

Witness

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[0 : 00] Good morning to everybody, especially if you're visiting. It's great to be here together. We were continuing a series in the book of Revelation.

And I was thinking about this this week, and I was thinking about a time a few years back when I was sitting outside at a coffee shop, and I saw this group of high schoolers, and they were talking to people.

They were going up to people all around the area where I was sitting, and they were talking to people. And my natural reaction in such a moment is to hunker down and to try to become invisible. But I see this one young girl working her way down the row of chairs that I'm sitting in, and she gets closer and closer and closer.

And then finally, she says, sir, excuse me. And I said, yes, what is it? And I had no idea what they're doing. And before I could say anything else, she sort of nervously blurts out, do you know Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior?

And I said, I do. And I said, what are you all doing out here? And she said, well, I'm out here with my youth group, and we're having a save-a-thon. And we're having a competition.

[1 : 10] You know, I said, what's a save-a-thon? And she said, well, it's a competition to see who can witness to the most people. And I said, okay, well, this can count.

So you just witnessed to me. I hope you win. And, you know, and I have to say, I admire the courage of this young woman.

There I am hunkering down, hoping nobody's going to talk to me. I'm the pastor of a church. And it's probably kind of part of the job description that I should probably want to talk to people. And on the other hand, she's coming up to people she doesn't even know and asking them about their religious life.

And I just think that's admirable. But I also did find myself wondering, is this what Jesus meant when he said that we are to be witnesses? Right?

In Acts 1, verse 8, Jesus commands his apostles. He says, you will be my witnesses. I'm going to empower you with the Spirit, and then you will be my witnesses. And he says, you know, I don't just want you to talk to a few people at a coffee shop.

[2 : 12] He says, you're going to be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth. And this command is given to all Christians. It's given to every Christian.

And so if you're here and you're not a Christian, you wonder why are Christians constantly trying to share their faith? It's because this is part of what it means to be a Christian. To be a Christian is to be a witness.

But what does it mean to be a witness? That's our question this morning. What does it mean to be a witness with our neighbors at work? A lot of you have jobs where you cannot talk about your faith. You cannot in any way meaningfully make it known that you have a faith.

And so what does it mean to be a witness in a job like that? What does it mean to be a witness with our own families in our neighborhoods? To find the answer, we're going to be looking together at Revelation chapters 10 and 11.

As you saw, Annika beautifully read those passages. There's a ton here. We will not be able to touch on all of it. Our focus is going to be, what does it mean to be a witness? And you know, every person is different.

[3 : 15] You all have different gifts and abilities and jobs and resources. So every witness in many ways is going to look different. But there are a few common characteristics shared by all witnesses.

We're going to see three of them. Truth, vulnerability, and hope. All witnesses embody truth, vulnerability, and hope.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word. And our temptation would be to put it on a table, to cut it open, to dissect it, to parse it out.

Instead, Lord, we pray that your word would put us on the table. That it would do surgery on us. That it would separate truth from falsehood. That it would separate despair from hope.

That it would separate death from life. That you would use your word to do your work in us, Lord. For your glory. For our goodness. In your son's name.

[4 : 12] Amen. So we're looking at what does it mean to be a witness. The first thing we see in Revelation 10 and 11 is that witnesses don't just proclaim truth. They actually embody truth.

We've been looking at this book for some time. The first half of Revelation, just to orient you a little bit. The first 11 chapters, which is half of the book of Revelation. All of these crazy visions.

All of the things that we've been looking at. This is like one giant prophetic commissioning service. For 11 chapters, God is commissioning the apostle John to be his witness.

And we know that because there's a lot of similarities with the book of Ezekiel and the first five chapters of Ezekiel. That's Ezekiel's commissioning service. And so this is John's commissioning service.

And so John is being commissioned to be a witness. And in Revelation chapter 10, John hears this thundering voice of God speaking. And he sees this mighty angel descending.

[5 : 12] And so John, when he hears this thundering voice of God, his first instinct is to start writing it down. He said, God is speaking to me. So he grabs a piece of paper and starts trying to write it down. But interestingly, God stops him.

God says, no, no, no. Seal it up. Don't write it down. And then God says, essentially, instead, go and take the book that the angel is holding, the scroll.

Instead of writing down what I'm saying, I want you to take that scroll, that book, and I want you to eat it. Now, again, this is a kind of a bizarre image. It seems odd to us.

But he says, I want you to eat that book. And then he says in verse 9, the angel says, take and eat it. It will make your stomach bitter, but in your mouth it will be sweet as honey. And this is actually showing us something very important about what it means to be a witness.

God is saying essentially this. I don't want you to just repeat my words like a parrot. I don't want you to just reflect back everything you hear, mirror back everything you hear.

[6 : 17] I want you to consume my word. I want it to go into you. I want it to be absorbed into your bone and your marrow and your DNA. I want it to become a part of you.

And I want it to do its work in you. And on the one hand, it will be sweet. And on the other hand, it will be bitter. On the one hand, it will comfort you and encourage you and give you a sense of peace.

On the other hand, it will challenge you and disturb you and convict you of sin. It will expose your need for my grace. So it will be sweet and it will be bitter.

Swifter. But the point is he wants his word to do his work in John before John goes out as a witness. And, you know, it reminds me of this sign at Union Market. If you've ever been to Union Market, there's a sign and it talks about how our skin and our bones and our organs, over time, the cells all replace themselves.

[7 : 17] And it says that, therefore, the food that we eat literally becomes us because our bodies are constantly replacing themselves using the food that we eat. And that's kind of like what God is saying to John.

I want my word to become you. That's what it means to be a witness, that God's word has become you. It's a part of every cell of your body. So a true witness is someone who has consumed God's word and it has become them.

And you say, well, how do you do that? Well, it reminds me of the Chicago Shakespeare improv group that sometimes I like to talk about. It's a great illustration of this. There's a group in Chicago and they're a troupe of improv actors and comedians.

And they, every night, do multiple performances in a fully Shakespearean, Elizabethan style. With verse, iambic pentameter, you know, the whole nine yards.

And they start the show by polling the audience and they say, give us a title. And people just shout out titles and from a title, they pick a title. From that title, they improvise an entire Shakespearean play, a 90-minute performance.

[8 : 24] And you ask, how in the world, you know, when you watch it happen, it is mind-blowing. You think they can't possibly be making this up and yet they do. The way they're able to do that is that they have consumed Shakespeare.

They have studied and read and memorized everything they can get their hands on. And they've studied Shakespeare so much that they can channel Shakespeare. And they can improvise on the spot what Shakespeare would say or do with any of his characters in any given situation.

And you know, that's relevant to us because life isn't scripted. All of life is improv. And so God calls his witnesses to consume God's word to the point that they develop not a Shakespearean instinct, but a gospel instinct.

So that they can then live lives of what you might call gospel improvisation. Because most of the situations that we face in life, the Bible does not directly address.

But if you develop a gospel instinct, you can improvise in the moment in ways that reflect the gospel, like this acting troupe reflects Shakespeare.

[9 : 34] You hear it or you see it and you think, that reminds me. That might as well have been taken right out of scripture. Right? So the reason this matters for the question this morning, what does it mean to be a witness, is this.

The most convincing argument for the truth of the gospel will never come in the form of an abstract philosophical argument or apologetics. There's a tremendous value.

I'm a great lover of philosophy, great lover of apologetics, tremendous value there. But the most convincing argument is never going to come that way. The most convincing argument is going to come in the form of a life that doesn't make sense.

It's going to come in the form of a life that demands explanation. It's going to come in the form of a life that doesn't fit. When people look at it, they say, how could you live that way given all of this?

Those are the most convincing arguments. It's a life that puts the gospel on display. Right? So when you see somebody who is quick to forgive and slow to take offense.

[10 : 39] Or when you see somebody that doesn't fight to take all the credit at work, but rather they freely give credit away. And they lift up their co-workers, even if they're the ones who should be taking credit.

Or if you see somebody who is regularly taking Sabbath rest, even though all of their co-workers work seven days a week. And you know it probably costs them in terms of promotion.

Or when you see somebody who actually is willing to receive criticism with openness and humility rather than defensiveness and hostility. People who live lives like that provoke questions that only the gospel can answer.

And that's what it means to be a witness. It means not just to proclaim truth. But to live a life that provokes questions that only the gospel can answer. Because I think the gospel always comes best as the answer to a question.

Explain that. That doesn't make sense in my world view. So part of what it means to be a witness is to embody truth. But that's not all. When you embody truth, you will get a variety of reactions.

[11 : 50] And not all of them will be positive. So the second thing we need to look at is the call to vulnerability. In chapter 11, John sees two witnesses. Verse 4 says, These are the two olive trees, the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth.

And it says that even though these witnesses are going to testify about the truth of Jesus, even though they're going to have tremendous power in spiritual authority, they're going to be breathing fire.

We've seen that already in Revelation. It says that eventually these witnesses are going to be trampled and killed by those who dwell on the earth, which is a kind of biblical phrase for the unbelieving world.

People who've rejected God, people who live in the world as though there is no God. God, those who dwell on the earth will eventually trample and kill these witnesses. And these unbelieving people who kill these witnesses are going to celebrate in the streets.

The witnesses are dead. They're not even going to want to bury them. They're not even going to give them the honor of a burial. They're actually going to be exchanging gifts and celebrating in the streets. Why? Because the witnesses had been tormenting with their words, all those who reject God.

[13:00] They couldn't stand to hear what the witnesses were saying, and so they put them to death. And you know, the two witnesses symbolize Jews and Gentiles. Jews and Gentiles.

And the message is clear. Everyone who witnesses to the truth of Jesus, whether you're a Jew or a Gentile, it doesn't matter. Everyone who witnesses to the truth of Jesus is going to suffer.

It's not a possibility. It's an inevitability. And the reason is because the message of the gospel, the truth that we are called to embody, is inherently offensive. It torments people who really hear it.

It says essentially, God created you as a human being to bear his image and to do his work in the world. That's what it means to be a human being. But it says that because of our own idolatry, because of our worship of self, because of sin, we have been corrupted and distorted.

That we are dehumanized. And it says that our only hope of ever becoming fully human is to abandon our entire way of life and to throw ourselves at Jesus' feet and to beg for his mercy.

[14:12] And that's a very offensive thing to tell people. People are horrified, especially this day and age, at that idea. The whole thing is challenging and offensive.

And so people are not only going to hate that message, they're going to hate the messengers. And so God is showing us this. You're going to have great, tremendous power and authority, Jews and Gentiles alike.

You're going to be powerful witnesses. But you're going to suffer and ultimately you're going to die. And he says this not so that he can then tell us the escape plan. Now that you know, here's the exit to take.

It's so that we will embrace it. He's preparing us. Don't run from it. Don't try to find another way.

Suffering is a part of what it means to be a witness.

Vulnerability is part of what it means to be a witness. So witnesses don't just proclaim truth. They suffer for it. And you know, I've been reflecting on this a lot this past couple of weeks.

[15:09] And I've been thinking how much I think I need to hear this. Because you know, my honest, my honest tendency is to want truth without vulnerability.

I'm happy to proclaim the gospel as long as I'm not risking anything, as long as it doesn't cost me anything, as long as it doesn't create any kind of discomfort. I'm happy to talk about the gospel.

Right? But if it actually costs me something, if I'm actually risking something, that's a whole different animal. Truth with vulnerability, that's terrifying. Right? I mean, why do you think so many Christians are willing to go halfway around the world to some village full of people they've never met and will never see again, and they preach the gospel freely?

And yet they won't even admit that they're Christians to their neighbors. Why the disconnect? Well, it's because we want truth without vulnerability. If somebody halfway around the world rejects me, I'm never going to see him again.

But the person that I live next to, whose respect and admiration I actually want, you know, that's going to cost me something. If I sit across the table from that person and I lay out what I believe, and I have the audacity to say, and I think that Jesus, the good news of the gospel, is for you as well, and that person laughs in my face or blacklists me socially, that's going to cost me a tremendous amount.

[16:29] But that's truth with vulnerability. God calls his witnesses to be vulnerable as we proclaim and embody truth. And you know, you see this throughout the Bible. When God called his people in Babylonian exile to love and to seek the flourishing of Babylon, he called them to do that, and you see this in Jeremiah 29, by going into the city, planting gardens, building houses, letting their kids get married, and then he says, in their welfare, you will find your welfare.

In other words, I want you to yoke yourself to them. I want you to become dependent on them. If they flourish, you flourish. If they starve, you starve. I want you to be deeply invested in the life of the city and dependent on the life of the city.

I'm going to provide for you through these pagan people. Now that's an amazing call to vulnerability. He says, I want you to go and embody truth, but I want you to do it in a way where you are utterly dependent on the people you're trying to reach.

You see the same thing show up in the New Testament. Jesus sends out his disciples. He says, I want you to go. I want you to proclaim the gospel. Tell people what you've seen and heard from me. Tell them about the kingdom. Don't take any provisions.

Whatever clothes you're wearing, good enough. You're ready to go right now, going out the door. God bless you. Right? And they go. And the reason is because he says, I want you to go into the

homes of the people that you're trying to reach.

[17 : 49] I want you to be dependent on their hospitality, dependent on their kindness, and also open to their rejection. If they invite you in, see them as a person of peace.

Proclaim the gospel. Tell them about me. If they reject you, shake the dust off your sandals and move on. But you are to move forward proclaiming the truth, but vulnerable. At the mercy of their rejection.

At the mercy of their hospitality. Trusting them to be the people to meet your needs. And I think this is something that we often overlook. But it's extremely important. Because when we think about being a witness in this day and age, whenever you talk about any kind of truth claim, most people have bought in to Michel Foucault, who said that all truth claims are essentially power plays.

And if I'm making a claim, a religious claim about you, or religious claim, if I'm preaching the gospel, that's just a power play. Now we can quibble about how true or untrue that is, right? But the point we need to see is that Jesus is actually calling us to lay down the power.

This is a truth claim without the power play. This is a truth claim from a position of weakness. It's a truth claim from a position of dependence and vulnerability. God calls his witnesses to lay down their power.

[19 : 07] He calls us to love people who hate and mock us. He calls us to pray for people who try to trample us. He calls us to serve people who reject us. That's truth with vulnerability.

And we see that with Jesus, if you reflect on his ministry, it wasn't just the truth he proclaimed, but it was actually his willingness to suffer for us that has transformed so many lives over the centuries.

And here's the shocking thing. That's the shape that our ministry is meant to take as well. We don't just proclaim the truth, but we're willing to suffer. I will sit across from you.

I will lay out my heart to you. I will tell you all about Jesus. And I will put myself at your mercy. And if you reject me or laugh at me or never talk to me again, that's okay. It's worth it to me.

It's worth it to me because I'm called to be a witness. Right? So this is what it means to be a witness. We are people of truth. We are people of vulnerability. Last question is simply this.

[20 : 06] Why in the world would anybody do this? You know, you're calling me to embody truth and you're telling me, you're telling me, not just the possibility, it's certain that you're going to suffer because of this.

How and why would anybody do this? And this brings us to the third characteristic of witness, which is the characteristic of hope, a kind of unwavering hope. Witnesses exude hope.

Inexplicable hope. Chapter 11 ends, we had to get this in here because it's so beautiful. It ends with a vision of the ultimate end, the ultimate purpose and fate of all of God's witnesses.

I'll just read it, verse 11 and 12. For after the three and a half days, a breath of life from God entered them and they stood up on their feet and great fear fell on those who saw them.

These are all the people that had been celebrating in the streets. Now they're feeling very different. A great fear fell on those who saw them. Then they heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, come up here.

[21 : 05] And they went up to heaven in a cloud and their enemies watched them. This is a vision of the ultimate end of things. This is a vision of the culmination, the seventh trumpet blast.

And this is a vision of the Lord's prayer finally being answered. You know, for centuries upon centuries, God's people have prayed, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Verse 15, the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ and he shall reign forever and ever. You know, no matter how dark things get in this life, true witnesses exude hope because they know how the story ends.

We know where all of this is headed. Imagine, imagine all of us here are sitting in a dark, windowless, hot, on air conditioned room.

And imagine there's two groups in two rooms. And imagine that we all sit there for an hour. But imagine that the first group is told you will only be here for an hour and after an hour of sitting in this room we're all going to get on a plane and we're going to go on a tropical vacation.

[22 : 20] And it's going to be great. And imagine that the other group isn't told anything. Somebody leads them into the room, sits them down, shuts the door, gone.

Both groups are going to have the exact same experience, exact same conditions, exact same duration, one hour. But you will have two vastly different experiences.

Two vastly different experiences because the one group knows where all this is headed. they know what the ending entails. God gives us visions of the future so that we can thrive in the present. And this is why you have Paul saying crazy sounding things like he does in 2 Corinthians 4.17. He says, for this light momentary affliction is preparing us, preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.

And light momentary affliction, what he means by that is all of the suffering in his entire life. All of my suffering, everything I've ever had to deal with. And Paul suffered.

[23 : 25] You know, he was whipped and tortured and imprisoned and rejected and mocked and shamed most of his adult life. And he says, all of that compared to what's coming, light momentary affliction. And compared to what's coming, a tropical vacation is a very, very, very poor metaphor.

All of this, it'd be nice. But it's a poor metaphor for what's coming. So while other people are raging out over the latest kind of internet outrage, they're raging about politics, they're panicking over the latest crisis du jour, you know, while people are freaking out over more and more division or waxing hopeless or lost and wallowing in despair, God's witnesses are people of inexplicable peace.

We are even keel. We are inexplicably hopeful. We are engaged. We are meaningfully doing everything we can to alleviate suffering and bring justice wherever we can.

But we're not caught up in it because we know this is a light momentary affliction. It's hard now, but it's a drop in the bucket compared to what's coming. Witnesses exude hope.

And we know that life is going to have ups and downs. And some of you are in a great place in your life and some of you are suffering. You're here right now and you are suffering. And maybe you're thinking, I don't even know if I can connect with what he's saying.

[24 : 53] But witnesses have this perspective of knowing that there are going to be ups and downs. There's going to be laughter and tears. Administrations will come and go. Nations will rise and fall. But the future of God's people is secure.

It is secure. Sure. So part of what it means to be a Christian is to be a witness. So I just want you to think about your own life, your own job, your own friends, your own family, the role, the vocation that God has given you in this world.

And I just want you to think about these three things. What would it look like for you to embody the truth of the gospel? Right? Even if you can't talk about your faith. Even if starting a Bible study at your work is never going to happen.

Right? Even if those things are, what would it look like for you simply to embody, to live as though Jesus rose from the dead? To live as though the future is secure? What would that look like?

To live knowing every day that you've been forgiven greater crimes than anybody will ever commit against you. How would that change the way you live? What would it look like for you to embrace vulnerability?

[25 : 57] What risks would you take if you were willing to let go of self-preservation? If you said, you know, by being vulnerable I am fulfilling what God has called me to do. I'm sharing in the sufferings of Christ which is what Paul so often says of his own suffering.

He doesn't say how dare you God? He says, in this suffering I'm drawn closer to the heart of my Lord. And what would it look like to exude hope in a culture that is desperately lacking hope?

To be that light and that beacon. If we want to know what this looks like, if we want the kind of courage that this takes, we have only to look to Jesus who was the embodiment of truth, who was more vulnerable than we will ever even be able to imagine on the cross and who not only exuded hope, he was the hope and through his resurrection he offers us that eternally secured hope in which we rest.

Let's pray. here. To beagement of truth,