fish? Or walk through my hometown? Or talk to my men? It is bosses and basins and towels and washing fishermen's feet.

The dusty pedestrian duties of life demand God Almighty in us. It takes as much of the power of God for me to go to my office and sit at the desk and talk on the phone -- as I should -- as much of God's power to go through my regular routine as it does for me to preach a sermon or write a religious book. An evening with my wife. A golf tournament with my son. An ice cream adventure with my daughter. A conference on financial budgets. I am not supposed to be a gilt-edged spook with wings making a holy hum: one-half human and one-half angel. I am supposed to be a normal, natural, down-to-earth human, full of creation's practical Spirit -- the 13th chapter of 1 Corinthians dressed up in mod clothes.

Then he quotes this verse from Scripture, "Whatever you do, whether you eat or drink, do it all for God's glory," {cf, 1 Cor 10:31}. And he adds:

There's nothing very churchy about eating and drinking. you say? Of course not -- that's the good news. Awesome news, but good news. Church is everywhere. Wherever you go you can say with Jacob at Bethel, "This is the house of God, this is the gate of heaven." Ruth Graham has a motto over her kitchen sink: "Divine service performed here three times daily."

That is Christianity. That is what this is all about. The secret of life is Jesus going with you day-by-day, involved in everything you do, and you drawing upon his wisdom, his power, his daily forgiveness. He sets aside your guilt, cleansing you afresh, so that the Holy Spirit bears witness to your spirit that you are justified by faith. Thus you can proceed with calmness, courage and confidence to take hold of life and deal with it in the midst of the daily pressures.

That is Christianity as it was intended. It has nothing to do with religion. Religion is man's groping, faltering, fumbling search after something bigger than himself that he can believe in. But Christianity is not that. Christianity is a living Person made available to us by the Holy Spirit, granting to us the courage, the cleansing, the purity and the grace to live as God's man and God's woman in every situation.

That is Christianity.

That is the great mystery of wholeness in our lives.

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