

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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Proclamation of the Faith (1 Timothy 3:15-16): Justified in the Spirit and seen of angels

"It's not often you're right and you're wrong again!"

"I didn't realise that when I married Mr. Right, his first name was always!"

"Never question your wife's judgment - just look who she married!"

Just some of the banter that goes to show that things don't always run perfectly smoothly within a marriage. Wouldn't it be wonderful if one could live a life that was totally perfect, that needed no apologies? But what we can only wistfully long for, One Man has fully done.

This morning we continue our look at this first century worship hymn found in 1 Timothy 3:16. Just to remind ourselves, let us quote the whole verse: "*And without controversy, 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.*"

When originally written in Greek, the rhythm of the verse was far more obvious leading many to suggest that the early church may well have used this as a song. If so, it is of the highest order and should make us question the quality of the hymns that we sing week in and week out. This morning, we shall look at the statements "*Justified in the Spirit*" and "*Seen by angels.*" In thinking of these two statements we will hopefully be drawn to the loveliness of the person of the Lord Jesus Christ and desire to worship Him. It ought also to have a profound influence upon the way that we live.

Justified in the Spirit

The thought behind being justified is closely associated with the word for righteousness. God has declared Jesus to be righteous. Now this in itself is a remarkable fact. God has the highest standards of any father. We may look back on our earthly fathers and think that their standards for what they would accept from us were pretty high. However, none can compare with God the Father who will accept nothing less than absolute perfection. Imagine being the son of one who could accept only complete obedience and devotion. We would find it utterly exhausting and ultimately frustrating and demoralising as we were bound to fail. Not so the Lord Jesus! He fully met every expectation of His Father.

In Ezekiel 22:30 we read, "*So I sought for a man among them who would make a wall, and stand in the gap before Me on behalf of the land, that I should not destroy it; but I found no one.*" This was definitely true of Ezekiel's day, but I think more generally it would be true of the whole of human history. God had been looking for a man from Adam onwards, but His sad lament was that He had found no one. Not Abraham the father of the faithful. Not Moses the greatest servant in God's house. Not David, a man after God's own heart. It was not until the Lord Jesus was manifest in the flesh that God finally found His Man. If we are to link this statement with the former statement and run them in parallel, then we must understand that "*in the Spirit*" refers to Jesus' own human spirit. God was manifest and the realm in which this manifestation took place was "in the flesh". He was justified, and the realm in which this justification took place was "in the spirit". Within the spiritual life of the Lord Jesus there was nothing but absolute pleasure for God. No wonder He would tear open the heavens and declare "*You are My beloved Son; in You I am well pleased*", Luke 3:22. But that declaration of Christ's righteousness did not only come at the beginning of His life. The resurrection is also a clear declaration that He was justified. So in Romans 1:3-4, we read: "*...concerning His Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh, and declared to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead.*" Jesus' resurrection could never have happened if there had been anything less than total acceptance by God of His sinless perfection and absolute obedience. So in these first two statements we find that not only was God fully revealed to us by what Jesus did in the flesh - His actions and His words, but also that which was of His spirit, was fully pleasing to God.

I think that John's Gospel, more than anywhere else, gives us confirmation that Jesus' spirit was wholly attuned to honouring His Father.

“For He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God does not give the Spirit by measure. The Father loves the Son, and has given all things into His hands”, John 3:34-35. John the Baptist instinctively knew that he had been in the presence of the One who in full measure would represent the Father here upon earth. That task was in safe hands. There was no deficiency in His spirit. We may be placid but given to bouts of melancholy. Or we may be brave but rash. Not so the Lord Jesus - his inner character and moral makeup were utterly unique and perfect.

“Jesus said to them, ‘My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work’”, John 4:34 No wonder God had found His Man! The whole object of Jesus’ life was to complete the work that His Father had given Him to do - what incredible, selfless obedience!

“But Jesus answered them, ‘My Father has been working until now, and I have been working ... 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 ... I do not seek My own will but the will of the Father who sent Me’” (John 5:17, 19, 30). In every aspect of His life Jesus was ready to put aside any thought of self pleasing in order that He might always please His Father.

Time does not allow us to continue our journey through John, but we have by no means covered all the verses that indicate that the spirit of Jesus was wholly attuned to the will of His Father and brought nothing but pleasure to His heart. We should not lightly pass over the challenge of all this. We who are adopted as sons into the heavenly family should model our lives upon His Son. How many hours each day do I spend in self will and self pleasing? Morning and evening, day by day I need to bring my spirit into subjection to His word and the leading of the Holy Spirit.

It is possible to understand the phrase *“in the Spirit”* as referring to the medium by which God chose to declare as righteous His Son. In this case the Holy Spirit would be in view as the One who justified the Lord Jesus. The supreme example of this being so is found by returning to the baptism of the Lord Jesus.

“And the Holy Spirit descended in bodily form like a dove upon Him” Luke 3:22. What a beautiful picture of peaceful rest! There was nothing in the moral makeup of the Lord Jesus that would cause anything to disturb the Holy Spirit as He came upon Him. Have you ever been in a situation that has made you feel really uncomfortable and you couldn’t wait to get out? In a sense, this must be how the Holy Spirit feels with you and me. Our sinfulness and lack of devotion to Christ grieve Him and make Him feel uncomfortable. David would have to pray *“Take not Thy Spirit from me”* (Psalm 51:11) as he felt his own failure. Now we will never lose the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, but sometimes our behaviour must make for an uncomfortable home for Him. What a beautiful contrast, then, we see in the person of the Lord Jesus. There was nothing in His life that would disturb that settled peace, that would compromise the Holy Spirit as He made His settled home in the life of the Lord Jesus.

Again, not only was the Holy Spirit seen at the beginning of the public ministry of the Lord Jesus, we read of Him involved in the resurrection also. So in Romans 8:11 we read: *“But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you.”* How incredible to think that the same Spirit who justified the Lord Jesus by raising Him from the dead now dwells in us bringing us into His life that we may live for Him. The Holy Spirit could not remain inactive within the corpse of the only begotten Son of God. At so great an injustice that the only One who was perfect lay dead, the Spirit must indeed speak up and act. And so in an act of life-giving power, the Holy Spirit brought up Jesus from the dead, into the power of an endless new life.

I do not know whether, as Paul penned the word originally, he had a particular view in mind. I am quite happy to meditate on both of them and find a source of wonder and amazement at the perfection of the Lord Jesus in all that He did. There is such depth to the Bible, and quite often more than one possible meaning may be understood. Where both are well supported by other verses then I am quite happy to enjoy both.

Seen by angels

But now we must move on to our second statement, *“Seen by angels.”*

If we are to understand the wonder of this statement then I think we need to look at the context of this subject.

If we go back to Solomon’s day when he consecrated the temple, we read that *“Then Solomon said: ‘The LORD said He would dwell in the dark cloud.’”* 2 Chronicles 6:1.

Isaiah had a vision of God that we read about in Isaiah 6:1-3: *“In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the LORD sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple. Above it stood seraphim; each one had six wings; with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one cried to another, and said: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory!’”*

This idea of the lack of ability to see God is also perhaps suggested by the cherubim covering the mercy seat on the Ark of the Testimony in Exodus 25:10-22. The thought continues in 1 Timothy 6:16: "...*who alone has immortality, dwelling in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see, to whom be honour and everlasting power. Amen.*" Perhaps, though the "mood music" has changed from "*thick darkness*" (see Exodus 20:21) to "*unapproachable light*" (1 Timothy 6:16). The sense that these verses give us is surely that God is so holy, so utterly pure that He cannot be just looked upon. That is not to say that He is aloof or uninterested as Matthew 18:10 states: "*Take heed that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that in heaven their angels always see the face of My Father who is in heaven.*"

I hope then that we can see that this statement is quite staggering - the only begotten Son, God incarnate, was "*seen by angels.*" We will trace some of the thoughts that may have been in Paul's mind as he wrote this majestic statement.

Naturally, we must start at the incarnation! "*Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. Then the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger.' And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!'" Luke 2:8-14.*

One can only imagine what the angels were thinking when they looked down into the cradle in Bethlehem. This God, who had dwelt in thick darkness had appeared - but not as they had imagined, perhaps. Here was no conquering King, or Overlord coming to execute judgement. As these angels looked into the face of God they saw the eyes of a baby looking back at them! Did they then comprehend what their Master was about? Or did they look on and praise utterly perplexed, not understanding the majestic plan of salvation that was unfolding before their eyes. Glory indeed to God in the highest!

Next we consider the angels as they saw Jesus following His temptation: "*Then the devil left Him, and behold, angels came and ministered to Him*", Matthew 4:11. Oh, the righteous pride that must have filled the minds of the angels as they saw the One, whom they had faithfully served throughout eternity, remain unbowed by the attacks of the devil! Oh, the shame that in this world that He had made with His own hands He should be treated so! Perhaps as they had followed the earthly path of the child Jesus, watching as He grew to perfect manhood, they could adore at the perfection they saw before them.

In all His pathway here upon earth there was total dependence and obedience to God. What a life to look upon and learn from! How many of us have seen the character of a human father acted out in the life of their child? The angels could not have failed to see the character of God fully recreated in the life of His one and only Son.

There were, of course, another group of angels. The devil, and those fallen angels who followed him in that awful rebellion, would have seen in Christ their doom. For thousands of years, since the fall of Adam, they might have thought that they had made the right choice. Mankind was utterly ruined and the plans of God thwarted. Surely there would be some kind of reprieve for them. They knew the love of God could never condemn the entirety of mankind to eternal judgement. They had experienced that love, and in that they saw some chance. But now they saw Him and knew the utter folly of those hopes and the futility of their rebellion.

"*Therefore He says: 'When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive, and gave gifts to men.'* (Now this, '*He ascended*' - what does it mean but that He also first descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is also the One who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things)", Ephesians 4:8-10.

These admittedly difficult verses at least in part refer to the work of the Lord after His death, and before His resurrection. Those fallen angels would see the "*strong man*" bound and his goods taken from him (Luke 11:21-22). The devil was utterly impotent to stop what was happening and these "*principalities and powers, the rulers of the darkness of this age, the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places*" (Ephesians 6:12) would watch as Jesus Christ, in death and then in resurrection would "*having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it*" (Colossians 2:15). This marvellous salvation was not accomplished in secret but in full view of the enemy - great indeed is the mystery of godliness! (1 Timothy 3:16)

Lastly, I would suggest that the phrase in part refers to the glorious "homecoming" of the risen Lord at the Ascension. My son had been away from home for 16 months. At last he was coming home. I had pictured this moment for so long. What a joyful and glorious time it would be. And yet the reality was a little disappointing. Of course I was delighted to see him, but not even the most fervent Mancunian can describe Manchester Airport as glorious, and the

traffic was building up and the baby seat wouldn't attach properly! All in all it was a bit underwhelming. Not so the return of the Lord Jesus to the glory of heaven and the right hand of the majesty on high!

Here was the Son returning gloriously into Glory! One can imagine the angels desperate to catch a glimpse of Him. There they would see the marks in His hands and feet. What an accomplishment! What a joyful return! Did those same angels who had proclaimed "*Glory to God in the highest*" at His birth (see Luke 2:14) also join in the heavenly anthems that will resound throughout all eternity?

"Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty who was and is and is to come!" (Revelation 4:8).

"Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels around the throne, the living creatures, and the elders; and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice: 'Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom, and strength and honour and glory and blessing!' And every creature which is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, I heard saying: 'Blessing and honour and glory and power be to Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, forever and ever'", (Revelation 5:11-13).

As the angels saw Him they will have begun a song that will last for all eternity for He indeed is worthy, worthy, worthy!

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