

ASCENSION 2016

1 Timothy 3:16

Scripture: 1 Timothy 3:8-16

Hymn: Tell Me The Story Of Jesus

INTRO: Today we commemorate the ascension of Christ, when He went back to heaven. Over the years I have preached close to 20 messages on the ascension of Christ. As these messages are a year in between you will not remember a series of nine messages in nine years on the ministry of the ascended Christ. One of the things that bothers me as I consider my age is that I will get to preach so little of the Bible in my lifetime.

This morning we go to 1 Timothy 3 (read verse 16). The book of First Timothy, is the first of three epistles, called the Pastoral Epistles. These three books were written to Pastors, and that is why they are called the pastoral epistles. And in verses 14-15 Paul says that he has written to Timothy in order that he might know how to conduct himself in the house of God.

The 'House of God' is here further defined as the Church of the living God. The Church is and has been God's greatest work on earth in the last 2,000 years, though most of mankind is oblivious to the fact. Now the Church of the living God is that sum total of all true believers of all the time of the Church age. This is the universal Church. And what held true for Timothy in the Church he was pastoring holds true for any local church at any time in the Church age.

In the OT, the 'House of God' referred to the temple. God dwelt in the Holy of Holies in that temple. When the Church was born, believers became the 'House of God'. So our text says, that Paul wrote in order that Timothy might know how to conduct himself in the house of God, which is the Church of the living God." Each individual believer and the collective body of believers are the dwelling place of God. So Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 3:16, "Do you not know that you are the temple of God and *that* the Spirit of God dwells in you?" Every true believer is a part of the temple of God, and the Church as a whole is where God dwells on earth today. So Paul says in the very next verse, 1 Corinthians 3:17, "If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which *temple* you are."

But the aspect of the Church of God Paul is talking about here is the collective church body, as in a local Church. So Paul has written to Timothy to instruct him, how he is to conduct himself in the house of God. Commentators seem to think that this refers not just the local church there, but the universal Church of the living God. So Barnes says, "This does not mean in a place of public worship, nor does it refer to propriety of deportment there. It refers rather to the church as a body of believers, and to intercourse with them. The church is called the 'house of God,' because it is that in which he dwells."

I tend to think, however, that this has special reference to the local church, no matter where it gathers. I believe that, because he has just instructed him on pastors and deacons, and the universal church does not have pastors and deacons placed over the entire Church. Roman Catholicism seems to think so, but the Scripture recognizes no such structure.

But each local church is part of the universal Church, and it is the universal church that is, according to verse 15, the pillar and ground of truth. This is a most significant statement for which we cannot take time. Our subject this morning is verse 16.

But note now how verse 16 begins: "And without controversy, great is the mystery of godliness." Now you will remember that recently that we looked at the sin of 'ungodliness'. We said that ungodliness is the failure to separate between the mundane and the holy. In verse 15 Paul said that he had written to Timothy in order that he might know how to conduct himself in the house of God. The subject is godliness. In the immediate context it was with regard to the qualifications of pastors and deacons.

And Paul says here, great is the mystery of godliness. We go then to the first point, God was manifested in the flesh.

I. GOD MANIFESTED IN THE FLESH

Now it is necessary for us to dispense first with a translation problem. Of the very first word of our passage, the word 'God', Albert Barnes says, "Probably there is no passage in the New Testament which has excited so much discussion among critics as this, and none in reference to which it is so difficult to determine the true reading. It is the only one, it is believed, in which the microscope

has been employed to determine the lines of the letters used in a manuscript; and, after all that has been done to ascertain the exact truth in regard to it, still the question remains undecided."

And what is the question? It is this. Does the very first word of the original text read, *theos*, or *hos*? If it is *theos*, it reads, 'God'. If it is 'hos', it reads 'who'. Now let me just mention that the words under study are understood to be part of an early church hymn.

I don't understand if I am too simplistic, and don't want to spend much time on this. If the word is 'hos', it is a Greek relative pronoun meaning 'who' or 'he who'. And if it is a pronoun, we look to the nearest antecedent that it could refer to, and that is God of the previous verse and it can be none other than God. So I see no need to make a big deal out of this. I hold to the majority text and believe the reading 'God' is correct. (More. Wallace 341).

In history past some very great moments have come. There was first of all, creation. At one time in the past there was no matter. There was no universe. And when God began to create, in just six days, there was the vast universe. It is undescribly huge. Then there came another great moment of time when it rained until the earth was covered with a flood. This past week my daughter and I went down towards the Hay River some 4 ½ hours north of here. There on the banks of the river are layer after layer of fossilized sea creatures. We saw a huge piece that had been broken out of the bank by machinery about 7 feet thick, filled with sea shells. And we talked of how this could not happen in the way evolution explains it. All over the earth there is evidence of the flood. That was a huge moment.

But our verse says, "God was manifested in the flesh!" Of all the great moments in history after creation, no moment has rivaled the first line of this hymn: God was manifested in the flesh! One commentator says this to that thought: "Every sentence of the sources bears witness to (unique events) ... every verse of our Gospels hammers it into us: something has happened, something unique, something which has never before come into existence ... The more we multiply analogies, the clearer it becomes that there are

no analogies to the message of Jesus." {Ecclectic Commentary, online Bible. J. Jeremias, Expository Times, 69 1957-58, p336 }

Think of this. God came as a baby. He was born in a sheep barn; cared for at first by shepherds and a human mother and stepfather. He grew up in a humble carpenter's home. He never left any great buildings like Herod the Great. He never wrote a book. And as I see it, He preached for a mere two years. Then He ascended back to heaven. And after that hundreds upon hundreds upon hundreds of thousands of books have been written about Him and He is the subject of discussion and controversy all over the world 2,000 years later. God's manifestation in the flesh marks our calendars! We are at 2016. And the question is 2016 from when? Should not any rational being ask that question?

Yes, God was manifested in flesh. He appeared in flesh.

II. GOD JUSTIFIED IN THE SPIRIT

We go then to the second line which says that God was justified in the spirit. To be justified is to be declared righteous. And the question is, was He justified by or in the Holy Spirit, or was He justified in His own spirit? I tend to side with the idea that He was justified, declared to be righteous in his own spirit. His spirit, unlike ours, was undefiled. It was pure. There was no filthiness of spirit such as pride, jealousy or envy. He was pure in spirit and He was declared to be righteous in spirit.

This was evidenced by His life. Jesus said in one place, "Wisdom is justified by her children." It is a difficult verse but I understand it to mean that wisdom is justified by the results in the person's life who has wisdom. You can see it in the results in life. Those results are the children produced by wisdom. Our passage says Jesus was justified in the spirit. I believe that means the righteousness of His spirit was justified by the life He lived. The offspring produced by His purity of spirit gave evidence to it and thus justified Him in spirit. He was justified in spirit when He had a physical body. The body did not contaminate Him in spirit.

Go to Matthew 3 (read 13-17). There we have the approval of God the Holy Spirit and God the Father on the purity of the life of Christ. In chapter 4 we have Jesus' three great temptations, and again He was justified in spirit by His victory over Satan's temptations.

Then we could go to Gethsemene. Never has, and never will any man come under greater strain and battle with Satan, the world and the flesh than Jesus underwent there, but He was justified with regard to the purity of His spirit there.

Then go to John 14. This took place just before Gethsemene so look at verses 27-31 (read). Satan is coming and He has nothing 'in' Me. Christ was justified in His spirit. There was nothing Satan had in Him. He had no ground in Him.

J. Oswald Sanders, whom my wife and I have heard on several occasions, but who has since passed away tells a story I have told you before. But it may be well to read it here. Here is how it goes:

As a young man, Sir John Ramsden established his textile mill in the small town of Huddersfield. As his business prospered, he bought increasing areas of land to enlarge his mill and accommodate his growing band of employees. Eventually he was able to purchase the whole town with the exception of one house adjoining the mill which was owned and occupied by an old Quaker.

At last, in order that he might be able to boast that Huddersfield was all his, Sir John determined to pay the Quaker a personal visit, and make an offer so generous that he could not refuse it.

'I suppose you know who I am,' said Sir John, when the door opened.

'Oh yes,' responded the Quaker in his quaint English, 'I know who thee art.'

'And I suppose you can guess why I am here?'

'Oh yes, I can guess why thee art here.'

'You know I have often tried to buy your property but you would not sell it. Well, I will make a very generous offer. If you will sell your property to me, I will cover the land

with gold sovereigns.' He did not dream that such an offer could meet with refusal.

For a few moments the Quaker was silent, then with a quizzical smile he said, 'If the wilt put them edgeways we might talk business.'

Angry and crestfallen, Sir John turned on his heel and left the house. When he had reached the gate, the old Quaker called after him,

'Sir John, remember that Huddersfield belongs to thee and to me.'

In order to reach his home, the Quaker could walk all over all the rest of Sir John's Huddersfield. If there is some area of our lives on which Satan has some claim, he can tramp through all the rest of our lives to reach that part in which he has a vested interest. And he can say, "Christ, remember that that soul belongs to you and to me!"

But Christ was justified in the spirit. Satan had nothing in Him. He had no beachhead anywhere in Him. Oh that I might be like that. And I suppose that Christ's resurrection and ascension to heaven are the greatest justification of His purity of spirit. He was justified in the spirit by these events.

III. GOD SEEN BY ANGELS

The next line is that He was seen by angels. Since we are talking about God's manifestation in the flesh in His Son Jesus Christ, being seen by angels, I believe refers to being seen by them in the flesh. Go to Luke 2 (read 1-15). He was seen by angels.

We go now to Matthew 3. Jesus has already endured two temptations and in verse 8 we come to the third one. So look at verses 8-11 (read). Oh, the angels were there alright. He was seen of angels. He was ministered to by angels!

We spoke earlier of Jesus in Gethsemene. Go now to Luke 22 (read 39-43). He was seen of angels while He was in human form. Go to Matthew 28 (read 1-6). No doubt the angels have been around and busy throughout these days!

But go now to Acts 1. Look at verses 1-5 (read). The number 40 is the number of testing, proving. Jesus was alive on earth for 40 days to give full evidence of His resurrection. Nobody today can justly say He was not resurrected. These 40 historical days give full evidence of that. But that brings us to the day we commemorate today so look at verses 6-11 (read). Yes, He was seen by angels.

IV. GOD PREACHED AMONG THE GENTILES

But our song does not end there. It says He was preached among the Gentiles. Now we could go through the book of Acts and all the epistles. Oh what a huge change Pentecost brought to the world! We just read Acts 1:8, where Jesus instructed them to be witnesses to Him in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and then to the uttermost parts of the world.

Well, they started in Jerusalem. That takes us from Acts 2-7. Then we come to Acts 8. Look at it (read 1-5). We have now come to Samaria. Then in Acts 10 Peter was called to go to Caesarea and the first Gentiles got saved. Oh how that rocked the boat of Judaism. But it survived and then we come to Acts 13 (read 1-3). And from there it has gone into every corner of the world. Yes, He was preached among the Gentiles; and still is.

V. GOD BELIEVED ON IN THE WORLD

But all of that preaching would have been to no avail if the truth of what was proclaimed had not been believed. And our next line says He was believed on in the world. Volumes upon volumes could be written here. I do suppose in eternity we will have time to read all about it. Nothing has had such an impact on the entire world as the Gospel, and the believing of it.

Let me give the quote I gave earlier here again: "Every sentence of the sources bears witness to (unique events) ... every verse of our Gospels hammers it into us: something has happened, something unique, something which has never before come into existence ... The more we multiply analogies, the clearer it becomes that there are no analogies to the message of Jesus." {Eclectic Commentary,

online Bible. J. Jeremias, *Expository Times*, 69 1957-58, p336 }

What has had a greater impact on the world than those who believe the Gospel? Have you ever considered what this earth would be like if God had not stepped into history in human flesh? Who has civilized more of heathendom than Christianity? How did England become such a stronghold for Christianity? How did America become what it became? It wants to rub some of us the wrong way when Americans think they are the greatest nation under the sun. But God has used America in ways Canada will never be able to come close to touching. In some ways, Canada has been like our own Mennonite people: die stille im Lande, the quiet in the land.

Yes, He was believed on in the world. Examples abound of the impact of Christ on the world because of those who believed on Him. We could begin with doubting Thomas. After Jesus was resurrected he said, "I don't believe it. I won't believe it. Unless..." So go to John 20 (read 24-28). How many times has that been repeated in history, even in Jesus' absence.

An article I read some years ago said, "The power of Christ knows no boundary of time or space. In our own age, many skeptics have been convinced just as thoroughly as their first-century counterparts. For example, Lew Wallace, a famous general and literary genius, was a known atheist. For two years, Wallace studied in the leading libraries of Europe and America, seeking information that would forever destroy Christianity. While writing the second chapter of a book outlining his arguments, he suddenly found himself on his knees crying out to Jesus, 'My Lord and my God.' When confronted by solid indisputable evidence, he could no longer deny that Jesus Christ was the Son of God. Later, Lew Wallace wrote the book *Ben Hur*, one of the greatest English novels ever written concerning the time of Christ."

Yes, he was believed on in the world, and still is.

VI. GOD RECEIVED UP INTO GLORY

We come now to our last stanza in the song, God was received up into glory. You see, in another of the most

crucial events of man's history, the resurrection of Christ occurred. In a matter of just over a week, human history took a huge turn. Jesus had come from Jericho to Bethany six days before the Passover. On Palm Sunday he was welcomed into Jerusalem as King, and on Wednesday of that week He was crucified.

And then Saturday evening, just as the Sabbath was about to begin, He folded up the napkin that had been around His head and left the tomb. The next morning the empty tomb was discovered and He was discovered to be alive. And to prove He was alive, He stayed in the area for 40 days. Then 40 days after His resurrection, but 10 days before Pentecost a monumental event took place and we go to Acts 1. We looked at this earlier, but let us read it again (read 1:1-11).

CONCL: And so we conclude this ascension day message by summarizing this song. Paul's prelude to this song was, "Great is the mystery of godliness." And then begins the first verse: God was manifested in the flesh. He came in Christ. Thomas said to Jesus, "Show us the Father and we will rest content that You are really the One." And, "Jesus said to him, 'Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; so how can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me? The words that I speak to you I do not speak on My own authority; but the Father who dwells in Me does the works. Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father in Me, or else believe Me for the sake of the works themselves."

He was justified in the spirit. I have concluded that this speaks of Jesus' justification by His life that He was clean and pure in His spirit. He was seen by angels. We saw that numerous times it is recorded that angels were with Him. They announced His birth and comforted Him in His greatest life trials.

He was preached among the Gentiles. Still is. The greatest part of the Church, when all is said and done and the rapture has taken place will be Gentile. Today, 2,000 years later He is still preached among the Gentiles. The accounts of His life are being translated into language after language. Not only is He preached in the world, He was and is being believed on in the world.

And last, our song says He was received up into glory! And what did those 2 brief years of God manifested in the flesh do among mankind? Voluminous writer and Historian Philip Schaff has described the overwhelming influence which Jesus had on the subsequent history and culture of the world. He writes, "This Jesus of Nazareth, without money and arms, conquered more millions than Alexander, Caesar, Mohammed, and Napoleon; without science...he shed more light on things human and divine than all philosophers and scholars combined; without the eloquence of schools, he spoke such words of life as were never spoken before or since, and produced effects which lie beyond the reach of orator or poet; without writing a single line, he set more pens in motion, and furnished themes for more sermons, orations, discussions, learned volumes, works of art, and songs of praise than the whole army of great men of ancient and modern times."

And the question we need to ask ourselves has never been more eloquently asked than was asked by Dr. S. M. Lockridge in a message he did when he spoke of Jesus as his king.

My King is a seven way king. He's a king of the Jews, that's a racial king; He's a king of Israel, that's a national king; He's a king of righteousness; He's a king of the ages; He's a king of heaven; He's a king of glory; He's a king of kings; and He's the Lord of Lords; That's my King!

Well, I wonder do you know Him? David said, "The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament showeth His handiwork." My King is a sovereign King; no means of measure can define His limitless love; no far-seeing telescope can bring into visibility the coastline of His shore-less supply; no barrier can hinder Him from throwing out His blessings. He's enduringly strong; He's entirely sincere; He's eternally steadfast; He's immortally graceful; He's imperially powerful; He's impartially merciful.

DO YOU KNOW HIM?

He's the greatest phenomenon that has ever crossed the horizon of this world; He's God's Son; He's the sinner's Savior; He's the centerpiece of civilization; He stands in the solitude of Himself; He's August and He's unique; He's unparalleled; He's unprecedented;. He is the loftiest idea in literature; He's the highest Personality in philosophy; He is the supreme problem in higher criticism; He's the fundamental doctrine of true

theology; He is the core, the necessity for spiritual religion; He's the miracle of the age; He is the superlative of everything good that you choose to call Him; He's the only one qualified to be an all-sufficient Savior!

I WONDER IF YOU KNOW HIM TODAY?

He supplies strength for the weak; He's available for the tempted and the tried; He sympathizes and He saves; He strengthens and sustains; He guards and He guides; He heals the sick; He cleansed the lepers; He forgives sinners; He discharges debtors; He delivers the captives; He defends the feeble; He blesses the young; He serves the unfortunate; He regards the aged; He rewards the diligent and He purifies the meek.

I WONDER IF YOU KNOW HIM?

Well, my King, He is a key to knowledge; He's a wellspring of wisdom; He's a doorway of deliverance; He's a pathway of peace; He's a roadway of righteousness; He's a highway of holiness; He's a gateway of glory.

DO YOU KNOW HIM?

Well, His office is manifold; His promise is sure; His light is matchless; His goodness is limitless; His mercy is everlasting; His love never changes; His Word is enough: His grace is sufficient; His reign is righteousness and His yoke is easy and His burden is light.

I wish I could describe Him to you! But He is indescribable! He's God. He's incomprehensible; He's invincible; He's irresistible; Well, you can't get Him out of your mind; you can't get Him off your hand; you can't outlive Him and you can't live without Him; the Pharisees couldn't stand Him, but they found out they couldn't stop Him; Pilate couldn't find any fault in Him; the witnesses couldn't get their testimonies to agree; Herod couldn't kill Him; death couldn't handle Him and the grave couldn't hold Him!

YES, THAT'S MY KING! THAT'S MY KING!

And thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever and ever and ever (How long is that?) and ever and ever, and when you get through with all the forever, then AMEN, AMEN, AMEN!!!