

## The Mystery of Godliness

### [John Calvin](#)

This sermon is from a Wm. B. Eerdmans' volume which was a reprint of the only sizable collection of John Calvin's sermons translated into the English language since the Sixteenth Century and the only volume ever published in America up to that time (1949). The collection was originally published in a limited edition in 1830 by John Forbes of New York.

**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.**

ST. PAUL exhorted Timothy to behave himself in his office; showing him to what honor God had advanced him, in that he had placed him to govern his house. He showed him also that the office itself was honorable; because the church upholdeth the truth of God in this world, and that there is nothing more precious, or more to be sought after, than to know God, and to worship and serve Him, and be certain of His truth, that we might thereby obtain salvation. All this is kept safe for us: and thus, so great a treasure is committed to our care by means of the church; according to the words of St. Paul. This truth is well worthy to be more highly esteemed than it is.

What a hidden thing is this, and how wonderful a matter; that God was manifest in the flesh, and became man! Does it not so far surpass our understanding, that when we are told of it, we are astonished? Yet not withstanding, we have a full and sufficient proof, that Jesus Christ being made man, and subject to death, is likewise the true God, who made the world, and liveth forever. Of this, His heavenly power beareth us witness. Again, we have other proofs: to wit, He was preached unto the Gentiles; who before were banished from the kingdom of God: and that faith had had its course throughout the whole world, which at that time was shut up among the Jews; and likewise Christ Jesus was lifted up on high, and entered into glory, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father.

If men despise these things, their unthankfulness shall be condemned: for the very angels have hereby come to the knowledge of that which before they knew not of. For it pleased God to hide the means of our redemption from them, to the end that His goodness might be so much the more wonderful to all creatures: thus we see St. Paul's

meaning. He calleth the church of God, the keeper of his truth: he likewise showeth that this truth is such a treasure, as ought to be highly esteemed by us. And why so? Let us mark the contents of the gospel; God abased Himself in such a manner, that He took upon Himself our flesh; so that we have become His brethren. Who is the Lord of glory, that He should so far humble Himself as to be joined to us, and take upon Him the form of a servant, even to suffer the curse that was due to us? St. Paul comprehendeth all things whatsoever that Jesus Christ received in His person; to wit, that He was subject to all our infirmities, *sin, only excepted*.

It is true that there is no blemish in Him, but all pureness and perfection. Yet so it is, that He became weak as we are, that He might have compassion and help our feebleness; as it is set forth in the epistle to the Hebrews (4:15). He that had no sin suffered the punishment due to us; and was, as it were, accursed of God the Father, when He offered Himself a sacrifice: that through His means we might be blessed; and that His grace which was hidden from us, might be poured upon us. When we consider these things, have we not occasion to be astonished? Do we consider what a being God is? We can in no wise reach unto His majesty, which containeth all things in itself; which even the angels worship.

What is there in us? If we cast our eyes upon God, and then enter into a comparison, alas! shall we come near this highness which surmounteth the heavens? Nay, rather can we have any acquaintance with it? For there is nothing but rotteness in us; nothing but sin and death. Then let the living God, the well-spring of life, the everlasting glory, and the infinite power, come; and not only approach to us and our miseries, our wretchedness, our frailty, and to this bottomless pit of all iniquity that is in men; let not only the majesty of God come near this, but he joined to it, and made one with it, in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ! What is Jesus Christ? God and man! But how God and man? What difference is there between God and man?

We know that there is nothing at all in our nature but wretchedness and misery; nothing but a bottomless pit of stench and infection; and yet in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ, we see the glory of God who is worshipped by angels, and likewise the weakness of man; and that He is God and man. Is not this a secret and hidden thing, worthy to be set out with words, and likewise enough to ravish our hearts! The very angels could never have thought upon it, as here observed by St. Paul. Seeing it pleased the Holy Ghost to set forth the goodness of God, and show us for how precious a jewel we ought to esteem it, let us beware on our part that we be not unthankful, and have our minds so shut up, that we will not taste of it, if we cannot thoroughly and perfectly understand it.

It is enough for us to have some little knowledge of this subject; each one ought to be content with what light is given him, considering the weakness of our judgment; and looking for the day wherein that which we now see in part, shall be wholly and perfectly revealed to us. Yet notwithstanding, we must employ our minds and studies this way. Why doth St. Paul call this a mystery of faith, that Jesus Christ, who is God everlasting, was manifest in the flesh? It is as much as if he should say, when we are gathered to

God, and made one body with the Lord Jesus Christ, we shall behold the end for which we were made; to wit, that we might know that God is joined and made one with us in the person of His Son.

Thus, we must conclude that no man can be a Christian, unless he know this secret which is spoken of by St. Paul. Should we now examine, and ask both men and women whether they know what these words mean, that God was manifest in the flesh, scarcely one in ten could make so good an answer as would be looked for from a child. And yet we need not marvel at it; for we see what negligence and contempt there is in the greatest part of mankind. We show and teach daily in our sermons, that God took upon Him our nature; but how do men hear them? Who is there that troubleth himself much to read the Scripture? There are very few that attend to these things; every man is occupied with his own business.

If there be one day in the week reserved for religious instruction, when they have spent six days in their own business, they are apt to spend the day which is set apart for worship, in play and pastime; some rove about the fields, others go to the taverns to quaff: and there are undoubtedly at this time as many at the last mentioned place, as are here assembled in the name of God. Therefore, when we see so many shun and flee from this doctrine, can we marvel that there is such a brutishness, that we know not the rudiments of Christianity? We are apt to consider it as a strange language, when men tell us that God was manifest in the flesh.

But this sentence cannot be put out of God's register. We have no faith, if we know not that our Lord Jesus Christ is joined to us, that we may become His members. It seemeth that God would stir us up to think upon this mystery, seeing we are so sleepy and drowsy. We see how the devil stirreth up these old makebates to deny the humanity of Jesus Christ, and His Godhead: and sometimes to confound them both; that we may not perceive two distinct natures in Him: or else to cause us to believe that He is not the man who fulfilled the promises in the law; and consequently descended from the stock of Abraham and David.

Is it indeed the case, that such errors and heresies as were in the church of Christ at the beginning, are set forth in these days? Let us mark well the words that are here used by St. Paul: God was manifest in the flesh. When he calleth Jesus Christ God, he admits this nature which He had before the world was made. It is true, there is but one God, but in this one essence we must comprehend the Father, and a wisdom which cannot be severed from Him, and an everlasting virtue, which always was, and shall forever be in Him.

Thus, Jesus Christ was true God! as He was the wisdom of God before the world was made, and before everlastingness. It is said, He was made manifest in the flesh. By the word *flesh*, St. Paul gives us to understand that He was true man, and took upon Him our nature. By the word *manifest*, He showeth that in Him there were two natures. But we must not think that there is one Jesus Christ which is God, and another Jesus Christ which is man! but we must know Him only as God and man. Let us so distinguish the

two natures which are in Him, that we may know that the Son of God is our brother. God suffereth the old heresies, which in times past troubled the church, to make a stir again in our days, to stir us up to diligence. The devil goeth about to destroy this article of our belief, knowing it to be the main prop and stay of our salvation.

If we have not this knowledge of which St. Paul speaketh, what will become of us? We are all in the bottomless pit of death. There is nothing but death and condemnation in us, until we know that God came down to seek and save us. Until we are thus learned, we are weak and miserable. Therefore, the devil went about doing all in his power to abolish this knowledge, to mar it, and mix it with lies, that he might utterly bring it to nought. When we see such a majesty in God, how dare we presume to come nigh Him, seeing we are full of misery! We must have recourse to this *link* of God's majesty, and the state of man's nature together.

Do what we can, we shall never have any hope, or be able to lay hold of the bounty and goodness of God, to return to Him, and call upon Him, until we know the majesty of God that is in Jesus Christ; and likewise the weakness of man's nature, which He hath received of us. We are utterly cast off from the kingdom of heaven, the gate is shut against us, so that we cannot enter therein. The devil hath bestowed all his art to pervert this doctrine; seeing that our salvation is grounded thereon. We should therefore be so much the more confirmed and strengthened in it; that we may never be shaken, but stand steadfast in the faith, which is contained in the gospel.

First of all we have this to note, that we shall never know Jesus Christ to be our Savior, until we know that He was God from everlasting. That which was written of Him by Jeremiah the prophet, must needs be fulfilled: "Let him that glorieth, glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me, that I am the Lord" (Jer. 9:24). St. Paul showeth that this must be applied to the person of our Lord Jesus Christ: and thereupon he protesteth that he made no account of any doctrine or knowledge, only to know Jesus Christ.

Again, how is it possible for us to have our life in Him, unless He be our God, and we be maintained and preserved by His virtue? How can we put our trust in Him? For it is written. "Cursed be the man that trusteth in man, and maketh flesh his arm" (Jer. 17:5). Again, how can we be preserved from death except by God's infinite power? Even if Scripture bore no witness to the Deity of Jesus Christ, it is impossible for us to know Him as our Savior, unless we admit that He possesses the whole majesty of God; unless we acknowledge Him to be the true God; because He is the wisdom of the Father whereby the world was made, preserved, and kept in being. Therefore let us be thoroughly resolved in this point, whenever we speak of Jesus Christ, that we lift our thoughts on high, and worship this majesty which He had from everlasting, and this infinite essence which He enjoyed before He clothed himself in humanity.

Christ was made manifest in the flesh: that is to say, became man; like unto us in all things, sin only excepted (Heb. 4:15). Where he saith, sin only excepted, he meaneth that our Lord Jesus was without fault or blemish. Yet notwithstanding. He refused not to

bear our sins: He took this burden upon Himself, that we through His grace might be disburdened. We cannot know Jesus Christ to be a mediator between God and man, unless we behold Him as man. When St. Paul would embolden us to call upon God in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, he expressly calleth Him man.

St. Paul saith, "There is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (I Tim. 2:5). Under this consideration, we may in His name, and by His means come familiarly to God, knowing that we are His brethren, and He the Son of God. Seeing there is nothing but sin in mankind, we must also find righteousness and life in our flesh. Therefore if Christ has not truly become our brother, if He has not been made man like unto us, in what condition are we? Let us now consider His life and passion.

It is said (speaking of Christ), "But now once in the end of the world hath he appeared, to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself" (Heb. 9:26). And why so? St. Paul showeth us the reason in Romans 5:18. "As by the offence of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life." If we know not this, that the sin which was committed in our nature, was repaired in the self-same nature, in what situation are we? Upon what foundation can we stay ourselves? Therefore, the death of our Lord Jesus Christ could not profit us one whit, unless He had been made man, like unto us.

Again, if Jesus Christ were only God, could we have any certainty or pledge in His resurrection, that we should one day rise again? It is true that the Son of God rose again; when we hear it said, that the Son of God took upon Him a body like unto ours, came of the stock of David, that He is risen again (seeing our nature is of itself corruptible), and is lifted up on high unto glory, in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ, "we are made to sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 2:6) Therefore, those that went about to bring to nought man's nature, in the person of the Son of God, are to be the more detested. For the devil raised up in old times some individuals who declared that Jesus Christ appeared in the shape of man, but had not man's true nature: thereby endeavoring to abolish God's mercy towards us, and utterly destroy our faith.

Others have imagined that He brought a body with Him from heaven; as though He partook not of our nature. It has been declared, that Jesus Christ had a body from everlasting; composed of four elements: that the Godhead was at that time in a visible shape, and that whenever the angels appeared, it was His body. What madness it is to make such an alchemy, to frame a body for the Son of God! What shall we do with that passage which saith, "He took not on him the nature of angels, but he took on him the seed of Abraham. Wherefore in all things it behooved him to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people" (Heb. 2:16,17).

It is said. He took upon Him our flesh, and became our brother. Yea, and that He was made like unto us, that He might have pity upon us, and help our infirmities. He was

made the seed of David, that He might be known as the Redeemer that was promised, whom the fathers looked for from all ages. Let us remember that it is written, the Son of God appeared in the flesh; that is. He became very man, and made us one with Himself; so that we may now call God our Father. And why so? Because we are of the body of His only Son. But how are we of His body? Because He was pleased to join Himself to us, that we might be partakers of His substance.

Hereby we see that it is not a vain speculation, when men tell us that Jesus Christ put on our flesh: for hither we must come, if we will have a true knowledge of faith. It is impossible for us to trust in Him aright, unless we understand His manhood: we must also know His majesty, before we can trust in Him for salvation. We must know moreover that Jesus Christ is God and *man*, and likewise that He is but one person.

Here again the devil tries to stir up the coals of strife, by perverting or disguising the doctrine which St. Paul teaches us. For there have been heretics who have endeavored to maintain that the majesty and Godhead of Jesus Christ, His heavenly essence, was forthwith changed into flesh and manhood. Thus did some say, with many other cursed blasphemies, that Jesus Christ was made man. What will follow hereupon? God must forego His nature, and His spiritual essence must be turned into flesh. They go on further and say Jesus Christ is no more man, but His flesh has become God.

These are marvelous alchemists, to make so many new natures of Jesus Christ. Thus the devil raised up such dreamers in old times to trouble the faith of the church; who are now renewed in our time. Therefore, let us mark well what St. Paul teaches us in this place; for he giveth us good armor, that we may defend ourselves against such errors. If we would behold Jesus Christ in His true character, let us view in Him this heavenly glory, which He had from everlasting: and then let us come to His manhood, which has been described heretofore; that we may distinguish His two natures. This is necessary to nourish our faith.

If we seek life in Jesus Christ, we must understand that He hath the whole Godhead in Him; for it is written, "For with thee is the foundation of life: in thy light shall we see light" (Psa. 36:9). If we would be maintained against the devil, and withstand the temptations of our enemies, we must know that Jesus Christ is God. To be short, if we would put our whole trust and confidence in Him, we must know that He possesses all power; which He could not have, unless He were God. Who is He that hath all power? It is He that became feeble and weak; the Son of the virgin Mary; He that was subject to death; He that bore our sins: He it is, that is the wellspring of life.

We have two eyes in our head, each performing its office: but when we look steadfastly upon a thing, our sight, which is separate of itself, is joined together, and becometh one; and is wholly occupied in beholding that which is set before us: even so are there two diverse natures in Jesus Christ. Is there anything in the world more different than the body and soul of man? His soul is an invisible spirit that cannot be seen or touched; which hath none of these fleshly passions. The body is a corruptible lump, subject to rottenness; a visible thing which can be touched: the body has its properties, which are

entirely different from that of the soul. And thus we ask, what is man? A creature, formed of *body* and *soul*.

If God used such a workmanship in us, when He made us of two diverse natures, why should we think it strange, that He used a far greater miracle in Jesus Christ? St. Paul uses these words, *was manifest*, that we may distinguish His Godhead from His manhood; that we may receive Him, as God manifest in the flesh; that is to say. Him, who is truly God, and yet hath made Himself one with us: therefore we are the children of God; He being our justification, we are delivered from the burden of our sins. Seeing He hath cleansed us from all our misery, we have perfect riches in Him; in short, seeing He submitted Himself to death, we are now sure of life.

St. Paul addeth, "He was justified in the spirit." The word *justified* is oftentimes used in Scripture, for *approved*. When it is said. He was justified, it is not that He became just, it is not that He was acquitted by men, as though they were His judges, and He bound to give them an account: no, no; there is no such thing; but it is when the glory is given Him which He deserveth, and we confess Him to be what indeed He really is. It is said, the gospel is justified when men receive it obediently, and through faith submit themselves to the doctrine that God teacheth: so in this place, it is said, Jesus Christ was justified in spirit.

We must not content ourselves by looking at the bodily presence of Jesus Christ, which was visible, but we must look higher. St. John says God was made flesh; or the Word of God, which is the same. The Word of God, which was God before the creation of the world, was made flesh; that is, was united to our nature; so that the Son of the virgin Mary, is God; yea, the everlasting God! His infinite power was there manifested; which is a sure witness that He is the true God! St. Paul saith, Jesus Christ our Lord was made of the seed of David; he likewise adds, He was declared to be the Son of God (Rom. 1).

It is not enough for us to behold Him with our natural eyes; for in this case, we should rise no higher than man: but when we see, that by miracles and mighty works, He showeth Himself to be the Son of God, it is a seal and proof, that in abasing Himself, He did not leave off His heavenly majesty! Therefore, we may come to Him as our brother: and at the same time worship Him as the everlasting God; by whom we were made, and by whom we are preserved.

Were it not for this, we could have no church; were it not for this, we could have no religion; were it not for this, we could have no salvation. It would be better for us to be brute beasts, without reason and understanding, than to be destitute of this knowledge: to wit, that Jesus came and joined His Godhead with our nature; which was so wretched and miserable. St. Paul declares this to be a mystery; that we may not come to it proudly and arrogantly, as many do who wish to be thought wise; this has caused many heresies to spring up. And indeed, pride hath always been the mother of heresies.

When we hear this word, *mystery*, let us remember two things; first, that we learn to keep under our senses, and flatter not ourselves that we have sufficient knowledge and ability to comprehend so vast a matter. In the second place, let us learn to climb up beyond ourselves, and reverence that majesty which passeth our understanding. We must not be sluggish nor drowsy; but think upon this doctrine, and endeavor to become instruction therein. When we have acquired some little knowledge thereof, we should strive to profit thereby, all the days of our life.

When we become possessed of this knowledge, that the Son of God is joined to us, we should cast our eyes upon that which is so highly set forth in Him; that is, the virtue and power of the Holy Ghost. So then, Jesus Christ did not only appear as man, but showed indeed that He was Almighty God as all the fulness of the Godhead dwelt in Him. If we once know this, we may well perceive that it is not without cause that St. Paul saith, all the treasures of wisdom are hidden in our Lord Jesus Christ.

When we have once laid hold on the promises of this Mediator, we shall know the height and depth, the length and breadth, yea, and whatsoever is necessary for our salvation: so that we may stay our faith upon Him, as upon the only true God; and likewise behold Him as our brother; who hath not only come near to us, but hath united and joined Himself to us in such a manner, that He hath become the same substance. If we have come to this, let us know that we have arrived to the perfection of wisdom, which is spoken of by St. Paul in another place; that we may fully rejoice in the goodness of God; for it hath pleased Him to lighten us with the brightness of His gospel, and to draw us into His heavenly kingdom.

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