

# Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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## What is the Truth of the Gospel? Incarnation

*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)*

After defining the primary role of a New Testament church as God's dwelling and as the pillar and ground of the truth, we rightly anticipate that Paul will tell us what this truth is that the church is to support and protect. Our study verse compresses more truth than we can imagine into one sentence. In this verse, Paul outlines the bedrock truth of the gospel, the defining foundation upon which all truth must stand, or it shall surely fall. Take away the Incarnation and the finished work of Christ, or tamper with its meaning, and you destroy the whole fabric of the gospel in its entirety.

*And without controversy....* Paul does not indicate that no controversy shall ever occur regarding this truth. He rather tells us that this truth is so central to God's revelation that there is no valid basis for such controversy. Doctrinal history reveals that the truths set forth in this verse have appeared as a central theme in many theological controversies over the centuries that followed this inspired writing. Even as Paul was writing these words, various gnostic heresies were working their insidious way into first generation churches. Consider Paul's confrontation of early gnostic error in the Colossian letter. Then take note of John's refutation of more advanced gnostic error in his inspired writings. First John specifically refutes docetic Gnosticism, but I am inclined to believe that most, if not all, of John's inspired writings aim at affirming the bedrock truth of Paul's teachings and the necessary rejection of gnostic heresies in their various forms. Because of a flawed view of the natural creation, and because gnostic teachers rejected the exclusive and authoritative message of inspired Scripture, these teachings reject any notion of Incarnation, of God inhabiting a literal, physical human body. If a false teacher taught that God not only did not, but could not, come in literal human flesh, as the gnostics whom John confronted and refuted taught (1 John 4:3, as just one example), he would necessarily reject Paul's teachings in our study verse. Controversies abound throughout Christian history regarding the Incarnation and the precise nature of Jesus' coming and work, but Paul asserts that they do so without any basis whatever from inspired Scripture.

*... great is the mystery of godliness....* Yes, it is a mystery that fallen, now redeemed humans live a godly life, but, as Paul explains in the words

following this statement, he is referring to the primary truth of the Incarnation, the mystery of God, specifically, of God coming in literal human flesh. While many of us enjoy reading a "Mystery" novel, especially when the "Good guys in white hats" win in the end, we cannot fully appreciate the first century use of this word. Rather than referring to something that remains unknown, an abiding mystery, it refers to something that was unknown at some time in the past, but it is now understood and known. Prior to the Incarnation, Old Testament Jews had ample testimony from their holy writings, their Scriptures, that God would come so as to inhabit human flesh, but the idea remained largely a mystery to them. How could such a thing be? However, once Jesus appears, and His life fulfills one Old Testament prophecy after another, the truth and the fact of His Incarnation unfolds. The "...mystery of godliness..." refers to the mystery of God coming in human flesh, of Incarnation.

*God was manifest in the flesh....* He was fully God before He came, before He was manifest. He remained God during the Incarnation, the time He lived in human flesh. It was real human flesh that He lived in, not a mere appearance of flesh (the idea of "Docetic" Gnosticism). He lived in real human flesh. Thus He alone, one and only one of His kind, was fully God, and He was just as fully man. He was not a hybrid, half-man and half-God. He was fully God, and He was fully man. He did not temporarily cease being God while dwelling in human flesh. It was God who manifested Himself in the flesh. The little baby that the old man embraced in the temple (Luke 2:30 and context) was a real human baby, but He was also God. No wonder the ancient Jews before Jesus came could not understand this truth fully. It was a mystery to them.

After thirteen verses affirming His eternal existence and deity, His full godhood, John introduces this transition of the "Word" into human flesh.

*And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth. (John 1:14)*

It was the same Word that existed in the beginning as the "Eye to eye" equal with God, as the Creator

of the material universe, who now becomes part of His creation for a brief time. Why this amazing shift? Why did God choose to become man, part of His own creation? From earliest Scriptural record, God prepared His people for this event and predicted that it would come.

*For he is not a man, as I am, that I should answer him, And we should come together in judgment. Neither is there any daysman betwixt us, That might lay his hand upon us both. (Job 9:32–33, KJV 1900)*

Job, possibly written as early as Moses' first writings (Genesis-Deuteronomy) or earlier, sensed the need for a Mediator, a "daysman" or umpire who inherently could claim authority with both God and men, one who could lay His hand on both God and the men of His choosing to bring them together. Centuries later, we see the fulfillment of Job's missing "daysman."

*For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.... (1 Timothy 2:5)*

Finally, and precisely according to God's eternal purpose, the repeatedly promised, "daysman" comes, and, because He is both fully God and fully man, He alone can "...lay his hand upon us both." He alone can bridge the impossible chasm of sin that lies between God and men. He can heal Job's dilemma, just as He can heal your dilemma and mine.

Perhaps it is a fine point, but nevertheless it is a point in this verse. Paul does not say that Jesus is the one Mediator between God and "man," the accepted generic form for all of humanity. He rather uses the plural form of the word, "men," an unnamed number of specific individuals, but not necessarily the whole of the human family.

Later in the Old Testament era, the Holy Spirit will direct Micah to write an amazing prophecy of this coming One.

*But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting. (Micah 5:2)*

Jesus, God Incarnate, shall begin His earth-human existence in Bethlehem Ephratah, a specific Bethlehem that was in fact the birth city of Jesus, though Joseph and Mary lived in Nazareth. Thus God told His people centuries before the Incarnation the specific village where Jesus would be born, where God Incarnate would begin His being "...manifest in the flesh...." Not only does God here prophesy that Jesus would be born in Bethlehem, but He also prophesied that He would "...**come forth unto me**...." The same God

Incarnate would fulfill His intended work as the "Daysman," and then He would return to the Father in victory. In his commentary on the whole Bible, Albert Barnes offers these words regarding His coming forth from everlasting. "...Here words, denoting eternity and used of the eternity of God, are united together to impress the belief of the Eternity of God the Son. We have neither thought nor words to conceive eternity; we can only conceive of time lengthened out without end. 'True eternity is boundless life, all existing at once,' or, 'to duration without beginning and without end and without change.'"

Most footnoted, English printed King James Bibles add a brief but powerful footnote in this verse to the words "...from everlasting." That footnote typically reads, "From the days of eternity." You would normally describe a famous man's accomplishments as "Going forth" from the place of his birth. Were that the case with Jesus, we would expect Micah to say that His goings forth were from Bethlehem, but the Holy Spirit directed Micah to write something far more amazing. The "Goings forth" of this One are "From the days of eternity." He has existed eternally; He had no beginning. What happened at Bethlehem was not His origin or beginning; it was merely his taking on humanity to His eternal deity. He has existed eternally, and, from eternity "past," He has been "Going forth" on behalf of His people. He didn't begin His intercession after His ascension. He has been interceding on behalf of His people from the very beginning. Abel, Noah, Abraham, David, Isaiah, and all the Old Testament saints today are praising Him in glory just as fully as the blessed saint who died and entered glory last week. Heaven isn't divided into two compartments, one for those who died before His appearance in Bethlehem, and another for those who died afterwards. No less with those Old Testament saints than with you and me today, when one of His little ones suffers or is in need, He "goes forth" to aid, to bless, and to guard His beloved people. Dear suffering Job had a "Daysman" who laid His hands on both Job and God; he just didn't understand it at that moment. Later (Job 19:25 and context) Job came to understand that his Redeemer lived and was, even then, at work on his behalf. In that verse, Job wrote some of Scripture's clearest and most precious language regarding our hope in the resurrection.

Ah, God was manifest in the flesh, and the angels who all gathered to sing His praises near Bethlehem on that momentous night haven't stopped singing since then. This amazing truth lies at the bedrock, the unshakable foundation of every tenet, every principle of truth that the gospel proclaims and that the church is to guard as the "...pillar and ground of the truth" till the Second Coming when God shall bring all of His eternal purpose to fruition as He raises His beloved children from the dead and takes them, body, soul, and spirit, to a glorious eternity with him.

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Worship service each Sunday  
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.  
Pastor