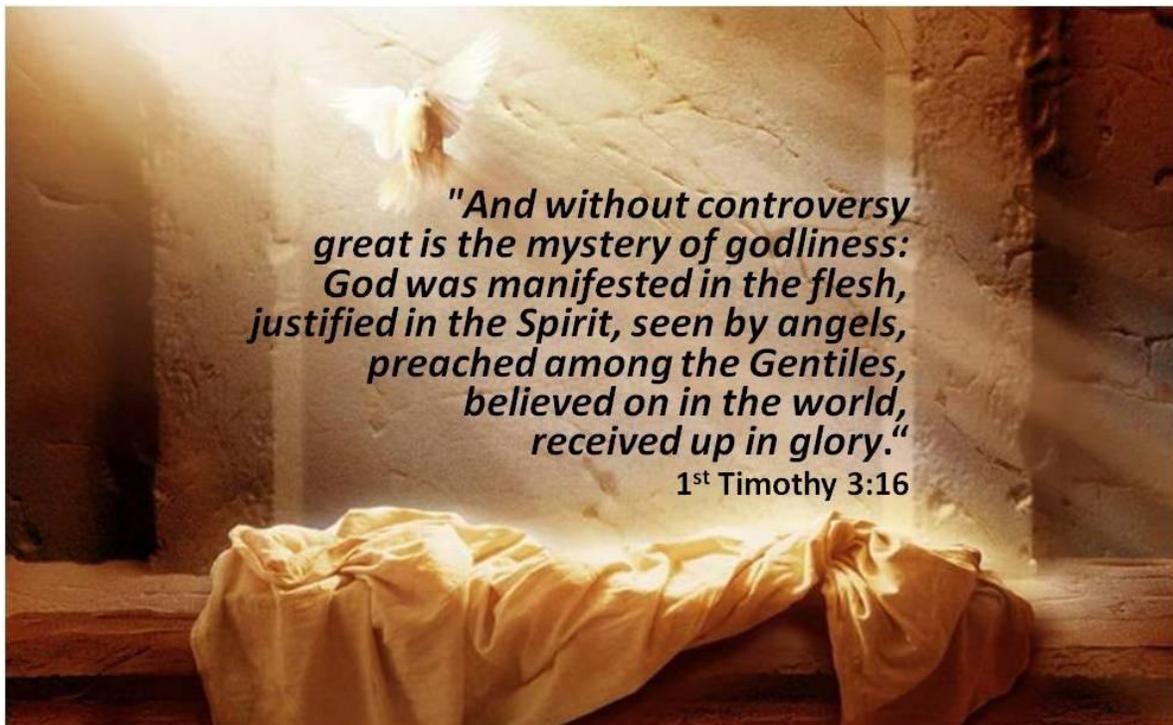


Basic Training Bible Ministries

presents

The Mystery of Godliness

Gene Cunningham



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great is the mystery of godliness:
God was manifested in the flesh,
justified in the Spirit, seen by angels,
preached among the Gentiles,
believed on in the world,
received up in glory."*

1st Timothy 3:16

Shenandoah Valley Bible Conference

May 11–13, 2018

The Mystery of Godliness

1 Timothy 3:16

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(emphasis added)

Introduction

*“He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us
into the kingdom of the Son of His love.”* Col 1:13

The contrast of these two kingdoms is displayed in our text. In this verse (1Ti 3:16) are three antithetical pairs of thought: flesh vs. spirit; angels vs. Gentiles (nations); and world vs. glory.

The presence of six strophes, set in antithetical pairs along with a sense of meter, makes it clear that this was part of an early hymn, as also possibly were Col 1:15–18, Phi 2:5–8, 2Ti 2:11–13, and 1Pe 3:18–19. These three contrasts emphasize the vast chasm between this world and the kingdom of God:

1. Flesh vs. spirit—mortal vs. immortal (see Joh 6:63)
2. Angels vs. Gentiles—near to God vs. far from God (see Eph 2:17)
3. World vs. glory—changing history vs. eternal permanence (see 1Jo 2:17)

Timothy was ministering in Ephesus, where Paul had first ministered for six months in the synagogue, after which he taught in the school of Tyrannus for two years (Act 19:1–10). It was here, during a riot by the idol-makers, that the Ephesians chanted, “*Great is Diana of the Ephesians*” (Act 19:28). It may be that, as a counter to this claim, the hymn was composed in Ephesus, “*great is the mystery of godliness.*”

Each of the statements in our primary text is supported both by **prophecy** and **historical evidence** in Scripture and, in keeping with the statement of 1Ti 3:15, “*that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God,*” also contains **spiritual implications** for each of us in living the Christian way of life.

Study One: A Mystery of Mysteries

“And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness ...”

The incarnation of the Son of God in human flesh is the beginning of the **age of mysteries**, which will culminate the plan of God (Rev 10:7)

Within the mystery of the incarnation are contained all the various facets of what we might call the “age of mysteries”: from the birth of Christ to His second coming. Note the parallel usage of “*great mystery*” to describe the relationship of Christ and the Church in Eph 5:32.

Specifically, Paul is dealing with the mystery of “*godliness*.” The Greek word *eusebeia*, which could be translated “piety, righteousness, religion, or truth about God,” is defined in the context by the revelation we have in the Person of Jesus Christ. In His coming, which was previously unrevealed, truth about God (mysteries) was made known.

The Prophecy

“And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel.” Gen 3:15

The first prophecy of the coming of the Savior was given immediately after the fall of Adam and Eve into sin. With the term “seed of the woman,” we are given a hint of the virgin birth. The coming of Christ is set in the context of Satan’s antagonism against the woman, as the instrument through which his Destroyer and our Redeemer—the Lord Jesus Christ—would come (see 1Jo 3:4, 8).

This prophecy also sets forth the central theme of the entire Old Testament, which is the coming of the Messiah into the world. God’s choosing of Abraham narrows the Messianic lineage to one nation. From that point, the promise continues to narrow: from Isaac and Jacob to the tribe of Judah, then the house of David. The struggle of Israel throughout history is evidence of the satanic malice against that nation. Not only would Israel give to the world the written Word of God, but also the Living Word (Joh 1:1–5, 14–18).

The Historical Evidence

“... Behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins.’” Mat 1:20b–21

The New Testament opens with the one virgin, Mary, identified. That Israel did not recognize her own Messiah is partly due to the “mystery” aspect of the virgin birth. Everything about Jesus of Nazareth seemed to contradict Israel’s expectations. This was largely because of the many prophecies of a suffering Servant, mingled with those of a triumphant King. The seeming contradiction led many rabbis to the conclusion that there would be two “Messiahs”—one the humble Servant, the other the glorious King. The apparent problem is resolved by the first and the second coming of Jesus Christ: first as a sacrificial Lamb (Isa 53:7), and then as the “*King of glory*” (Psa 24:7–10).

Note that in the extended text partially quoted above, the phrase “*Joseph, son of David,*” would have been quite significant in light of the Davidic Covenant (2Sa 7:12–17), which proclaimed the Messiah would come out of the house of David. Further, there are several Psalms which anticipate the Savior coming from the Davidic line (Psa 89:3–4, 27–36; 122:5; 132:10–18).

Then, Joseph was told that the means of this greatest of all miracles was by the power of the Holy Spirit, and its purpose was so that, “*He will save His people from their sins*” (Mat 1:21b). The whole plan of redemption, first promised in Gen 3:15, was about to be fulfilled. Mary was “*the woman*” and her Son was the promised “*Seed.*”

Even more astounding, by reading on down to Mat 1:22–23, we find:

“So all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying: ‘Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,’ which is translated, ‘God with us.’”

In this short text of Mat 1:20–23, we have some of the greatest “mysteries” opened and explained to us:

1. Joseph, as a “*son of David,*” is in the promised line of the Messiah.
2. “*Mary your wife*” is “*the woman*” of Gen 3:15.
3. This child is “*conceived ... of the Holy Spirit,*” so that God and man might become one, and he may be free of the taint of sin.
4. He would be named “*JESUS,*” which means “*the salvation of the Lord,*” a common Old Testament theme (Gen 49:18; Exo 14:13; 2Ch 20:17; Lam 3:26, etc.), and is anticipated in a multitude of figures and types in the Old Testament.
5. He would “*save His people from their sins,*” thus accomplishing the plan of God for redemption and reconciliation.
6. All this would also fulfill the prophecy of Isa 7:14 regarding the virgin birth.
7. Finally, His identity (as opposed to His personal name) would be identified by the title “*Immanuel ... God with us*”!

The Practical Implications

“Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God ... Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.’” Joh 3:3–5

It was by means of the virgin birth—through the power of the Holy Spirit—that the Son of God became the Son of Man. So also, due to His victory on the cross, we who are sons of men must—through faith in Him—become sons of God.

Jesus later says, “*That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit*” (Joh 3:6). This is what we call the work of regeneration (being born again). Regeneration is a work accomplished totally by the Spirit of God in response to faith in Christ (Tit 3:4–7).

There are those today who follow the theory that God first regenerates, then gives us faith. This is in direct contradiction to the order given in Scripture (Act 15:7–8; Eph 1:13–14). It is clear that the message of salvation is heard, followed by faith, resulting in the regenerating work of the Spirit. Paul makes it clear that faith is a receptive response to the truth of the Word of God (Rom 10:17; Act 15:7). Faith is, in reality, an admission of total helplessness on our part and of complete trust in the merits and work of the Savior. The gift of eternal life is freely offered to all (Rom 6:23; Rev 22:17). Some, in pride, reject the gift; others, in humility, receive it (Joh 1:12; Act 10:43). The Scriptures make clear that “God gives grace to the humble (Psa 138:6; Isa 57:15; Mat 5:3; Jam 4:10; 1Pe 5:5b).

A Practical Look at Godliness: 1Ti 6:3–12

1. It is both fountain and fruit of sound doctrine, 1Ti 6:3.
Sound doctrine comes from “*the words of our Lord Jesus Christ.*” Christ Himself is the fountain of truth, and from that truth His godliness is reproduced in those who trust Him and grow in grace.
2. It seeks spiritual and eternal gain, 1Ti 6:5–6.
Since this world and all that is in it is passing away (1Jo 2:15–17), all true gain is spiritual and eternal. Phony preachers who make millions, Christian authors who make millions, are all using “*a form of godliness*” (2Ti 3:5) to make earthly gain. They either deny or willingly violate Jesus’ mandate to His disciples, “*Freely you have received, freely give*” (Mat 10:8b). If what we offer to people has been given to us by God, we have no right to charge for it. If it is not God-given, it is not worth buying! However, like you, I am forced to buy good study books. I then devour them and give the fruit of my study away free. I cannot in good conscience do otherwise.
3. It finds contentment in simplicity, 1Ti 6:7–10.
There is great power, not to mention wealth, in simplicity. If we attain, through consistent spiritual growth, to godliness (2Pe 1:5–7), we can find contentment “*having food and clothing*” (1Ti 6:8). Absent the pursuit of godliness, life becomes complex, more and more complicated, and contentment vanishes because we have been “*corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ*” (2Co 11:3b).
4. It flees evil, follows divine good, and fights in faith, 1Ti 6:11–14.
The advancing believer grows from infant to youth, youth to mature (1Jo 2:12–14), then as a spiritual warrior (Eph 6:10–18) becomes a hero of the faith (Hebrews 11), and finally a friend of God (Joh 14:21–23; 15:14–15; Jam 2:23). This process of growth is summarized in the words: “*Flee ... pursue [follow] ... fight ... lay hold ... keep ...*”. The full Christian experience is: A truth to learn, a path or way to follow, a battle to fight, a treasure to gain, and a trust to guard. This is why we can never cease advancing forward, as Paul himself did (Phi 3:14) until the day of his death.

The Beginning of Mysteries

*“And He answered and said to them, ‘Because it has been given to you to know the **mysteries** of the kingdom of heaven ...’”* Mat 13:11 (emphasis added)

The fact that both Jesus and Paul speak of “mysteries” in the plural helps us to understand why the “*mystery of godliness*” is “*great*.” It is the great mystery that contains and brings to pass all other mysteries.

In the parables, Jesus is introducing and unfolding the conditions that will prevail during the “mystery phase” of the kingdom. This phase was not previously revealed to Israel and is unlike anything they expected. These conditions prevail primarily during the Church Age and the coming Tribulation Period or, we could say, between the first and second coming of Christ.

The Part We Play

*“Let a man so consider us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the **mysteries** of God.”* 1Co 4:1 (emphasis added)

“As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.” 1Pe 4:10

In ancient times, the steward was a slave selected for his wisdom and faithfulness, to whom the master entrusted the running of his household. This, of course, included the disbursement or investment of the master’s wealth, with the purpose of gaining an increase or profit.

Every believer should be well-instructed enough to explain the riches of the “*mysteries of God*” to those in the dark. These “*mysteries*,” as has been said above, explain history from the birth of Christ until His second coming.

These mysteries can only be rightly understood within a dispensational approach to Scripture. They reveal the plan of God as it unfolds historically from the virgin birth to the second coming of Christ. Note that the “*mystery of God [will] be finished*” before the Kingdom Age begins (compare Rev 10:7 with Rev 11:15). This is because the Kingdom is the subject of many prophecies in the Old Testament and, therefore, does not qualify as “mystery” revelation.

The Definition of Mystery

In the ancient world, there were many mystery religions with closely guarded “secrets” of wisdom, which were only shared with those who had been properly initiated over a period of time. In many cases, these “secrets” were not to be divulged on pain of death.

In much the same way, the “*mysteries of the kingdom*” can only be understood by those who have entered the kingdom through faith in Jesus Christ (Mat 13:10–11). Since Christ is Himself the key to both history and eternity, faith in Him—resulting in regeneration (new birth)—

provides the believer with the spiritual capacities to comprehend all truth (Eph 3:16–19). The Scripture itself defines for us what is meant by the term “mystery”:

1. It speaks of something previously hidden, but now revealed (Rom 16:25–27; Eph 3:2–7).
2. It involves spiritual wisdom which cannot be grasped by the unregenerate mind (1Co 2:6–8, 14).
3. It explains the unfolding purpose of God for this present age (Eph 1:9–10; 3:2). Note the terms “*dispensation of the fullness of the times*” and “*the dispensation of the grace of God.*”
4. The specific focus of these new revelations of the divine plan is the formation and purpose of the Church (Eph 5:31–32; Col 1:25–27).
5. The “mystery” of the Church Age explains God’s infinite wisdom in forming and working through the Body of Christ during the time of Israel’s spiritual blindness, and as a remedy to ultimately restore Israel to her rightful place (Romans 9–11).
6. All things referred to as “mystery” in the Bible also involve elements of the miraculous and the supernatural.

The Doctrine of the Mystery

Knowing the highlights of this age of spiritual mysteries makes it possible to grasp the scope of history, as well as to make sense of events in our own generation:

1. “*The mystery of godliness*”—1Ti 3:16; Col 4:3
This refers to the incarnation of the Son of God in human flesh.
2. “*The mysteries of the kingdom of heaven*”—Mat 13:11; Mar 4:11
As the parables portray, these mysteries involve the supernatural working of God in the midst of human history to fulfill His eternal purpose. The natural world is permeated by the supernatural.
3. “*The mystery of the gospel*”/the faith—Eph 6:19; 1Ti 3:9
The mystery of the Gospel is in its simplicity due to the finished work of Christ on the cross. The natural mind recoils against the unconditional offer of eternal deliverance on the basis of faith alone. “*The faith*” is a term referring to the content of Church Age doctrine, as revealed in the epistles.
4. The mystery of the Gentiles—Rom 11:25; Col 1:27
It was revealed in Old Testament prophecy that the Gentiles would be included in God’s plan of redemption. What was not revealed is that they would form the backbone of an entirely new entity called the Church—or the Body of Christ.
5. The mystery of the Church—Rom 11:25; Rev 1:20
This is closely related to #4 (above), but here the focus is on the unique relationship of the Church to Christ, and her unique role in history.

6. *“The mystery of lawlessness”/iniquity* —2Th 2:7
This refers to the coming and power of Antichrist, due to the working of Satan. The unholy use of miracles will attend his coming into the world and will be used to deceive the world.

7. The mystery of *“Babylon the Great”*—Rev 17:5
The term *“Babylon”* refers to more than an ancient city. It includes a satanic, revolutionary spirit that permeates history and culminates in the kingdom of Antichrist in the Tribulation Period, before being destroyed by Christ’s second coming. With the release of Satan from the Abyss, it will resurface briefly at the end of the Millennium (Rev 20:3, 7–10).

Study Two: The Word Became Flesh (Joh 1:1–9, 14; Heb 1:1–3)

“God was manifested in the flesh ...”

C.S. Lewis called the incarnation of Christ *The Grand Miracle*, by which all other miracles recorded in the Bible are validated.

The incarnation is the greatest single act of revelation in all of history. In fact, according to Heb 1:1–3, the coming of Christ is the culmination of all revelation. All the Old Testament points forward to Him, and all the New Testament points back to Him. His coming is what gives history its meaning and purpose—and not only history, but our lives!

The Prophecy

“Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel.” Isa 7:14

Many have made too much (and all for the wrong reasons) of the fact that the Hebrew word used here for *“virgin”* simply means “young woman.” They do not catch the double application of the *“sign”* which was to be given. It is very common in prophecy to have both a near and a far fulfillment of the prophecy. So it is here.

If we follow the text into chapter eight, we see that it also applies to the son that Isaiah will have (Isa 8:1–10), as a sign that *“Immanuel ... God is with us”* (Isa 8:8, 10). The word *“virgin”* (young woman) applies first to Isaiah’s wife in the near fulfillment and, ultimately, to Mary in the final fulfillment. However, when Isaiah is quoted in Mat 1:23, the word used is *parthenos*, which can only mean *“virgin.”*

The Historical Evidence

“So all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying: ‘Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,’ which is translated ‘God with us.’” Mat 1:22–23

In the days of Isaiah's prophecy, the northern kingdom allied with Syria and attacked the southern kingdom, under King Ahaz. King Ahaz and all the people were terrified (Isa 7:2). Isaiah was sent by God to offer hope and comfort to the kingdom of Judah, which included the sign of his next son's birth (Isa 7:3–17; 8:1–4). The nation was to trust in God for their deliverance, and a warning was given, *"If you will not believe, surely you shall not be established"* (Isa 7:9b). The Hebrew is much more colorful, and has been paraphrased, "If you doubt, you won't hold out."

King Ahaz and the nation chose, instead, to put their trust in Assyria, who would ultimately prove to be a far greater threat. Therefore, the land that could have demonstrated the very presence of God would find the king of Assyria in their midst (Isa 8:6–10).

In Isa 9:2, 6 and Isa 11:1–5, the focus of the promised Child is totally on the coming Messiah. However, God is not done demonstrating His power to deliver. Later, under King Hezekiah, the Assyrian army under Sennacherib, invades the land and besieges Jerusalem (Isaiah 36–37). Again, the prophet Isaiah is sent to the king with the promise of deliverance. Whereas Ahaz rejected the Lord, Hezekiah prayed in faith (Isa 37:21). The result was that *"the angel of the LORD went out, and killed in the camp of the Assyrians one hundred and eighty-five thousand; and when people arose early in the morning, there were the corpses—all dead"* (Isa 37:36). Thus, Immanuel, in the form of *"the angel of the Lord,"* demonstrated that God is with those who will trust in Him!

Immanuel—God with Us

1. Joh 1:1–9, 14 reveals the truth that, in the incarnation, we have what is known theologically as "the hypostatic union": God and man united in one unique Person—His deity, undiminished, and His humanity, perfect and sinless.
2. According to Heb 1:1–3, this great event is the epitome of all revelation.
3. In the biblical record of the life of Christ, we have a living definition of *"the beauty of holiness"* (Psa 27:4; 29:2; 90:17) and of "godliness," which means "Christ-likeness."
4. The true nature of God is fully presented in the Person of Jesus Christ, in the context of daily life in a fallen world.
5. Christ was in the world, but *"not of the world"* (Joh 17:14).

The Spiritual Implications

"I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me." Gal 2:20

Our union with Christ through spiritual re-birth results in a new creation (2Co 5:17)—the new inner man. Our position *"in Christ"* is as though we were already glorified with Him (Eph 2:4–6; Col 3:1–4). The objective of our Christian life is to align our practice with our position. The

aim of spiritual growth and maturity is that we become “like Him,” conformed to His image (Rom 8:29; 12:1–2; 2Co 3:18).

Paul, though he freely acknowledged his own shortcomings (Rom 7:18; 1Co 15:9; Eph 3:8; Phi 3:12; 1Ti 1:15), learned to overcome the frailty of the flesh by living in the power of the Holy Spirit. By steady growth and spiritual tenacity, he learned to let Christ live through Him. This is the goal for all who have trusted Christ:

1. Paul begins from the standpoint of positional truth, our union with Christ (Rom.6:1-6). This is the “*mystery*” of us “*in Christ*” and of Christ “*in us*” (Col 1:26–29).
2. On this basis, he moves to the issue of true spirituality (2Co 5:14–15).
3. Christ lives in us by means of the filling of the Holy Spirit (Eph 5:18; Gal 5:16).
4. Spirituality is possible only by a life of faith (Hab 2:4; Rom 1;17; Gal 3:11; Heb 10:38).
5. The spiritual life is a life of gratitude for the matchless grace of God given to us through Christ (1Jo 4:9, 19).
6. Christ living in us fulfills the promise of Joh 14:21–23 and perpetuates the miracle of the incarnation in the lives of Spirit-filled believers.
7. A life of godliness—Christ-like living—is impossible apart from a steady diet of sound teaching from the Word of God (Tit.2:10-15).

Study Three: The Justification of the Spirit (Phi 2:5–8; Rom 3:21–26)

“Justified in [by means of] the Spirit ...”

The first couplet of contrasts is between flesh and Spirit. The Lord Jesus was revealed to us in a human body, but His claims as the Son of God were vindicated by the power of the Spirit of God.

Apart from Jesus’ justification through the Spirit, there would be no justification for mankind. The Spirit of God vindicated the claims of Jesus during His life and ministry through His words and works. The ultimate justification of His claims was the resurrection (Rom 1:4).

Jesus’ claims were vindicated by His supernatural life and deeds. His miracles attested to His true identity and deity. In fact, Jesus claimed that His miracles were simply imitations of what His Father was doing in the world all the time (Joh 5:17, 19, 30, 36).

As a part of His self-emptying (Phi 2:5–8), Jesus relied, not on His own inherent power as God. But as the Son of Man, He relied on the Holy Spirit to empower and enable Him to fulfill the Father’s plan (Mat 12:28; Luk 2:27; 4:1, 14, 18).

The Prophecy

“The Spirit of the LORD GOD is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach good tidings to the poor ...” Isa 61:1; Luk 4:18

It is of great interest, particularly in Luke, to observe the reliance of Jesus as “*the Son of Man*” on the ministry of the Holy Spirit. It is important to remember that Jesus is the Son of God eternally (Psa 2:7, 12; Pro 30:4b). He became the Son of Man when He entered the world by virgin birth. As the Son of Man, He relied on the Spirit of God for His power—as we are to do.

1. He is anointed by the Spirit at His baptism—Luk 3:21–22.
2. He is filled by the Spirit and led by Him to be tempted—Luk 4:1.
3. He returns from the temptations victorious, in the power of the Spirit—Luk 4:14.
4. He proclaims, from the prophecy of Isaiah, that His entire ministry is dependent upon the Holy Spirit—Luk.4:18-19.

The Historical Evidence

“But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you.” Mat 12:28

“It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life.” Joh 6:63

1. Again, in His humanity, due to His act of self-emptying (Phi 2:7 **Grk. Gene, did you mean to put the Greek word in here?**), Jesus relied on the power of the Spirit to do all His mighty works.
2. Thus, the Spirit of God testified to His true identity, and confirmed that He was the promised and anointed Messiah (Joh 5:36, 39).
3. Jesus’ words and deeds contained the “secret” to eternal life, for they vindicated His claims and gave foundation to faith in Him (Joh 10:37–38; 1Co 3:11).
4. By sending Christ to die on behalf of sinners, God the Father demonstrated His justice in judging sin and vindicated His right to forgive sin and save guilty sinners—without compromising His own righteousness because Jesus paid their debt. Thus, God is both “just” and the “justifier” of sinners.

The Spiritual Implications

“Being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” Rom 3:24

“Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” Rom 5:1

The Lord Jesus was “*justified*” in the sense that His claims were vindicated by the presence and power of the Spirit. For us, the concept of justification means to be “declared righteous” by God. This is possible due to our sins being paid for on the cross, with the result that they cannot be imputed to us (2Co 5:19–21), and the righteousness of Christ being imputed to us through faith (Rom 4:1–8, 23–25). Jesus Christ became our sin, that we might become His righteousness (2Co 5:21).

1. To be justified means to be “declared righteous” by God. All sins are forgiven (Col 2:13), and we are imputed with the righteousness of Christ Himself (Rom 4:3–6, 23–24).
2. Scripture repeatedly reminds us that justification is a free gift of God, conferred on all who trust in Jesus Christ as Savior.
3. Salvation is free for us, but it cost the Lord Jesus Christ everything. He paid the price so that we could receive the blessing of eternal life.
4. Once we are justified by faith, we are reconciled to God (Rom 5:6–11) and have a permanent standing of peace before Him.
5. This means that we are free from all eternal condemnation (Joh 5:24). Our conduct may be condemned (1Ti 3:6; Jam 5:12) here in time, resulting in divine discipline (Heb 12:3–11), but all condemnation is removed for eternity,

Study Four: The Observation of Angels (1Pe 1:10–12)

“[He was] *seen by angels ...*”

Our second couplet contrasts angels who are near to God, and the Gentiles who were far from God (see Eph 2:17).

The Greek verb *horaō*, in the constative aorist, speaks of the angels’ observation of the whole of His earthly experience. We get the word “horizon” from this word—the idea is of a wide, broad view. What the angels of God observed with wonder and delight, the fallen angels of Satan must have watched in horror and dread.

By His incarnation and resurrection, Jesus the Man, became the first of the human race to be exalted above the angels (see Hebrews 1–2). In His ascension, He is said to have “*disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it*” (Col 2:15).

Many commentators see here a mighty battle fought and won, as the forces of darkness sought to prevent His entrance into the presence of God.

The Prophecy

“Of this salvation the prophets have inquired and searched carefully ... things which angels desire to look into.” 1Pe 1:10–12

What a wonder it must have been to the angels to see their Creator and Lord step down into history, partake of human flesh, and live among men. And not only this, but then He humbled Himself even further to the point of crucifixion as a criminal on behalf of a fallen race.

By means of Christ’s redemptive work on fallen mankind’s behalf, those who believe would be raised to a status and position above the angels themselves. Those who are in Christ by faith will, in fact, judge angels (1Co 6:3).

Since the Gospel plan was revealed before time began (2Ti 1:9; Tit 1:2), it seems reasonable that God revealed it to the angels. This could very well have been the catalyst that provoked Lucifer's fall (Isa 14:12–15; Eze 28:12–19). I find it interesting and intriguing that the five things Lucifer declared that he would claim in the Isaiah cite above, have been given to all who are in Christ:

1. *"I will ascend into heaven ..."* Isa 14:13.
"For our citizenship is in heaven ..." Phi 3:20.
2. *"I will exalt my throne above the stars [angels] of God."* Isa 14:13.
"We shall judge angels ..." 1Co 6:3.
3. *"I will also sit on the mount of the congregation"* Isa 14:13.
"They shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him ..." Rev 20:6.
4. *"I will ascend above the heights of the clouds [witnesses]"* Isa 14:14.
"[He] raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus" Eph 2:6.
5. *"I will be like the Most High"* Isa 14:14.
"When He is revealed, we shall be like Him ..." 1Jo 3:2.

If it is correct to assume that God's plan was revealed to the angels before the natural creation, and if this provoked Lucifer's revolt, then we could easily see why angels would "stoop down to observe" what is occurring on the Earth (literal rendering of 1Pe 1:12b).

The Historical Evidence

"... Behold, angels came and ministered to Him." Mat 4:11b

The angelic realm watched in wonder, and even ministered to, Him who was their Creator (Mat 4:11; Luk 22:43). Angels stood by to rescue Him from the cross, if He should call on them (Mat 26:53).

Angels ...

1. Announced His birth—Luk 2:8–14
2. Ministered to Him in the temptations—Mat 4:11
3. Strengthened Him in Gethsemane—Luk 22:43
4. Announced His resurrection—Mat 28:1–8; Mar 16:5–8; Luk 24:4–7
5. Jesus was conscious of angelic observation at all times, as Paul says we should be (1Co 11:10, *cf.* 2Ki 6:16).

Spiritual Implications

"Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation." Heb 1:14

The ways in which angels ministered to Jesus anticipate how they also minister to us, though we are mostly unaware of this (Heb 13:2). Apparently, all children have guardian angels (Mat 18:10). Whether angels continue to guard those who reject Christ, we cannot know with

certainty. However, it is evident that believers are under angelic protection, guidance, and ministry.

Daniel revealed to us that behind the conflicts among nations, there are mighty angelic forces—clashing as the holy angels of God clash in titanic battles against the forces of Satan (Daniel 10).

The experience of Elisha, surrounded by the heavenly host (2Ki 6:16–17), is a good reminder that angels play vital roles in the guarding of God’s people, and in the sure accomplishment of His will.

We will no doubt be astounded when we enter glory, and the veil of our natural condition is removed, to find how many incidents in our lives were due to the intervention of angelic hosts!

Study Five: The Proclamation to the Gentiles

“[He was] *preached among the Gentiles ...*”

Here, we move from the topic of angels who are near to God, to the Gentiles who were far from God (again, see Eph 2:17).

Paul, initially the great enemy of the Christian faith, was uniquely chosen by God to become its great champion (Gal 1:11–17). Jesus Christ, by His coming, brought godliness into the world. The message of the grace of God, articulated by Paul, brought men and women into that godliness, by faith (Tit 2:10–14). By the miracle of regeneration and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in those who believed, godliness became the norm for the Christian way of life. This was nothing less than Christ living in and through believers (Gal 2:20).

Paul often exults in his mission as the apostle to the Gentiles (Rom 11:13). He had a great and abiding sorrow over Israel’s historical failure (Rom 9:1–5). He knew the ancient prophecy that God would use a people—not a nation—to provoke them to repentance (Rom 10:19, from Deu 32:21). He understood that this was the role of the primarily Gentile Church (Rom 11:13–25). Paul was the dominant voice of his generation that launched the Gospel message into the Gentile nations.

The Prophecy

“... *By the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, in Galilee of the Gentiles. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; Those who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death, upon them a light has shined.*” Isa 9:1b–2; see Mat 4:15–16; Mal 1:11

It was no secret in the Old Testament that Gentiles would be included in God’s plan of redemption (Isa 42:1). However, the common Jewish idea as to how this would occur was that Gentiles would become Jewish proselytes. They had no way of anticipating the formation of an entirely new spiritual entity—the Church—because it was an as-yet-unrevealed mystery.

The “*great light*” that shined on the Gentiles, beginning with the ministry of Christ, was nothing less than “*the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ*” (2Co 4:6b). We know that “*God is light and in Him is no darkness at all*” (1Jo 1:5b). Therefore, “*if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin*” (1Jo 1:7). To walk in the light is to walk in His character, as it is revealed to us in His Word. When we fail, the remedy is humble confession (1Jo 1:9), as this is a humble acknowledgement of both our failure, and of our continuing trust in His finished work.

The Historical Evidence

“For my eyes have seen Your salvation which you have prepared before the face of all peoples, a light to bring revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel.” Luk 2:30–32

As has been stated, the concept that salvation was to be offered to the Gentiles was a matter of Old Testament prophecy (Isa 11:10; 42:6; 66:19; Jer 16:19–21). Yet, the how-and-when was hidden (Rom 11:25). Of much greater “mystery” was how godliness would become a reality for us, that we should become “*partakers of the divine nature*” (2Pe 1:4).

Prior to the events, no one could have anticipated the full scope of the incarnation of Christ, His crucifixion and resurrection, and our union with Him by the baptism of the Holy Spirit (1Co 12:13; Eph 2:5–6). So great and eternal is the union to our Lord of those who believe, that we are said to already be “seated with Him in the heavens” (Eph 2:6; Col 3:1–4).

The Role of Paul

“But the Lord said to him, ‘Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel.’” Act 9:15

The role of Paul in all of this is nothing short of staggering. In the face of constant hatred and persecution, he carried the banner of truth into the Mediterranean world and established churches, which then sent out their missionaries to even further fields (See Col 1:24–29). In his own lifetime, he was able to boast that his labors had caused the spread of the message of salvation through Christ to the whole world (Col 1:23).

The Spiritual Implications

“For the love of Christ compels us ... Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ ...” 2Co 5:14–20

Since we are the recipients and beneficiaries of such proclamation, we now have a spiritual obligation to continue the work of world missions. Every single child of God has a three-fold calling: as a **priest** to God, as an **ambassador** to the lost, and as a **minister** to fellow believers. Our priesthood is focused on intercessory prayer; our ambassadorship is our witness to the unsaved; and our ministry is to the strengthening of fellow-believers. These three aspects of ministry are found in the three exhortations of Heb 10:22–24:

1. *“Let us draw near ...”* This is a picture of the priest approaching the altar, having been cleansed of all defilement. Every believer is a priest to God (1Pe 2:5–9), and the offering of our priesthood is prayer and praise (Heb 13:15).
2. *“Let us hold fast ...”* The focus is *“the confession of our hope.”* We are ambassadors of Christ and, therefore, have a message of hope to the unsaved world through the offer of full and free salvation (Rom 6:23).
3. *“Let us consider one another ...”* Here is our ministry to fellow believers as we each exercise in prayer and service to each other.

The love Paul speaks of here (2Co 5:14) is that of Christ for us (subjective genitive), not our love for Him (objective genitive). However, our response of love for Him is assumed in 2Co 5:15 as we live for Him. As John reminds us, *“We love Him because He first loved us”* (1Jo 4:19). There should be no doubt that commitment to His cause will inevitably lead to some form of persecution (Mat 5:10–12; 2Ti 3:12). Godliness is not welcome in this world!

Study Six: Justification by Faith

“Believed on in the world ...”

This phrase is crucial, as it presents the one criterion for phase one salvation (Eph 2:8–10). The plan of God for mankind is progressive: justification, then sanctification, and finally glorification (see Rom 8:28–30; 2Pe 1:5–7). Too often, Christians think of “salvation” only in terms of initial justification, when most of the epistles focus on phase two—sanctification. The word “saved” simply means “deliverance,” and the context determines what we are being delivered from.

Since deliverance implies helplessness to deliver ourselves, faith in Jesus Christ is the only means of deliverance from condemnation from sin (Joh 3:16–19). Once we have trusted Christ, the Living Word, as our Savior, our focus shifts to God’s written Word. The promises and doctrines of the Word, received by faith and implemented by the indwelling Holy Spirit, deliver us from the wiles of Satan, sin, and a fruitless and ineffective life. The greater part of the epistles, written to believers, focuses on deliverance from failure to live by faith (Heb 5:11–14; 6:1–12).

The Prophecy

“But the just shall live by his faith.”
Hab 2:4; Rom 1:17; Gal 3:11; Heb 10:38

It is no accident that these words from Hab 2:4 are quoted as foundational truth in three epistles (my conviction is that Paul wrote Hebrews). These three books demonstrate that we are justified by faith, that we are then sanctified (set apart to God) by faith, and that a life of faith will result in rich eternal inheritance.

The Historical Evidence

“I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel.” Luk 7:9b

“Now we believe ... for we ourselves have heard Him and we know that this is indeed the Christ, the Savior of the world.” Joh 4:42b

Only twice do we read that the Lord Jesus was amazed: first because of the faith of a Roman centurion (Mat 8:10; Luk 7:9), and second due to the unbelief of His own people (Mar 6:1–6). Jesus, like the pearl merchant in the parable (Mat 13:45–46), was seeking “*one pearl of great price,*” and that pearl was faith.

God values faith above all other things, for it is the supreme expression of humility and acknowledgment of helplessness. Faith alone in Christ alone is the way of salvation, for the simple reason that faith abandons all attempts of self-deliverance and rests wholly in the merits of the finished work of Christ on the cross. Only humble, non-meritorious faith glorifies God, for it magnifies His grace and mercy on undeserving sinners.

The Spiritual Implications

“For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age ...” Tit 2:11–12

The normal progression of the spiritual life goes from condemnation to justification (salvation by grace through faith). Then, from justification, we move into sanctification, which is the gradual transformation that takes place as a result of steady, spiritual growth. The consistent intake of God’s Word through reading, teaching, and memorization changes our lives. With growth comes greater effectiveness in our prayer life and our witness. In time, the discovery of our own spiritual gift(s) emerges, and we enter into the active role of ministry to the Body of Christ. Sanctification is the path to glorification with honor (see 2Pe 1:8–11).

Spiritual growth teaches us to live life in the light of eternity (see Tit 2:13–14) and, therefore, puts the various pursuits and pleasures of this life into perspective. Believers, ignorant of the value of eternal rewards and inheritance, struggle to overcome the various lures of this world and continue to fail—for they are lacking the power that comes from truth, the Spirit, and the promise of eternal glory, which is the gift we offer to Jesus Christ, from a life well lived. To stand naked at the Bema Seat (1Co 3:11–15) is far more than just shame. It is to be deprived of anything of this life to offer our Savior, who gave everything for our redemption.

As Paul makes clear in the above text, those who live in the light of “*the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ,*” will not be slack as His “*special people, zealous for good works*” (Tit 2:13–14). Paul goes on to emphasize this to Titus:

“But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done,

*but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, **that** having been justified by His grace we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.” Tit 3:4–7 (emphasis added)*

Every believer in Jesus Christ has an eternal inheritance which is “*incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God ...*” (1Pe 1:4–5a). However, as Peter makes clear in 2Pe 1:8–11, the degree and extent of that inheritance is to be determined by our faithfulness and conduct in this life. It is for this that we need the daily “*hope of eternal life,*” to keep us grounded and focused on what truly matters in life.

Study Seven: The Present Session (Psa 110:1–4; Phi 2:9–11)

“Received up in glory ...”

The Prophecy

“The LORD said to my Lord, ‘Sit at My right hand, till I make Your enemies Your footstool’ ... rule in the midst of Your enemies!” Psa 110:1–2

A thousand years before Christ, the prophet David foretold the victory of the Lord Jesus Christ in His ascension into Heaven. The right hand is the place of power and authority. It is no wonder, then, that before His ascension, Jesus said to His disciples, “*All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth*” (Mat 28:18).

The “*rod of Your strength out of Zion*” may well refer to the proclamation of the cross, by which over the intervening centuries, He would “*rule in the midst of [His] enemies*” (Psa 110:2). Jesus laid out the plan for His conquest to the disciples: “*You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem [Zion], and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth*” (Act 1:8).

While our Lord is seated in Heaven, His work is the initiation of a reign that will ultimately encompass the heavens and Earth. His kingdom does not come without a fight. With the strategic victory won at the cross, the forces of Christ wage incessant battle to claim ground by claiming souls through the proclamation of the Good News of His redemptive victory on our behalf. Each of us, who have trusted in Him, are called to play a part in the battle of the ages. Those who are valiant in the fight will be crowned with glory and honor in His presence (2Ti 2:12; 4:7–8).

The Historical Evidence

“... when He had by Himself purged our sins, [He] sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become so much better than the angels, as He has by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they.” Heb 1:3b–4

When we speak of the present ministry of Jesus Christ, we use the theological term “Present Session.” Mostly, believers focus on the work of the cross to the exclusion of what Christ is occupied with at this present time. Certainly, the cross is the focal point for our “*so great ... salvation*” (Heb 2:3). But this is only the beginning of salvation, not the end.

The glorified Lord Jesus Christ is now “[reigning] *in the midst of [His] enemies*” (Psa 110:2). But we must see this current reign in its connection to our lives on this Earth. At the moment of our salvation by faith, we are spiritually seated with Christ in the heavens (Eph 2:6; Col 3:1–4). Not only this, but God has placed at our disposal all the wealth of His heavenly treasury (Eph 1:3; 3:8; Phi 4:19).

We are, therefore, called “*servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God*” (1Co 4:1). These are not idle words. The position of steward was one of great honor, great trust, and great responsibility. Consider that Jesus Christ is reigning “*in the midst of [His] enemies*” in absentia, through His Body—the Church. That means that we are to be living examples and exhibits of the prayer, “*Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven ...*” (Mat 6:10). This leads to astounding spiritual implications for every believer.

The Spiritual Implications

“If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me.” Luk 9:23

“Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus ... He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.” Phi 2:5–8

The demand of Jesus in the passage above is realized in the exhortation of the Apostle Paul. The life of the disciple is the constant imitation of the Master (Luk 6:40). Jesus set the standard for this, when He said, “*Most assuredly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do; for whatever He does, the Son also does in like manner*” (Joh 5:19).

If, indeed, the current work of Christ is reigning “*in the midst of [His] enemies,*” are we not also called to use our exalted position and power and provisions to do the same? Look at Peter and John in Acts 4. They were poor, and considered ignorant by the religious elite, and yet they moved among their enemies with a majestic sense of command. Their likeness to Jesus was obvious (Joh 5:13), because their focus was to do the will of God above all else (Joh 5:19). The outcome of their courageous faith was the edifying and uplifting of all the Church (Joh 5:23–31).

As believers, each of us is granted power, resources, and a royal commission to fulfill. As sons and daughters of the King—even more, as the Bride of Christ—we are to “*obey God rather than men*” (Act 5:29). When we act in the love of the Spirit, we will never violate any law worthy of being called or recognized as a law (Gal 5:22–23). It is this sense of our identity in Christ and our commission from God—in the power of His Spirit—that empowers us to “*reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ*” (Rom 5:17b).

Consider this truth: If God prepared for each of us certain works to accomplish, before the world began (Eph 2:10), isn't it reasonable to assume that nothing can frustrate His plan but our own inaction? If we are seated with Christ in the place of "*all [power and] authority ... in heaven and on earth*" (Mat 28:18), and have been freely granted His power, the same Holy Spirit He relied on in His earthly life, and His spiritual riches (Eph 1:3), then ought we not to conclude that we are, in fact, invincible in the accomplishment of His will?

This is the mind-set that drove the Apostle Paul. How great a difference would it make if we were to adopt it?

When Winston Churchill, against all odds, was called on to become Prime Minister of England in the early days of WWII, the prospects of Great Britain seemed hopeless. And yet he said (and I paraphrase), "I felt that I was walking with destiny. I was sure that I would not fail."

We as Christians have been given our destiny! How can we fail?

Study Eight: The Family Culture (1Ti 3:14)

These things I write to you, though I hope to come to you shortly; but if I am delayed, I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth." 1Ti 3: 14

These instructions specifically include the teachings of 1Ti 2:1–3:13. The behavior of believers—members of the household of God—should be to conduct themselves in such a way as to reflect the family "likeness."

The "*house of God*" does not refer to a building, but to the royal family of God made up of all who believe in Christ. Is it the Church that is here called "*the pillar and ground of the truth*"? Or is it He on whom she is founded? I am inclined to believe the latter.

Paul makes it clear that the only foundation for eternal salvation, and, therefore, of the Body of Christ, is Christ Himself—the Cornerstone (compare 1Co 3:11 with 1Pe 2:6). The house itself may often shake; the foundation never does.

When we speak of the "household," we are speaking of its members. The task of the members is always to reflect the will and character of the Head of the house. Tragically, we all fail to do this in various ways and degrees. However, to the degree we are faithful, we reflect the divine Householder, and share in His kingdom reign. So says the author of Hebrews:

"But Christ as a Son over His own house, whose house we are, if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm to the end ... For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end." Heb 3:6, 14 (emphasis added)

The two conditional clauses indicate that we may or may not stand firm. To fail to do so is to step outside the boundaries of the household, and to forfeit fellowship with Christ and the resulting rewards. This is exactly what Jesus meant when He said to Peter, *“If I do not wash you, you have no part [portion] with Me”* (Joh 13:8). The ongoing cleansing of Jesus Christ, His washing of our feet, is essential to fellowship and effective service in His household (2Ti 2:20–22; 1Jo 1:7, 9).

The Prophecy

*“Your people shall be volunteers in the day of Your power;
in the beauties of holiness, from the womb of the morning,
You have the dew of Your youth.”* Psa 110:3

Have you volunteered for service? If not, it will never come to you. This verse comes in conjunction with David’s prophecy of Christ being seated at the Father’s right hand and reigning amid His enemies. Just exactly how does Christ reign on this earth while seated in Heaven? The implication is that He reigns through His willing servants. In this, the portion of the Lord’s prayer, *“Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven”* (Mat 6:10) begins to be fulfilled.

The importance of our faithful service here on Earth is realized in that we are preparing for greater and more glorious roles in His future kingdom (both the temporal and the eternal). As Paul reminded Timothy, *“If we endure [with Him], we shall also reign with Him”* (2Ti 2:12).

I am often asked by those who would designate themselves as “just common believers” (there is no such thing), “What can I do? I am not a pastor, or a missionary. I can’t teach the Bible to others or win multitudes to Christ. How do I qualify?” Let me point you back to the conditions given in Heb 3:6 and 14:

“If we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm to the end ... if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end ...”

Faithfulness begins with faith. Faith gives rise to hope and love (1Co 13:13). If we guard and nourish the inner man, in the assurance of the truth and the joy that comes from it, service will be the most natural outcome. We will be moved to pray, not just self-centered prayers, but intercessory prayers for the genuine needs of others. We will be moved to give—both to those near at hand and in support of ministries far away. We will have no reluctance to encourage others, to lend helping hands, to *“rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep”* (Rom 12:15). Above all, we will not be inclined to “[forsake] *the assembling of ourselves together*” (Heb 10:25), for we will be acutely conscious of our need for both instruction and fellowship. By these simple steps, growth, transformation, and effectiveness will come in due time.

The Historical Evidence

“For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named.” Eph 3:14–15

How amazing to consider that the very concept of “*family*” begins with the Godhead: Father, Spirit, and Son. From this creative source comes the family in Heaven (angels) and on Earth (mankind).

When we have man and woman united together, we call it “marriage.” But, add a child and now we call it “*family*,” and it reflects the three-in-one Godhead.

Paul’s prayer in Ephesians comes in two parts: first he prays for enlightenment or illumination regarding the things he is teaching (Eph 1:15–20). In the second part, he prays for empowerment, or enablement, to put them into practice (Eph 3:14–19). While his concern reached each individual believer, it was the family—the household as a whole—that he addressed. What a difference it would make if we all had more concern for the whole family!

The Spiritual Implications

“... as His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue ...” 2Pe 1:3

These truths are the criteria for how we, as believers, are to conduct ourselves “within the household of God” (1Ti 3:15). The Church is to be a true counter-culture in this world (Joh 17:13–19).

The “*divine power*” refers to the effects of regeneration, resulting in the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. By His power, we are to be transformed into the image of Christ (Rom 8:29; 2Co 3:18). It is critical to grasp the truth that this transformation is the result of “*the knowledge of Him who called us*,” which comes gradually as we grow in grace and truth, through the study of His Word (2Ti 2:15; 2Pe 3:18).

The attainment of true godliness is not possible by our feeble efforts in making vows or sacrificing some trifle. It comes slowly, increasingly, as does growth in a child. But the power for conformity to Christ rests with the indwelling Spirit, who works according to our faith in God’s Word. As we make our lives a daily offering through faith, we are changed, starting from within and working outward, and we are changed “*from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord*” (2Co 3:18).

The Fragrance of Life, the Stench of Death

As members of the Body of Christ reflect the divine nature, we impact society with one of two possible reactions: attraction or antipathy. This is how the Apostle Paul describes this impact:

“Now thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and through us diffuses the fragrance of His knowledge in every place. For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing. To the one we are the aroma of death leading to death [antipathy], and to the other the aroma of life leading to life. And who is sufficient for these things?” 2Co 2:14–16

Note that Paul answers his question regarding sufficiency in 2Co 3:4–6. Our confidence of having a counter-cultural impact is not “self-confidence,” but rather the sufficiency that God gives to us through His indwelling Spirit.

When believers “walk in the Spirit” (Gal 5:16), they will inevitably have the effect of either drawing others to Christ (attraction) or of getting a hostile reaction (antipathy) which is rooted in hostility to Christ. This is the root-cause of persecution—the desire of those who reject Christ and, being convicted of their eternal condemnation, wish to attack the immediate source of their sense of impending judgment.

The Blessing of Persecution

This is why Jesus, in His first recorded major discourse—the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7)—began by revealing the character traits that reflect the nature of God (the Beatitudes), and concluded with a benediction on those who suffer for reflecting Christ:

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” Mat 5:10–12

The direction of the Beatitudes moves from transformation (Mat 5:3–9) to persecution (Mat 5:10–12). It is only as we are conformed to Christ that we become “salt and light” (Mat 5:13–16). Throughout the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus rebukes the practice of external ritual without corresponding internal reality. Spirituality that is for “show,” or “to make a name,” is the most offensive stench to God (Isa 64:6).

This is precisely why we each need to “examine [ourselves] to see whether [we] are in the faith” (2Co 13:5, see 1Co 11:28–31). Far too much valuable time is spent in Christian circles examining others, which in reality we cannot do, when we should be preoccupied with our own spiritual condition.

The Law of Love

“Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law ... Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.” Rom 13:8, 10

“Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil;

does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails ...” 1Co 13:4–8a

There are two character traits that stand out in the life of our Lord that define godliness for us in practical terms. The first is His humility (Phi 2:5–8). Our Creator stepped down into His own broken world and, having become a man, humbled Himself to become the servant of all men (Luk 22:27). As if this were not enough, He humbled Himself, even more, to die in our place on the cross, bearing the just penalty of our sins. Andrew Murray, in his book, *The Beauty of Holiness*, defines that beauty with one word: humility.

Coupled with His humble spirit was the most all-encompassing love ever known on this Earth. In His every word and deed, He was moved by the love of the Father, which He brought into a world of hatred and violence. In these qualities, “*the mystery of godliness*” is defined. The more we truly “see Him,” as He is revealed in our Bibles, the more we will long to be like Him. The more we are conformed to His image, the less this world will be a home to us. Gradually, as we grow, the possessions of this life begin to rust, and the pleasures that once captivated us grow cold.

Very slowly at first, and then with increasing urgency, we begin to realize the truth that “*where your treasure is, there your heart will be also*” (Mat 6:21). We will begin to look at the beauty of the sunrise or the sunset, and say to ourselves, “There is a kingdom over there!” And we will come to know that what makes the kingdom wonderful and desirable is the King who reigns there.

Not until we desire Him—above all the blessings He has to offer—will we be truly on our way into the mystery of godliness!

“For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” 2Co 4:6 (emphasis added)

On the cobble-stone street in front of Edinburgh Castle, stands a monument to a soldier, one among many. Yet this one stands apart, not by its size or beauty, but by the man to whom it is dedicated.

I recently stood before this stone, the granite face is old and the engraving fading. One has to get down on his knees to read it, a posture that is entirely fitting. The stone is dedicated to Col. Kenneth Douglas MacKenzie, C.B. He served for 42 years in the 92nd Highlanders, fought bravely in two wars, and was highly decorated. He was born at Dundee on February 1, 1811, and died while on duty at Dartmoor August 24, 1873. Inscribed on his stone was his life-motto:

“But godliness with contentment is great gain.” 1Ti .6:6 (KJV)

I look forward to meeting Col. MacKenzie when I enter eternity. I pray that each of us may prove worthy of his company, and that of other heroes of the faith!