

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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What is the Truth of the Gospel? Seen of Angels

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. (1 Timothy 3:16)

Why include this notation in such a compact and major statement of Christian truth? Is there anything that angels don't see? When we peel back all the layers and get to the bedrock, foundational truth of the New Testament, that truth must affirm the literal birth, Incarnation (becoming man), death, burial, resurrection, and ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ. A major first century error, perhaps the first major error after the Jewish legalism that we read about throughout the New Testament, Docetic Gnosticism, denied all of these truths and instead affirmed that what appeared to be a real human body was a "spirit body," or a "phantom body." In other words, the appearance of that man, born in Bethlehem, raised in Nazareth, that man who, for between three and four years, "...spake as never man spake," who did nothing but good, who never sinned, who raised the dead, made blind people to see, and "...healed all manner of sickness," that man who was finally arrested because the Jews viewed him with such intense envy (Matthew 27:18; Mark 15:10)—that man really didn't have a true, literal human body. Despite all the things He did and said, it was all a phantom, a spirit that merely appeared as a human body, not at all dissimilar to Satan's deceit. (2 Corinthians 11:14) What are the consequences of such a bizarre belief? Well, if he didn't have a real human body, He couldn't rise from the dead, could He? And in First Corinthians 15:17, Paul outlines the dreadful implications of such a horrible idea. The leading problem is that we would be yet in our sins. (1 Corinthians 15:17) Despite His coming with the stated purpose of saving "...his people from their sins," (Matthew 1:21) with no literal body and no literal resurrection, He must face the stark reality that He failed in His primary and most significant purpose for coming. Isn't that Paul's point; no resurrection means no deliverance from our sins. And no literal human body means no resurrection is possible. If Jesus had no literal human body, for Him to claim resurrection, as both He and His followers proclaimed, only adds to the hoax.

So what does all this first century madness have to do with Paul's teaching in this passage? I suggest that it has everything to do with his teaching here. Consider just a few of the implications of such an error.

1. For a man to appear in every imaginable setting as if he were fully human over a period of thirty three or so years when he in fact was not at all human makes him one of the greatest imposters of all time. He cannot be the righteous man He claimed to be. He is patently a deceiver.
2. He cannot die a human death on a Roman cross.
3. He cannot literally, physically rise from the dead.
4. Based on Paul's specific statement, He thus cannot save us from our sins. We remain in them and at a guilty and irreversible distance from God.

While a deceitful "phantom" spirit may well dupe ordinary humans, he could hardly deceive God's angels. Thus if angels saw Him, He must be real. He must be who and what He claimed to be.

One of the most exciting studies of the New Testament is a study of Jesus' interaction with angels during His Incarnation. At His birth, angels gathered outside Bethlehem and serenaded the shepherds, announcing His birth and praising God for His coming. In fact, based on Hebrews 1:6, it seems reasonable to believe that **all** of God's angels gathered at that moment to praise their God, now become man, fully man, a real man, but oh so much more than just a man.

And again, when he bringeth in the firstbegotten into the world, he saith, And let all the angels of God worship him. (Hebrews 1:6)

Do not overlook the simple, but powerful word, "...all...." It was not a handful of the angels who gathered that night to praise their God, now Incarnate. When the "firstborn" came into the world, the Father commanded every one of His angels to go to that one spot in His universe to rejoice at the single most glorious event in the entire history of that universe. Sing, angels, sing!

On several occasions during the Incarnation, angels are personally and intimately involved in Jesus' work. They appeared to Joseph and Mary during His infancy, directing them to go to various places and do certain things to protect the infant from harm.

Shortly after Jesus' baptism and the forty day temptation in the wilderness, angels appeared and ministered to Him. No wonder He refused the deceitful food that Satan used to entice Him. He knew angels were preparing a feast for Him.

After His Gethsemane agony, angels again ministered to Him. When the disciples ventured out of their safe hideaway to visit the tomb on Resurrection Morning, it was angels who met them and announced that he was not in the grave; He was risen. It was angels who reminded the disciples, as they witnessed His ascension back to glory, that He would return again in glory.

Not only did angels proclaim His literal resurrection; Old Testament inspired prophecy likewise teaches the same truth.

Therefore my heart is glad, and my glory rejoiceth: My flesh also shall rest in hope. For thou wilt not leave my soul in hell; Neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption.
(Psalm 16:9–10, KJV 1900)

David wrote these words in prophecy of Jesus' resurrection. Yet he also wrote them as a personal expression of his hope for his own future resurrection. Did David live in a literal, physical human body, or did he also live in a "phantom" or "spirit" body? If David lived in a real human body, his prophecy requires that His Lord must also live in a literal human body, and the prophecy's fulfillment must include both David's literal, physical resurrection, as well as Jesus'. Is the prophecy true?

Whom God hath raised up, having loosed the pains of death: because it was not possible that he should be holden of it. For David speaketh concerning him, I foresaw the Lord always before my face, for he is on my right hand, that I should not be moved: Therefore did my heart rejoice, and my tongue was glad; moreover also my flesh shall rest in hope: Because thou wilt not leave my soul in hell, neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption. Thou hast made known to me the ways of life; thou shalt make me full of joy with thy countenance. Men and brethren, let me freely speak unto you of the patriarch David, that he is both dead and buried, and his sepulchre is with us unto this day. Therefore being a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him, that of the fruit of his loins, according to the flesh, he would raise up Christ to sit on his throne; He seeing this before spake of the resurrection of Christ, that his soul was not left in hell, neither his flesh did see corruption. This Jesus hath God raised up, whereof we all are witnesses. (Acts 2:24–32, KJV 1900)

Peter, directed by the Holy Spirit, gives us God's intent in this Old Testament prophecy. God

intended for us to understand the prophecy specifically of Jesus' literal, physical, bodily resurrection. David's hope for his own resurrection relied wholly on Jesus' bodily resurrection. A "phantom" or "spirit" body could not die and decay, "...see corruption..." but a literal human body could, if it were not resurrected. Peter's reasoning in this passage specifically directs us to the truth of Jesus' literal, bodily resurrection. Our own hope that our bodies shall be resurrected and glorified at the Second Coming must stand or utterly fall on the fact of Jesus' resurrection. If He lived in a literal, physical human body, and that body arose, we have a true and lively hope of our own resurrection. If He lived in a "phantom" or "spirit" body, and thus His claim of resurrection was false, we have no hope whatever of our own future resurrection.

Yes, He was indeed "...seen of angels." They observed and repeatedly affirmed the amazing reality of Incarnation. Their seeing Him bare witness that He was everything He claimed to be. For this reason, we could not call more credible witnesses to testify of Jesus' Person and work. In First Corinthians the fifteenth chapter, Paul called the immediate disciples, plus an unnamed host of over five hundred believers to the witness stand for eyewitness testimony to Jesus' literal, bodily resurrection. Now Paul goes a major step beyond that measure. He now calls angels to give their testimony. And, based on this verse, they agree with the eyewitnesses mentioned in First Corinthians fifteen. They saw Him from the first night of His Incarnation at every step of His Incarnation until He finally ascended back to the Father in glory. If Jesus' physical, literal presence had been a cosmic hoax--if He had really been nothing more than a mere phantom, angels would have observed and been repulsed by the folly of such a colossal deception. They would refuse to bear false witness to the lie.

It seems, therefore, that, rather than offering a vague, irrelevant point in his defense and affirmation of the bedrock truth of the Christian faith, Paul actually presents the "Magnum Opus" of validation to His literal Incarnation, apart from God's personal testimony. Angels saw the Incarnation, marveled at it, and bear their witness to its truth.

Whether we view this verse as a first century hymn or as a first century summary of the church's core belief, the verse appears in Scripture as God's personal, inspired testimony to the truth, the timeless truth of the Incarnation. We cannot deny this truth and offer a credible claim to believing in New Testament, historical Christian truth. We must begin with this truth as a foundation for every other truth that we hold and affirm. All Biblical truth stands on this foundation. We begin here, or we have no beginning with God's revealed New Testament truth. It is, according to Paul's teaching here, that the Lord's church must make this truth the "...pillar and ground..." upon which it stands, and which it upholds.

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Worship service each Sunday
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.
Pastor