

We are his witness

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Preacher: Keith Knowlton

[0 : 00] Well, good evening, everyone. My name is Keith Nolton. If we haven't met before, it's a pleasure to be able to bring God's word to you this evening.

We're going to be continuing our series that we've been in on Sunday evenings, looking at the mission of God's people. Tonight, we're going to be looking at specifically at a passage from Isaiah 43, verses 8 through 13.

So as you turn there, look on the screen behind you. I wonder, have you ever received notice that you've been selected for jury duty? Imagine that if you have, you probably weren't thrilled at the prospect of getting that notice in the post.

That can mean days off of work. It can mean needing child care for your kids. It may mean several boring days or even possibly weeks in a courtroom. Myself, I've never been called for jury duty, but practicing law, often had to interact with those who had been called for jury duty.

And it usually would happen on a Monday morning. You show up for trial and you have a courtroom full of maybe 100 or so potential jurors that are there for maybe a couple of trials that are to begin that week.

[1 : 06] And needless to say, there's not too many smiling faces. There's not too many people that are happy to be there. Most people recognize that a real trial is not like a TV drama that's suspenseful and nonstop action.

They recognize that there's these long statements that are given and open and closed and complicated examinations with facts and issues that most people could probably care less about. And so what we look at and see in our passage today is very much a courtroom scene, much like we saw this morning in our passage from John. But our courtroom scene here is not something that deals with mundane facts that we may have in a typical courtroom.

It is a case between God and Israel's enemies. And so we'll see that in this courtroom, God invites the nations to assemble, to serve as the jury, that they may examine the evidence and issue a ruling to see the conclusion of this trial.

So in a sense, we are invited into, as we look at this text tonight, it's a challenge that we have to consider the evidence, to serve as jurors, so to speak, to recognize who God is and who we are as his people.

[2 : 26] And so let's look at our text, Isaiah 43, verses 8 through 13. Let's look at the verse, Isaiah 43, verses 8 through 13.

Before me, no other God was formed, nor will there be one after me. I, even I, am the Lord, and apart from me there is no Savior. I have revealed and saved and proclaimed, I, and not some foreign God among you.

You are my witnesses, declares the Lord, that I am God. Yes, from the ancient days I am he. No one can deliver out of my hands. When I act, who can reverse it?

This is the word of God. Will you pray with me? Lord, as we prepare to dig into your word this evening, we ask that your spirit may be among us, that you may soften our hearts and open our ears, that we may receive your word with joy.

Where we pray that your truth will go forth from this pulpit and that you will receive all the glory and praise from it. And so now we ask God that the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts may be pleasing in your sight.

[4 : 04] Oh Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen. And so as we dig into this text again, I want us to consider this trial scene.

It's important to examine who's in the courtroom as we try to understand what they are examining. So as I mentioned before, it's the nations that God calls and assembles together.

It says in verse 9, all the nations gather together and the peoples assemble. And so if there's ever a trial to be a part of, to sit as a juror of, you think that this is the one, right?

It's not a little issue that deals with property issues or a little misdemeanor that really doesn't really have any real significance. This is a case with serious implications for all the nations.

So if we think about it, this would be one of those cases where those TV satellite trucks are set up out front, where the news reporters are standing by waiting to tell others about how the trial has progressed.

[5 : 04] And so this is a trial of infinite significance with far-reaching implications. And so what's ultimately being decided in this text, in this trial, is who is God?

And so we need to consider then, well, who are the parties that are going to be putting forth an argument toward this issue? On one side, we have the enemies of Israel.

These are the nations that have persecuted Israel, that have enslaved Israel, the nations that worship pagan gods and have rejected the God of Israel. And these nations, to put forth their case, to support their case, they are supposed to call their own witnesses.

And it's rather open-ended here. It doesn't really say who they're going to call, but somebody, somebody to testify that these pagan gods have been able to predict the future and control the outcome.

The other hand, we have the God of Israel, right? He is the God who created the universe, the God who chose initially to bless Abraham and all his descendants.

[6 : 09] And so we see who he decided to call as his witness. Rather ironically, it says in verse 8, Lead those out who have eyes but are blind, who have ears but are deaf.

And so we see this disabled group that's described here is actually the people of Israel. So during the time of the prophet Isaiah, we know that the Israelites have been led away as exiles in Babylon. They're under the rule of the Babylonians. And so we've seen repeated throughout the Old Testament this cycle of sin that Israel falls into. And when they fall into sin, they're handed over to their enemies.

And so even though they're suffering in this case as they have before, we see that their stubbornness is persisting. In fact, throughout Israel, God calls, or throughout the book of Isaiah, God repeatedly calls his own people deaf and blind.

If we look at chapter 42, just going back one chapter, it says this in verse 18, Hear you deaf, look you blind and see. Who is blind but my servant?

[7 : 15] And deaf like the messenger I sent. Who is blind like the one in covenant with me? Blind like the servant of the Lord? You have seen many things, but pay no attention.

Your ears are open, but you do not listen. If you go down to the end of this chapter, it's actually talking about God pouring out his anger, his wrath on his people for their disobedience. And even then it says, enveloped in the flames of their own wrath, they still don't understand.

They're consumed by fire, but they still don't take it to heart. And so this is our cast of character. We have the enemies of Israel and whoever their witnesses may be, the God of Israel and his own witnesses, though they are deaf and blind.

And so the two points I want us to consider tonight as we see this trial unfold are very simple. You don't have to write them down. First is God is God and we are his witnesses.

God is God and we are his witnesses. So let's look at that first point. So as we see this trial begin, you may kind of try to think of what this jury is thinking about.

[8 : 23] If the nations have assembled, they may be having these kind of preconceived notions as how this trial may unfold. Because they look at the enemies of Israel and see that these are the ones, these are the guys who are in control, right?

It's the people of Israel that they have enslaved. And then they look on the other side and they see this God who seems unable to bring his own people out of captivity, who can't prevent them from being blind and deaf.

But we see that those thoughts are quickly dismissed as this trial plays out. The enemies of Israel are told to put forth their first witness. If we look at the second part of verse 9, God asks, Which of their gods foretold this and proclaim to us the former things?

Let them bring in their witnesses to prove that they are right. And so basically God is challenging them. Bring any witness, any evidence that you can to prove that your false gods have been able to predict the future and control the outcome.

And we see the response. Well, frankly, there is no response. There is silence. There is no witnesses. There is no evidence. There is nothing at all that is brought by these pagan nations to support their claim that their gods are the true God.

[9 : 40] And so we see immediate transition here. That God doesn't waste any time. He calls his witness, the people of Israel. But because of their disability, we see that he steps in their place.

That he testifies on his own behalf. And it's not this dull examination that can go on in a real courtroom for hours on end and the jurors start to close their eyes. No, this is an impassioned speech that God gives.

And the interesting part is of what he emphasizes here. To claim that he is the real God. Oftentimes when we think of God and we want to characterize God in a certain way or describe him, we think about his attributes, right?

We say, well, God is loving. God is good. Or God is patient. And while all those things are true, that's not what God himself focuses on here.

He focuses on something that's much more foundational to his case. Because it really makes no difference if God is loving or God is patient. If he's not, first of all, God.

[10 : 40] And so in his speech, he points out his own godness. And he does so by emphasizing three points of which I want us to consider.

First of all, he points out that he is unique. If we look in verse 10, Before me no God was formed, nor will there be one after me. It would have been common in those days for these pagan nations to have their gods and to maybe believe that their gods produced other gods or there's maybe a succession of gods or some gods that are stronger than other gods.

The God of Israel is making clear here. There is no other God before me. I did not descend from anyone and no one descended from me. I am incomparable. I am unique.

I am without rival. If we think about it in our common day, you've maybe heard people say that maybe are outside any sort of religion. Say, well, all religions are the same, right?

You all worship the same God. It's as if God is sitting on top of a mountain and each religion is just represented by different people, you know, hiking up the mountain on different trails to try to reach the summit.

[11 : 50] Or maybe you think about, you know, in our postmodern world where all truth is relative, you have people say, well, you know, all religions have their own value. Everyone's beliefs have equal merit.

And so you don't judge me for what I believe or think, and I won't judge you for the way that you think. And that way all religions or all values or all ways of living are equally good and valid.

But that's not what God is saying here. He makes clear, no, there are no other gods but me. There is no one who is equal to me. There is no one who is the same.

I alone stand. And so we see this emphasized over and over again in the Old Testament. And if we turn to Deuteronomy 435, it says, the Lord is God. There is no other besides him.

And so this is really an incredible statement, especially in our day and age with relative truth, to be able to claim with absolute certainty that the God of Israel is the one true God.

[12 : 54] And so we see that religion, it's not based on preferences. Your opinion does not dictate reality. God is saying that he is Yahweh and that there is none beside him.

And so that brings us to our second point then. He emphasizes his uniqueness. He also emphasizes his own sovereignty. If you look in verse 12, you are my witnesses, declares the Lord, that I am God.

Yes, and from ancient days I am he. No one can deliver out of my hands. When I act, who can reverse it? So God is asserting here his authority over all things throughout all times.

Past, present, and future, God is in control. And that's what really makes him God. When we think about God's sovereignty, that gives him his Godness.

If we take away God's sovereignty, he is no longer God. Because if we think about it, if he is not in control, then he is in fact controlled by something or somebody else.

[13 : 56] If he is not the absolute ruler, then he himself is being ruled by something. And so we see this truth resounding throughout the book of Isaiah about God's sovereignty.

If we look at Isaiah 45, verse 7, it says this, I form the light and create darkness. I bring prosperity and create disaster. I, the Lord, do all these things.

And so if we think about our own lives, how easy is it for us to trust God and his sovereignty when things are going well? But when things go maybe ways that we didn't plan, or we face hardship, we begin to question God's sovereignty.

But we see in this verse, what does it say here? That he brings prosperity and creates disaster. Israel was not under Babylonian captivity because God didn't possess the ability to deliver them. We don't face sickness or hardship in our life because God isn't able to change the circumstances. We don't suffer in certain ways because God has turned his attention elsewhere.

[15:05] No, God is before all things and in him, all things hold together, as Paul says in Colossians. And so the reason for this is because God does all things according to his own will.

If we look further in Isaiah, Isaiah 46, verse 10, I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times what is still to come. I say my purpose will stand and I will do all that I please. And so the reality is that God is God-centered. He does everything that he desires for his own purpose according to his own will.

There's one commentator that I read as I was looking into this text and he pointed out that between verse 11 and verse 13, there are 29 words in the original Hebrew and 12 of those words are in the first person.

So God is giving evidence. The evidence that he is putting forth is himself, that he is God. He is the totality of all deity.

[16:16] And so you may have heard that in order to win a case, if you're in trial, you have to carry the burden of proof, right? In a civil case, civil cases that I did back in the States, I'm assuming it would be very similar here in the UK as well, that burden of proof would be called the preponderance of the evidence.

And so if you consider the scales of justice, right? For me, in order to win my case, all that I had to do was tip the scales ever so much that they were in my favor.

Likewise, for the plaintiff, if they're even, if he tips it ever so much in his favor, he's won the case.

We see here that the evidence that God is putting forth in trial as himself is certainly enough to meet the burden of proof.

He is not simply tipping the scales here. His evidence is overwhelming that he is the sovereign Lord overall. And so what a comfort it is to know that we have the opportunity to serve and live under a sovereign God.

But the thing is, it's not just his sovereignty that should bring us comfort. It's the fact that because of his sovereignty, we get to experience the benefit of it. And so that brings us to our third point then.

[17:37] We recognize that God is unique and that God is sovereign. He's also pointing out here that he is a God who saves. Look at verse 11. I, even I, am the Lord and apart from me there is no other, or excuse me, there is no Savior.

I made that mistake myself. That's anticipating what I think that text might say. You're like, he's talking about his exclusivity, right? You expect him to say there is no other. No, he says there is no Savior.

Verse 12 as well. I have revealed and saved and proclaimed. Ever since I was a kid, I've liked to collect coins. It's not been a huge hobby.

One thing I've liked to collect every year is something known as a silver proof set. So each year, the Mint will put out a collection of coins for that year that are made of silver that are double stamped. So it improves the quality of the coin.

It's more clarity and it shines better and it's something that I've just collected ever since I was a kid. And those are legal tender, right? I could use those coins to buy something if I wanted to but of course I've never have because I've wanted to collect them.

[18:44] I want to be able to admire them and maybe pass them on to my kids one day. Well, that's certainly not what God is suggesting here. He's not simply maintaining his power and his sovereignty simply for the sake of having it.

He has his own sovereignty and he is using it, using his power to save. There'd be really no reason for us to get excited about the sovereignty of God if it didn't affect us in a positive way because we see throughout Scripture God revealing his sovereign plan of salvation.

So you would think to these blind and deaf people of Israel that they would recognize this, right?

That even from the beginning of time in Adam and Eve when they were kicked out of the garden even that God promised them a savior.

That God made a promise to Abraham that he would bless him and that through him all nations would be blessed. We see that the people of Israel are brought out and delivered out of slavery in Egypt and taken into the promised land.

Through judges and kings we see that God's control over his people never changes. And so now even though the people are enslaved in Babylon God promises to deliver them but even more he has promised something greater.

[19 : 58] He promises to send them a savior whose kingdom will never end. And so that's why we can rejoice too not only in God's sovereignty but to recognize how his sovereignty has affected every single one of us that he has sent his son Jesus and through his blood we are saved.

And so that brings us to our second point then to recognize that God is God we also need to recognize that we are his witnesses. If we look again at the people of Israel God calls them blind and F over and over again throughout the book of Isaiah.

And so we could think well for this trial he certainly could have just dropped them as witnesses right? I mean when I was trying cases I'd always have to create a list of witnesses that I was required to produce to the judge and opposing counsel so everyone know who you may call to trial. But rarely did I ever use every single witness on that list. Based on how the trial was going based on the strengths of the witness or potentially what I felt the facts or the issues that I still needed to emphasize I may or may not call certain witnesses.

And so you may think well God could have done the same thing here right? I mean he's he's certainly capable of testifying for himself. He could have just dropped the people of Israel altogether. They're the ones that are blind and deaf.

[21 : 24] It doesn't seem like a positive trial strategy to keep them as witnesses. But we see that God continues to use his people even though they can't communicate effectively because their own presence is sufficient in communicating as being valuable evidence communicating his own sovereignty.

So look again in verse 10 it says you are my witnesses declares the Lord and my servant whom I have chosen. So God chose Israel even though they had sinned against him even though they had turned from him he still desires to be their God.

And so this fact alone shows his sovereignty it's not that Israel came to God and asked to be a part of his family no God chose Israel that shows his sovereignty and the fact that he continues to serve them and continues to be their God shows that his sovereignty continues.

And so there's really two reasons that we see in this text for why in the world God would use these deaf and blind people to be his witnesses. I want to look at them.

First it's because it's for their own benefit and it's also for the benefit of others. So look at verse 10 again. You are my witnesses declares the Lord and my servant whom I have chosen so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he.

[22 : 58] God first chose Israel to be his witnesses for their own benefit. And this makes sense because we can't share the good news of the gospel if it doesn't first affect us.

Right? This uniqueness and the sovereignty of God and his ability to save these aren't just intellectual facts that we can just pass down the line to somebody else. And so I think this is something that we often can struggle with because we get so wrapped up in our own busyness with work and with school or even good things like family or ministry that we can so often overlook the fact that God is God.

There is no one like him. The God of the universe has saved us. And so often we can take that for granted, right? It just becomes kind of our Christian vocabulary and it becomes so cliché.

Yes, God is sovereign and Jesus saves. Think about that fact. Let that soak in. It should affect every single fiber of our being.

It should be the source of all hope and security that we have. And so that leads us to that second reason. Yes, we are witnesses for our own benefit but we are also witnesses for the benefit of others.

[24 : 23] In verse 10, God calls his people to be witnesses and servants. And it's interesting that he doesn't, it's not a command.

He doesn't say be my witnesses and you need to be my servants. He says they are. They are my witnesses and my servants because I have chosen you to be my people this is your role.

This is your mission. And so we see that these two words witness and servant they really go well together. I mean they communicate the same thing. In order to be God's servant as we serve God we are to be his witness.

And so it's funny even though God is addressing the nations here he's putting forth his case to the nations he's really also directing this communication to his own people. Because he wants this reminder the reality of who he is to transform his own people.

That their eyes may be open that their ears may be able to hear that they can recognize that God is sovereign and to recognize then their own role in his mission.

[25 : 29] Their task is to be witnesses. And so we see this language used over and over again in the New Testament. We read this passage Roddy read it for us from Acts 1 right?

When this passage where Jesus before he ascends into heaven he communicates with his disciples and what does he say? You will receive the Holy Spirit and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

When Paul is recounting his own conversion experience in Acts 26 he says that God said to him now get up and stand on your feet I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen and will see of me.

And so we see the role of God's people has not changed. It's the same role that was to the people of Israel in the Old Testament. It's the same role that he gave the New Testament church. It's the same role that he has given us to be servant witnesses.

And so it's important to be clear well what are we witnessing about? This passage is about God being God. We don't just walk around saying well God is sovereign and expect it to make a whole lot of change in people's life.

[26 : 41] Right? I mean it's true but it's only the foundation upon which our message is built. Our message is the gospel.

We bear witness to the good news of Jesus. A friend to sinners the savior of the world. And so just like that courtroom scene that we see in the passage where the nations have been assembled to be able to listen to the evidence and render a verdict we here at Bucleu are in a very similar situation. We have the nations in this city and they desperately need to hear the good news of the gospel. And so it should be our charge our we should question how are we to be witnesses how can we be effective in the spread of the gospel here in this neighborhood in our own neighborhoods around our city and to the ends of the earth.

James talked about this morning the need to pray how we're going to start praying specifically for neighbors and co-workers family members who don't know the Lord for opportunities that we can interact with these non-believers that we may have boldness in our witness and so let that be our charge tonight that we may recognize that God is sovereign and that God saves and this is good news that all need to hear so may we have the boldness and the joy of being witnesses for our sovereignty let's pray Lord we thank you that you are God and there is none like you that you are sovereign over all things there is nothing that happens in our lives that is outside of your knowledge and control and Lord we thank you specifically that your sovereignty affects us in such a beneficial way that you have sent your son to die for our sins may that reality never cease to be amazing may it truly transform who we are and what we desire to be in this world so God we ask to be your witnesses that we may be your humble servants in the spread of your gospel in our own neighborhoods among our own families in and around this church and university that we may see lives transformed by the truth of the gospel may that be our heart's desire God to see your kingdom come we pray this in Jesus name amen now we're going to stand for our last hymn of the evening the Lord is my salvation our martyrdom and làm down and our h