

SERMONS

BY THE

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SERMON VII.

THE GREAT MYSTERY OF GODLINESS—GOD MANIFEST IN THE FLESH.

(PREACHED ON CHRISTMAS-DAY.)

1 TIM. iii. 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 into glory.

IT is my intention, first, to state what I conceive to be the true meaning of this passage of Scripture; and then to endeavour to deduce from it such practical remarks as may be likely, under the blessing of God, to prove beneficial to our souls.

I. I am first, then, to EXPLAIN THE PASSAGE.—And here I must begin by observing, that it is attended with some difficulties, which have exercised the pens of the most able commentators. It is not, however, my intention to enter into any critical disquisition; as I do not think the pulpit a fit place for it. A minister should study his subject in his closet, and then bring the result of his investigations before his audience. But as many of them must necessarily receive much upon his authority, let him remember that he is strictly answerable to God for the diligence, the impartiality, and the sacred reverence for truth with which he has pursued his inquiries. It has been my endeavour not to be deficient in these respects.

In order to judge of an author's sense, it is material to know his style of writing, and his general turn of mind; for, wherever the meaning of a particular passage is doubtful, it ought to be interpreted so as may best accord with the scope of his general writings. Now, in the style of St. Paul, the following peculiarities are to be noticed:—1. He appears to have generally present to his view the Jewish dispensation. He often alludes to it, compares with it the several parts of the Christian system, and illustrates the one by the other. The whole Epistle to the Hebrews is a continued parallel of this kind.—2. He is apt, on the occurrence of a particular word, or the suggestion of a particular idea, suddenly to di-

verge from his general subject, and to follow up, and perhaps at considerable length to elucidate, the new topic.—3. He is accustomed to give only a rapid sketch of the subject which engages him, often leaving the detail to be supplied by the reader's mind. Much that was distinct and evident to himself is implied, rather than expressed. Even the strict rules of grammar are occasionally neglected. His mind seems so warmed by the subject, as to render him indifferent to exactness in his expressions. Hence he is often sublime in his thoughts, but inaccurate in his language; clear in his ideas, but involved in his narration; rapid in his transitions, and concise in his arguments. All these remarks will, I think, assist us in the elucidation of the passage before us, to which I will now proceed.

“These things,” says he (namely, those relating to the government of the church), “write I unto thee, hoping to come to 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, the pillar of the living God,” (for so, with the learned Heinsicus, would I place the words), “and ground” or depository “of the truth.”—When the idea of the church as the “house of God” arose in the mind of the Apostle, there instantly suggested itself a comparison of the Christian church with that house or tabernacle which under the Old Testament was called “the house of God,” and particularly with that house in which God might be said to dwell during the passage of the Israelites through the wilderness. Over that tabernacle was a pillar of cloud, or of fire, which in a signal manner denoted the presence and residence of the Most High God; and within the tabernacle was contained the ark, which was the depository of the law of God. In this pillar, denoting the residence of God, and this ark, the depository of the Law, the Jews might justly exult. And in like manner, the Apostle goes on to show, might Christians exult in their church; for this was now become the residence of God, and the sacred receptacle of truth. There is now the “pillar of the living God.” There is now permanently deposited the truth;—the truth, which, though once borne from place to place in the ark, is now become stationary in the church.—It may be right to add, that the ancient fathers of the church consider the words “pillar and ground of truth” as bearing this reference.

The idea of the visible presence of God, as denoted by the pillar and cloud, having thus taken possession of the mind of the Apostle, he continues, in his usual manner, to dwell upon it; instituting a comparison or analogy between the presence of God formerly displayed, and the presence of Christ as vouchsafed to the Christian church. In this parallel, however, from the usual rapidity of his ideas and conciseness of his manner, he leaves the points of resemblance to be in part supplied by the reader. Contemplating the similarity of the type and the antitype, he ob-

serves, “and great, without controversy, is the mystery of godliness,” or of the Christian dispensation. The mystery of the appearance of God in the Pillar and Cloud to the Jews, was confessedly great: but, says the Apostle, the mystery of his being manifested in the flesh, is “without doubt great” also. If, in the wilderness, God was “justified,” or his Divine presence and his truth were vindicated, by miraculous signs; so, in the Christian church, Christ was “justified,” or the truth and authority of his pretensions vindicated by the miraculous operations of the Spirit. If, in the wilderness, the Divine presence was beheld by “angels,” who, on Sinai, attended the delivery of the Law, and who were represented as stooping over the ark, “desiring to look into” the things shadowed out by it; thus, in the new dispensation, Christ was the object of wonder and adoration to angels: he was seen by a “multitude of the heavenly host,” as he lay at his birth in a manger; he was “seen of angels,” when he was tempted in the wilderness; he was “seen of angels,” whilst in agony in the garden of Gethsemane; he was “seen of angels,” while lying in the sepulchre, and when he rose from the dead and ascended into heaven. In the wilderness, God delivered the Law to the Jews alone; but Christ preached his Gospel to the Jew and Gentile also. In the wilderness, only one nation believed in God, and even they continually gave way to unbelief; but the Gospel of Christ was preached throughout the world, and throughout the world was his name honoured. In the wilderness, the cloud, the visible symbol of the Divine presence, often mounted up towards heaven, the seat of the Most High; and, in like manner, Christ proved his intercourse with Heaven, by being, in the presence of many witnesses, “received up into glory.”

Such is, I conceive, the general outline of the meaning of the Apostle. But there is, I am well aware, a difference between the several manuscripts of the Greek Testament in respect to the word “*God* manifest in the flesh.” The larger number of manuscripts agree with our translation, but others, of great weight and antiquity, have, instead of “God,” the pronoun “*who*;” a word the form of which in Greek very nearly resembles the form of the Greek word “God.” On the ground, as well of these various readings, as of some other considerations, I should not choose to lay much stress upon the proof which the term “GOD,” here used, affords of the Divinity of our blessed Saviour. God forbid that we should attempt to support truth by arguments which we deem to be not decisive! We need no such fallacious aid. The Divinity of our blessed Lord rests upon many other passages of Scripture, where no various reading or version has ever been pretended. Indeed, if even the term GOD be omitted in this place, the doctrine of the Divinity of Christ is implied; for, as Cyril, bishop of Alexandria, about four hundred years after the birth of

our Lord, writes, "If the Word, being God, is said to have put on human nature, then it is indeed a great mystery: but if Christ be a mere man, how can he be said to have been manifested in the flesh?" "What would be the 'mystery,' if 'the angels' saw him abiding with us, being man only?"

II. But I now pass on, from the explanation of the text, to state some PRACTICAL OBSERVATIONS which it naturally suggests. And may that gracious God who "spared not his own Son, but gave him up for us all," mercifully vouchsafe to us his blessing, without which we shall hear of this "mystery of godliness" in vain!

Consider then, in the first place, the important declaration, that "without controversy, great is the mystery of godliness."—The term "godliness" means the worshipping and serving God in a right and acceptable manner; and therefore, as Jesus Christ was the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and no man came to the Father but by Him, the whole Christian dispensation is here denominated "godliness" by the Apostle. "Great," then, "is the mystery" of Christianity. The word "mystery," as used in Scripture, does not denote anything absolutely unintelligible or incomprehensible, as it often does in modern language, but something sacred which had been hid and is made known only by Divine Revelation. The mystery of Christianity, here spoken of, consists of the several particulars which are subsequently specified; particulars, indeed, which it would never "have entered into the heart of man to conceive," had not God revealed them to us by his Spirit; namely, that the Son of God should become man for our salvation; that he should exhibit, in the miracles he performed, many and incontestable proofs of his Divine mission; that he should be seen and adored by the heavenly hosts while in his state of humiliation; that his Gospel should be preached to the Gentiles, as well as to the Jews; that every creature under heaven should be invited to partake of it; that multitudes, in every nation, should lay aside their prejudices and superstitions, and should accept him as their Lord and Saviour; and that, when he should have been thus proclaimed to the world, he should be openly "received up" into the glory of "heaven." These particulars are indeed most weighty and important, and they surely deserve our most serious consideration. Indisputably "great," then, "is the mystery of godliness."

Great indeed it is, in every point of view.—Consider, for instance, its *object*. This is the very greatest which can employ the attention of the mind. For what is it but the everlasting salvation of our souls? The Gospel was devised by the gracious counsels of God, in order to raise us from our fallen state of sin and misery, to fit us for a nobler existence,

and then to translate us into the blessed mansions of glory; mansions into which the Son of God himself has entered before, as our forerunner, that we, being forever delivered from evil, may be unspeakably happy with him through an infinite succession of ages. What object can be greater than this, more worthy of the Divine nature, or more deeply affecting our interests?—My brethren, you all feel daily the infirmity of your nature; you are admonished that you have here no abiding city; you see your friends and acquaintance fall victims to the attacks of disease and death; you know that, ere long, you must yourself lie upon the bed of sickness, your present frame be dissolved, and your soul either cease to be, or exist in some new state. Of what infinite consequence, therefore, is it that this state should be happy; that you should be translated to realms of glory, and be blessed eternally in the enjoyment of the favour and presence of your God and Saviour! God has revealed to you, in Christianity, the means of obtaining this blessedness. I beseech you, let not this Revelation be made to you in vain. Such, alas! is the thoughtlessness, folly, or sin, of many, that they feel no concern about it; no solicitude about the means of securing eternal happiness. They are unmoved by any object which does not immediately address their senses, strike their sight, or manifest itself to their touch. Future blessings, however great, do not affect them; future miseries, however dreadful, do not alarm them. Against this insensibility to future things, I would earnestly warn you. When you behold the Divine Author of Creation exhibiting such a system of wonderful dispensations for your benefit and salvation, is it for you to be indifferent, to pass them by as if you had no concern in them? If ever God spoke to the feelings of man, it is in this Revelation. If ever we are interested in listening to his voice,—a voice not speaking obscurely, as is often the case when we are addressed through our natural reason, but plainly and intelligibly by the declarations of his own word,—it is when this great mystery is made known to us. If it is ever sinful and ruinous to neglect the warning of God, it surely is when so great a salvation, wrought out for us by the Son of God himself coming down from heaven, has been graciously presented to our acceptance. “See, then, that ye refuse not him that thus speaketh to us from heaven.” The period, my brethren, is fast approaching when no knowledge but that of this “great mystery of godliness” can be interesting to us, and no possession but that of salvation of any real value. Oh! let the commemoration of the Nativity of our blessed Saviour bring to your serious recollection the train of objects connected with it; and let it be considered as an event in which you are more deeply interested than in any other which has occurred in the annals of time.

Reflect, next, upon the *means* by which this great object of the “mystery of godliness was accomplished. It was by means of “God” becoming “manifest in the flesh.” The Word,” says St. John, “was made flesh, and dwelt among us;” and “in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” When God brought the Jews out of Egypt into the promised land of Canaan, he might, doubtless, have led them, after the ordinary manner, by the instrumentality of some eminent captain, such as Joshua. But it pleased Him, whose ways are unsearchable, and whose judgments are a great deep, to deviate from the natural course, and become himself their Leader and Commander; sensibly to display his presence in the midst of them, and to dwell amongst them in a mode totally unprecedented and new, as well to the Israelites as to every other people. There was seen hovering over the tabernacle the Cloud, the symbol of the presence of God himself; a mysterious and Divine emblem, filling with astonishment and gratitude the mind of every pious Israelite.—Was it merely to the Jews that such a signal exhibition of the special intercourse and protection of the Almighty was vouchsafed? Was all this celestial interference and display of glory intended only as a safeguard in conducting a tribe of men from one country to another? No: God was giving to the world a grand lesson of his own agency: he was affording an anticipation of the manner in which, by his Divine power, he should conduct, not a tribe or a nation, but a world; not from one earthly station to another, but from earth to heaven; not in order to satisfy them with temporal bounties, but to bless them with the eternal glory of a higher and nobler existence. If God thought proper to bring the Jews to Canaan by a miraculous display of his own energy, with how much reason might we expect that the eternal salvation of the human race should not be accomplished but by as remarkable an exhibition of the Divine interference? Hence, to save man, he sent his only-begotten Son. God was thus “manifested in the flesh:” he pitched his tabernacle, “and dwelt among us; and we beheld his glory as of the only-begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.”

While we behold this mystery of godliness, with what sentiments of gratitude, my brethren, ought we to hail and welcome the illustrious Saviour sent down from heaven to accomplish our redemption! The Scripture is full of exhortations to “take heed” that we do not despise his authority, nor reject his testimony. For “to him all the Prophets give witness;” to him all Revelation points. “There is no other name under heaven given, whereby we can be saved, but the name of Jesus Christ.” While I contemplate the wonders of this salvation, I own that I am lost in astonishment; and scarcely could I credit the stupendous fact, did I not perceive that in every age, in every dispensation, the tenor of Divine

Revelation has been uniform; that the whole volume, and not merely a single discovery of the Divine will, attests these amazing truths; that the whole book of Revelation must be torn asunder before these can be disjoined from it; and did I not reflect, that the very approach to infinity in any act of Divine Goodness, in itself renders it more credible, by rendering it more suitable to the infinite benignity of the Divine Being. I cannot reject the Divinity of Christ without discarding, at the same time, the Divine manifestation of the Shekinah in the wilderness; without dismissing, indeed, the whole Mosaic dispensation, and the whole Mosaic record. Having credited the Divine interference in bringing the Israelites from Egypt to Canaan—the account of which is attested by evidence so strong, that it is scarcely possible to conceive how it could be stronger—I become fully prepared to believe that the Divine interference was also employed in the infinitely greater work of accomplishing the salvation of men.

When, therefore, the magnitude of this mystery of godliness staggers our reason, let us reflect that the illustrious Saviour was “*justified by the Spirit.*”—His character and dignity were ascertained and vindicated by the illustrious display of miraculous powers. What miracles were not performed by Jesus! Take but a single miracle of the vast profusion; and, if you admit that one, it is scarcely possible not to admit them all. Take the single fact of Christ’s resurrection, than which there probably never was an event more satisfactorily attested. Believe only this, and all the other miraculous actions recorded in his life become credible; for, allowing the Divine interference in this one instance, you must expect it to have taken place on other occasions, in order to give its attestation to the character of Jesus. It cannot be supposed that the Divine power would be exerted in order to raise from the dead an impostor, or an enthusiast, or even a merely good man. God Almighty never would act in so extraordinary a manner, except for some great end. Such an end was the salvation of the human race by the mission of his only-begotten Son. A greater object could not be accomplished; a more noble Personage could not be the instrument; a more grand and luminous display of Divine Power could not attest the greatness of the end, or the dignity of the Agent. The end, the Agent, the testimony, were in unison with each other. “Great” indeed was the “mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit.”

Let us, my brethren, derive from this part of the “mystery of godliness” substantial ground on which to establish our belief in Christ, and, together with it, our hope of salvation. We need—indeed we need, if we know ourselves, or if we feel how momentous is the issue which is before us—we need strong evidence upon which we may confidently ven-

ture our souls, and build our hopes for eternity. In the hour of death we especially need it. I allow that, in the vigour of health, amidst the levity of youthful spirits, under the benumbing effects of that worldliness which immersion in business is too apt to produce, the idea of an eternal state may be so faint; the knowledge of God, and particularly of his justice and holiness, may be so obscure; and the realization of the solemn account to be given at the day of judgment, may be so imperfect; that even the hope arising from our own merits, however delusive and wavering, may be sufficient to support us. But things will wear a different aspect when disease has abstracted us from the surrounding scene, and left us leisure and coolness of mind to reflect. When death has knocked at our door, and warned us to be ready for his return; when the fascination of the world has subsided, and its spell is broken; when better acquaintance with ourselves, and deeper reflection upon the state of our hearts and lives, has brought low our high conceit of ourselves; when more accurate meditation upon Scripture, so full of facts and declarations which attest the holiness of God and the alarming awfulness of his justice, has bowed our hearts into a holy fear of his Name, and a serious alarm about our acceptance with him: then we shall feel our need of a Redeemer; then we shall welcome the account of his salvation as glad tidings of great joy; then we shall earnestly seek for such evidence as may calm our troubled mind, and enable us to rest with tranquil hope in the moment of death: then, also, will that evidence meet our wondering eyes in all the radiance of truth; and while we contemplate Christ as justified by the Spirit, we shall be enabled to say, "Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, for mine eyes have seen thy salvation."—God grant this may be the blessed experience of everyone here present!

Christ was "*seen of angels.*"—Those heavenly hosts beheld him, while yet an infant, with pious awe and reverent adoration. A "multitude of the heavenly host" surrounded the stable where he lay, singing, "Glory to God in the highest; and on earth peace, and good will to men." They beheld glory accruing to God in the highest heavens, peace and tranquillity reigning upon earth, and reconciliation and good-will to men diffused by the birth of this illustrious Stranger. Yet, to them, it was matter of wonder and praise only; to us, it is a subject of the deepest interest. Let us not, my brethren, be silent, while they adore; let us not be cold, while they deeply feel: let us not disregard those things, which they "stoop down to look into." Oh, how will heaven and earth testify against the man who has neglected so great a salvation! God will testify against him; for "he spared not his own Son, but gave" this inexpressible gift to us, and proclaimed from heaven, "This is my beloved Son; hear ye him." Christ will testify against him; for he laboured, he suffered, he died for

man, to make him partaker of eternal salvation. The Holy Spirit will testify against him; for he wrought a profusion of miracles in order to direct the attention to Christ, and to testify of him as the great Saviour of the world. The angels will testify against him, who came to learn upon earth the riches of this grace of God. Men will testify against him, millions of whom have received the record of Christ and believed on him as their Saviour. And the fallen spirits will testify against him; for even they obeyed the word of Christ, and feared his authority. Let not all these witnesses appear against us, to display to us the greatness of the neglected salvation, and to aggravate our condemnation in having dared to slight so high a Saviour.

Christ was, also, "*preached to the Gentiles, and believed on in the world.*"—To us he has been "preached:" God grant that we may hear him and receive his testimony! But methinks I see, flocking from the east and the west, from the north and the south, many who from the extreme parts of the earth only heard the distant sound of salvation; many from the remote extremity of Africa; many from the frozen realms of Greenland; many once sunk in the lowest depths of poverty and misery, now hoping and triumphing in their Saviour, and pressing with joyful haste to the courts of Heaven. Behold, also, some of "the children of the kingdom" shut out;—those who, through fastidiousness of taste, or sceptical apathy, or worldliness and sordidness of mind, have sat continually under the preaching of the Gospel, and remained indifferent to its glad tidings! Thus shall that Scripture be fulfilled, which I never reflect upon without shuddering; "The first shall be last, and the last first." Oh, my brethren! ye who enjoy every opportunity of religious improvement; ye whose learning qualifies you to read and understand the Scriptures; whose leisure and ease, and whose whole circumstances, afford you every advantage in the pursuit of sacred knowledge;—O beware, lest you perish amid the abundance of the means of edification; lest, while Christ is "preached to the Gentiles, and believed on in the world," he be proclaimed to you in vain.

Lastly, Christ was "*received up into glory.*"—Glory, perpetual glory, was the termination of all his benevolent labours and sufferings. And into this glory he entered, in order that his disciples might have the same splendid mansions ever before them, as the end of all their toil and the crown of all their hope: "I go to prepare a place for you, that, where I am, there ye may be also." Under the deep impression of the truths contained in this "great mystery of godliness," how should our thoughts soar to the blessed place where our Saviour is gone before us, and our affections be "set not on things below, but on things above, where Christ sitteth at the right hand of God!"—My brethren, do you consider that,

after a short time, our labours will cease, our battle will be fought, our warfare accomplished, and that we shall enter into eternal glory? What thought can be more animating, what more consoling, amidst the troubles and trials of your pilgrimage here! Only wait on, steadfast in faith, in love and obedience; and the Saviour, who came down from heaven to save you, will receive you to his own glory. Oh! let us often turn our eyes from these sickening earthly scenes of discord, and bloodshed, and woe, to those regions of glory, where the day shines in endless lustre; where violence shall no more be heard in the land, nor wasting and destruction be found within its borders; where the sun shall be no more the light by day, nor the moon give light; but “the Lord shall be an everlasting light, and God its glory.”—Would to God, that this glory were more frequently the subject of our contemplation! Then should we look with a holy tranquillity upon the petty troubles and evils of this transitory scene. We should bear affliction cheerfully, knowing that we have an enduring inheritance. We should enjoy true happiness in this world, reflected through the radiance of that glorious world above.

But let us remember, that “he who hath this hope, must purify himself, even as He” who hath called us “is pure”— for into these regions of glory the unholy shall not enter. May “God, therefore, sanctify you wholly, and establish your hearts unblameable in holiness before God, even our Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints!”