

From the Pulpit of the Japanese Baptist Church of North Texas
December 25, 2016

The Mystery of Godliness

1 Timothy 3:16

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. “Messiah”

In 1685, two musicians were born in Germany. One was born on February 23rd Handel, the other was born on March 31st Bach. Bach dedicated his life to write church music, and Handel was successful in theater music. Handel composed many operas and oratorios, and the most famous one is “Messiah”.

“Messiah” is English word for “Savior” in Hebrew. “Messiah” in Greek is “Christ”. So this piece is based on Christ’s life. However, Jesus Christ, his disciples, and Jewish people do not appear in this piece. This piece depicts Jesus Christ indirectly by using the prophecy of Jesus Christ.

Handel’s music was composed to entertain the audiences in the theaters. When he used Jesus Christ in “Messiah”, he was criticized because people thought he used the Holy One for the entertainment.

Actually, “Messiah” was composed for entertainment; however, the entire text was taken from the Scripture, and Handel himself was impressed at the words when he was composing this piece. Moreover, the listeners also received the impression of faith from this piece. We know an episode that King George II was impressed by Hallelujah and stood up and worship Jesus Christ, King of kings, the Lord of lords” when “Messiah” was first performed in London. “Messiah” was premiered in a charity concert of hospital to comfort the patients. Later, this piece was performed for the charity concert of orphan. Handel might not want to use this piece for just profits, since the main character was the Savior.

This is lesser known fact but when “Messiah” was performed in April 13th 1742, this sentence has been inserted to the program note. That is today’s Bible verse 1 Timothy 3:16. What the oratorio “Messiah” want to say is, “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.” But what does it mean “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.”? We would like to learn what this verse would like to say.

2. Salvation in Christ

The phrase, “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,” might be one of the hymns sung in the early church; and, The New Testament has many “hymns”. The most famous one is Phillip 2:6-11.

Though he (Jesus Christ) was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, 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.

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.

This “hymn” in Philippians 2:6-11 powerfully sings about the facts that Son of God became man, crucified on the cross, resurrected and now has a seat next to the Father. Moreover, the phrase confesses the core of faith, “Jesus Christ is the Lord,” and admire the greatest and finest One over everything. We should also bend down and worship Him as reading these verses.

Timothy 3:16 is also a “hymn” that sings about Jesus Christ, the Lord and King of us. It has 6 lines and each 2 lines are written in comparison format.

(Line 1) He was manifested in the flesh,

(Line 2) vindicated by the Spirit,

1st and 2nd lines include the comparison between “flesh” and “Spirit.” 1st line implies that God’s Son was born as man in flesh to be on the earth, and sacrificed Himself on the cross in order to atone

everybody. 2nd line, expresses Jesus Christ was still alive after 3 days; It was assured that Jesus was the Son of God by His resurrection.

Here is the comparison between “angels” and “nations” in 3rd and 4th lines.

(Line 3) seen by angels,

(Line 4) proclaimed among the nations,

It suggests that resurrection of Jesus Christ is powerfully proclaimed in heaven and on the earth.

Finally, last 2 lines describe that Jesus returned to heaven after 40 days of resurrection, which means “Ascension.” 4th line and 5th line are, you may already notice, also comparison; “proclaimed” and “believed”.

(Line 5) believed on in the world,

(Line 6) taken up in glory.

After 10 days Jesus Christ returned to heaven, the Holy Spirit was given to the apostles and the Church was born. Apostles proclaimed Jesus Christ by the power of Holy Spirit. The Good News of Jesus Christ was delivered all over the world soon, and believed in. This “hymn” also praises Jesus Christ who is in glory of the heavenly seat.

Philippians 2:6-11 and 1 Timothy 3:16 both describe 4 stages of the life of Jesus Christ, “Birth,” “Passion,” “Resurrection,” and finally “Ascension” because these have our salvation. God’s salvation is not subjective feeling like “relaxation” or “motivation.” It’s based on the objective “facts” that Jesus became man, lived as a historical key-person, changed the world, and changed the history. This facts can change those who believe in Jesus Christ into the children of God, and

they no longer in the world of sin and death.

1 Timothy 3:16 clearly tells that Jesus Christ is the Lord. This would be the most suitable phrase for the theme of “Messiah” that describes Jesus is the Savior.

3. Mystery of Godliness

1 Timothy 3:16 is called “the mystery of Godliness”. This verse is also “the mystery of salvation” and “the mystery of faith” before “the mystery of godliness”. Why this verse called by “the mystery of godliness” here? Because this does not only show salvation and basis of faith but also the truth that leads believers to the godly life.

The Bible teaches in 2 Peter 1:5-7 “For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love.” Godliness is not required in certain people but in all the Christians, and should be sought by true Christians. Those who believe in God are redeemed of their sins and changed into righteous and rational thinker and speaker, as well as doer. These changes are called “godliness”.

There is an English joke, “those who suffer from seasick look so godly”. The real godly person does not necessarily look pale or being quiet or have life with abstinence. The real godly person trusts in Jesus Christ, who became a human and suffered, but resurrected and is now in Heaven, and live a strong life. He who accepts Christ, who became a person and descended on this earth, into his heart and follows His guidance from the heaven; that is our salvation and

godliness.

The early Christians were heavily prosecuted but they never gave up. They were not afraid of the Roman Emperor's orders. As Gloria sings, "For you alone are holy. You alone are the Lord. You alone, O Jesus Christ, are most high", they continued to confess that Jesus Christ stands at a higher place than the Roman Emperor. They praised Jesus Christ, singing "with the Holy Spirit in the glory of God the Father. Amen." We would also like to trust and praise Jesus Christ as Holy God, King of kings, and the Highest.

The Christmas story in the Bible does not only describe Jesus as a poor and powerless baby in the manger, but also as a powerful and glorious king praised by angels and worshiped by shepherds and wise men. In this Christmas, we not only remember the poverty of Jesus Christ but praise His glory and power, as 2 Timothy 2:8 says, "Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David." Let's trust our Messiah Jesus Christ and start our life from this Christmas, assured by His power and authority. Those who already accepted Jesus Christ, let's be humble before the Lord and seek our godly life looking upon God.

(Prayer)

Dear heavenly Father, you showed us your salvation through the life of Jesus Christ from His birth to Ascension. In this Christmas, help us remember the truth of salvation and the mystery of faith embedded in the life of Jesus Christ, and remember the mystery of godliness. We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.