

Title: **A SUBJECT WITHOUT CONTROVERSY**

Text: 1 Timothy 3:16

Subject: *Angels Observing Christ's Redemptive Work*

Date: Sunday Evening — December 23, 2007

Tape # Z-46a

Reading: *Darvin Pruitt — 1 Timothy 3:14-4:16*

Introduction:

In the late 1700s Joseph Priestley, a liberal Unitarian preacher near Philadelphia, was visited by his younger brother, Timothy. Timothy Priestley was also a preacher. His older brother had once professed the faith of the gospel, but had abandoned it. While visiting with his brother, the elder Dr. Priestley (the unbelieving liberal) courteously asked his younger brother to preach for him. As the time neared, he began to fear he had made a mistake. So he asked his younger brother to choose a subject that would not be controversial. When Sunday morning rolled around, the younger Dr. Priestley stepped into the pulpit and announced as his text 1st Timothy 3:16, and read these words.

(1 Timothy 3:16) “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.”

Let's look at that text together. I have often been told that the things I preach are too controversial. So, tonight I am going to try to improve my image. I am going to preach to you about **A SUBJECT WITHOUT CONTROVERSY**.

(1 Timothy 3:16) “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.”

IRREFUTABLE MYSTERY

When Paul says, “*without controversy great is the mystery of godliness,*” he means for us to understand two things:

1. **The doctrine of the gospel is irrefutable.** That which it reveals is an irrefutable fact — “*Godliness*” is the whole body of revealed truth,

particularly the truth of God regarding the Person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. As Paul uses it in this text, “*godliness*” refers to the doctrine of Christ, to the whole revelation of God concerning his dear Son. Paul says, “the doctrine of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ is indisputable, undebatable and irrefutable. It is so plainly revealed and evidently manifest that no reasonable controversy can be raised about it.” Yet...

2. **The gospel of Christ is a mystery which no man can comprehend.** — It cannot be known, understood, or received by any man, except by divine regenerating grace and revelation. And even those who are blessed of God to believe it cannot comprehend it. The gospel of Christ is a mystery to mortals, a matter of obscurity to human beings. It is a mystery because we have no ability, in our present, sinful, mental state to comprehend it. We see it and rejoice in it, but we “*see through a glass darkly.*” The gospel of Christ, the revelation of his Person and work, is considerably bigger than our puny brains! Having said that, Paul goes on to declare and assert as unquestionable facts those very things which to mortal eyes are incomprehensibly mysterious.

SIX FACTS BEYOND DISPUTE

In this one sentence, breathed by God the Holy Spirit and recorded here upon this page of Holy Scripture, we are given six facts that are beyond dispute.

1. “**God was manifest in the flesh!**” — The greatest mystery in all the world is the mystery of the incarnation. It was a miraculous, supernatural work of God. And that which is supernatural cannot be explained by the laws of nature, anymore than that which is spiritual can be explained by the laws of physics. When Paul says, “*God was manifest in the flesh,*” he is declaring that — God the Son, the second Person of the Holy Trinity, who in the covenant of grace took upon himself the work of saving his people from their sins, became a man so that he might accomplish that great work.

He never ceased to be God over all, blessed forever, infinite, eternal, incomprehensible. Yet, he became a man, a real man, just exactly like us, with one great exception, he had no sin. (John 1:14, 18; 1 John 1:1-3).

(John 1:14) “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 1:18) “No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared *him*.”

(1 John 1:1-3) “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life; (2) (For the life was manifested, and we have seen *it*, and bear witness, and show unto you that eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us;) (3) That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship *is* with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ.”

Our Redeemer had to be a man, for man had sinned and man must suffer. And he had to be God; otherwise that which he suffered had been of no value to us. The sufferings of the God-man are vicarious sufferings of infinite value. The death of the God-man is the payment of infinite value to God for the satisfaction of justice.

2. “*God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit.*” — That is a very full, meaningful statement. It means that the Spirit of God, given to him without measure, fully satisfied all his claims to be the Messiah, the Christ, the Redeemer, the Son of God.

All the prophets pointed to him. At his baptism the Spirit descended upon him. And the miracles he performed in conjunction with the Spirit (Luke 11:20) proved him to be the Son of God, whose mission it was to redeem and save his people. (Matthew 1:21).

I have no doubt that this also refers to the fact that he who was made to be sin for us was justified from sin when he was raised from the dead. McCheyne was right when he suggested that the body of our Savior, who had been made to be sin for us, laid in an unjustified state, under the sentence of death, for three days. But on the third day, the Spirit of life came again to his body. And by his resurrection from the dead, he was “*justified in the Spirit*.”

He was spiritually justified, or justified as the Surety and Representative of his body, the Church of God's elect. Our sins, which were made his, he has put away by the sacrifice of himself. And when he was raised from the dead, God declared that his work of atonement was effectual to our everlasting justification. — “*He was delivered for our offences, and raised again for our justification*” (Romans 4:25). **Toplady wrote**, “When the Sun of Righteousness arose from his sad, but short, eclipse, he rose to set no more.” And there is healing for us under his wings!

3. Read on. “*God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels.*” — The risen Savior was seen with joy, adoration and praise by the holy angels who never fell. And he was seen with envy and dismay by those apostate spirits who kept not their first estate. Those fallen angels were forced to acknowledge him as the Christ, the Son of God.
4. Then the Apostle adds, he was “**preached unto the Gentiles.**” He who is God, who came into the world as a man, who died under the penalty of sin as our Substitute, who was raised from the dead, whom angels beheld, is the theme and subject of all true preaching. He was “*preached unto the Gentiles.*”

He was “*preached unto the Gentiles*” **in his two-fold character as God and man**, the only Mediator between God and men. (1 Timothy 2:5-6).

(1 Timothy 2:5-6) “For *there is* one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus; (6) Who gave himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time.”

He was “*preached unto the Gentiles*” **as the only, all-sufficient sacrifice for sin.** (Hebrews 10:1-14). — The only one by whom sin could be put away. — The one who has effectually put away our sins by the sacrifice of himself. (Hebrews 1:3, 9:26).

(Hebrews 1:3) “Who being the brightness of *his* glory, and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high;”

(Hebrews 9:26) “Now once in the end of the world hath he appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.”

(Hebrews 10:10-14) “By the which will we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once *for all*. (11) And every priest standeth daily ministering and offering oftentimes the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins: (12) But this man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God; (13) From henceforth expecting till his enemies be made his footstool. (14) For by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified.”

He was “*preached unto the Gentiles*” **as the everlasting righteousness of all who believe**. As our sins were made, so his righteousness has been made ours! As he was made sin for us, so we are made to be the righteousness of God in him (Jeremiah 23:6; 33:16; 2 Corinthians 5:21).

(Jeremiah 23:6) “In his days Judah shall be saved, and Israel shall dwell safely: and this *is* his name whereby he shall be called, THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS.”

(Jeremiah 33:16) “In those days shall Judah be saved, and Jerusalem shall dwell safely: and this *is the name* wherewith she shall be called, The LORD our righteousness.”

(2 Corinthians 5:21) “For he hath made him *to be* sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.”

The Lord Jesus Christ is relentlessly “preached unto the Gentiles,” as well as to the Jews, by every faithful gospel preacher (1 Corinthians 2:2). All true preachers, in every age, have preached Christ crucified to sinners. In the Old Testament, the prophets all spoke of him. In the New Testament, the Apostles all spoke of him. Today, all true preachers speak of him. **He who preaches the Book of God preaches the Son of God**. — “And he will still be preached to the end of time, as long as there is one elect sinner uncalled, and until all the vessels of mercy are brought to the saving knowledge and love of himself.” (Toplady)

5. This blessed Christ, who was preached unto the Gentiles, was, is, and shall be, until time is no more, “**believed on in the world.**” The Spirit of God makes the preaching of Christ crucified the means by which sinners are converted.
- The preaching of the gospel is the means of faith. (Romans 10:17).
 - The crucified Christ is the Object of faith.

Illustration: The Brazen Serpent (John 3:14-15; 12:32). Some saw clearly. Some saw faintly. But all who looked were saved. And some believers have a clear, assured, confident faith; while others have a clouded, faltering, confused faith. But all who trust Christ are born of God!

6. “*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.***” — He was raised from the dead and his body was glorified, as ours shall be in the resurrection. He ascended into heaven in a glorious manner, in a cloud, and with chariots of angels. There he was received by his Father, sat down at his right hand and was crowned with glory and honor, and glorified with the glory he had with him before the world was.

(John 17:1-5) “These words spake Jesus, and lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, Father, the hour is come; glorify thy Son, that thy Son also may glorify thee: (2) As thou hast given him power over all flesh, that he should give eternal life to as many as thou hast given him. (3) And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent. (4) I have glorified thee on the earth: I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do. (5) And now, O Father, glorify thou me with thine own self with the glory which I had with thee before the world was.”

- He was “*received up into glory*” to intercede for his elect!
- He was “*received up into glory*” to rule the world for his elect!
- He was “*received up into glory*” to execute the salvation of his elect!

Now, let me tell you something about this great God-man, the Lord Jesus Christ, our Savior. — “**He shall not fail**” (Isaiah 42:4).

- All whom he came to redeem, he has redeemed (Galatians 3:13).

- All for whom he makes intercession are forgiven (Romans 8:33-34; 1 John 2:1-2).

(Romans 8:33-34) “Who shall lay any thing to the charge of God’s elect? *It is* God that justifieth. (34) Who *is* he that condemneth? *It is* Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us.”

(1 John 2:1-2) “My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: (2) And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for *the sins of* the whole world.”

- All whom he seeks to save shall be saved (Matthew 1:21).
- All who believe on him have everlasting life (John 3:16).

(John 3:14-16) “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: (15) That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life. (16) For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

SEEN OF ANGELS

Now, let me wrap-up this message by calling your attention to just one thing which Paul declares in this verse of Scripture. Right in the middle of this verse, he tells us that the Lord Jesus was “*seen of angels.*”

All the elect angels, who were kept by Christ in their holy habitation, whom he made to be “*ministering spirits, sent forth to minister to those who shall be the heirs of eternal salvation,*” — **those elect angels saw the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, perform the whole work of redemption as our Mediator.**

I do not know when the angelic hosts were created. But it appears that they were the first creatures of God. And as soon as they were created by him they saw him, loved him and adored him. To this day they attend the gatherings of God’s church to learn the wonders and mysteries of redemption from redeemed sinners (Ephesians 3:10; 1 Peter 1:12).

(Ephesians 3:8-10) “Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ; (9) And to make all *men* see what *is* the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the world hath been hid in God, who created all things by Jesus Christ: (10) To the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly *places* might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God,”

(1 Peter 1:8-12) “Whom having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see *him* not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory: (9) Receiving the end of your faith, *even* the salvation of *your* souls. (10) Of which salvation the prophets have inquired and searched diligently, who prophesied of the grace *that should come* unto you: (11) Searching what, or what manner of time the Spirit of Christ which was in them did signify, when it testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow. (12) Unto whom it was revealed, that not unto themselves, but unto us they did minister the things, which are now reported unto you by them that have preached the gospel unto you with the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven; which things the angels desire to look into.”

But those holy creatures saw the Lord Jesus Christ as he performed the whole work.

1. **The angels of God saw Christ in his pre-incarnate glory, not only as God, but as the Mediator, as the Lamb of God slain from the foundation of the world** (Cf. Isaiah 6:1-7 with Revelation 4:8-11; 5:8-10).
 - They were informed of the covenant of grace.
 - They were informed of the Savior’s intentions for his elect.
 - They were informed of the purpose of their creation. (Hebrews 1:14).
 - Perhaps this was the point of Satan’s rebellion (Revelation 12).
2. **When the blessed Son of God actually entered into the world in human flesh, he was “seen of angels.”**
 - Angels beheld his miraculous conception!

- An angel was the first messenger of the incarnation (Matthew 1:18-21; Luke 1:26-35).
- An angelic host announced the birth of the Savior (Luke 2:8-14).

What a place that stable at Bethlehem was for one brief night. — The presence of God turned a cow stable into a temple of glory! A feeding trough was made a throne of grace in which the King of glory was laid!

3. **While he grew from a baby to a boy, from a boy to a young man, and from a young man to an adult, the angels of God saw him.** — They heard and cherished his every word. They adored his every movement. They anxiously anticipated the day of his revelation.
4. **When the Lord of glory came to be baptized, to fulfill all righteousness, he was “seen of angels”** (Matthew 3:13-17).

Our great Substitute was not ashamed to publicly avow both his allegiance to God and his mediatorial office. In order to symbolically fulfill all righteousness in obedience to his Father, and symbolically as our Substitute, in anticipation of his death and resurrection, our Savior was baptized by John in the river Jordan. And the angels of God watched and listened.

- They watched the solemn ceremony of death and life. — A sinner slain, purged, risen again.
- They saw the Spirit of God descend upon the Savior. — A picture of the result of Christ’s redemptive work (Galatians 3:14).
- They heard the Father’s approving voice.

If the Son of God submitted to this blessed ordinance willingly, so must his disciples. You cannot follow Christ without following him into the watery grave.

5. **When our great Mediator was carried away into the wilderness of temptation, he was “seen of angels”** (Matthew 4:1-11). — In our Savior’s temptation of the devil, he was “*seen of angels*.” They stood by, not to assist him (he needed no help!), but as spectators, watching his conflict, witnessing his conquest. As they had seen Paradise lost by Adam’s weakness, they now watched as Christ, by his great strength, began to regain Paradise. After he had fought the good fight and foiled the tempter, they rushed to minister to him. But they gave him no aid in the conflict.

Our great Savior was tempted in all points like we are, yet without sin. When Satan tempted the Lord Jesus, it was like putting a torch in water. There was nothing in his holy soul for the flame to ignite.

To put it in the words of William Gurnall, Satan's temptations of Christ were like "the movements of a serpent on a rock, where they can make no impressions, nor leave the least dent, or trace behind them." In temptation, the angels saw him.

6. **As our dear Savior conducted his ministry for three and a half years, he was "seen of angels."**
 - They saw his miracles of mercy.
 - They heard his words of grace.
 - They beheld his weeping eyes.
 - They followed him into the secret place of prayer.
 - They watched his devoted labor.

7. **On the mount of transfiguration, the Lord Jesus was "seen of angels"** (Matthew 17:1-9).
 - They listened as Moses and Elijah spoke to him of the death he must accomplish at Jerusalem.
 - They saw his transfiguration!
 - They heard the Father's voice.

8. **When the Son of God went into the Garden of Gethsemane, the heavenly host followed the heavy-hearted Savior of men into the dark Garden, and there he was "seen of angels."**
 - The sleeping disciples.
 - The agonizing prayer.
 - The bloody sweat.
 - The kiss of betrayal.
 - The display of sovereignty and grace— "I am he...Let these go!"
 - The arrest.
 - The mock trial.
 - The scourging.
 - The hellish parade.

9. **When he Lord of glory was crucified, he was “seen of angels.”** — They saw the spitting. They heard the laughter. They beheld the sorrow. But their holy eyes were fixed upon the dying Substitute for sinners.
- They saw the marvelous transaction of grace — Substitution!
 - They heard the Savior’s words. — “*Father, forgive them!*” — “*I thirst!*” — “*My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?*” — “*It is finished*” — “*Into thy hands I commend my Spirit!*”
 - They saw the three hours of darkness, the quaking of the earth, the rending of the veil, the resurrection of the dead, and the binding of Satan!
10. **And when the Son of God had breathed out his Spirit, the angels of God followed his holy Soul up into heaven.** — When he, with his own blood, entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us, he was “*seen of angels.*” — When he sat down on the right hand of the majesty on high, from henceforth expecting, till his enemies be made his footstool, he was “*seen of angels.*”

APPLICATION

But there is one thing the holy angels can never see about Christ. They saw the whole work of redemption accomplished, from beginning to end. But no angel has ever seen, or known, the experience of grace within, personally. They cannot know the glorious experiences of—

- Personal Redemption!
- Personal Forgiveness!
- Personal Salvation!

These things can only be known by sinners like us. They are promised to faith. And they shall be known by you, as soon as you look to him in faith who was “*seen of angels.*”

How astonished the angels of God must be when they, who have looked into the wonders of redemption for ore than 6,000 years, see us, who are redeemed by the blood of Christ, so cold toward him, so unaffected by his death, so disinterested in him and his great work of love! God help us to repent!

“Sons of peace redeem'd by blood,
Raise your songs to Zion's God;

Made from condemnation free,
Grace triumphant sing with me.

Calvary's wonders let us trace,
Justice magnified in grace;
Mark the purple streams, and say,
Thus my sins were wash'd away.

Wrath divine no more we dread,
Vengeance smote our Surety's head;
Legal claims are fully met,
Jesus paid the dreadful debt.

Sin is lost beneath the flood,
Drown'd in the Redeemer's blood,
Zion, oh! how blest art thou,
Justified from all things now.”

John Kent

Amen.