

PM Acts 14:1-28 God's Testimony

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Date: 29 December 2024

Preacher: Dr Alistair Mackay

[0 : 00] And we would remember before we, as we start to read this, that in the church at Antioch there were a number of prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon, Lucius, Manan and Saul.

And when they were worshipping the Lord and they were fasting, the Holy Spirit said, set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.

Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off. And so began the first missionary journey. We are well into the journey now as we pick it up in Acts chapter 14.

Now, at Iconium they entered together into the Jewish synagogue and spoke in such a way that a great number of both Jews and Greeks believed.

But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers. So they remained for a long time speaking boldly for the Lord who bore witness to the word of his grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands.

[1 : 25] But the people of the city were divided. Some sided with the Jews and some with the apostles. When an attempt was made by both Gentiles and Jews with their rulers to mistreat them and to stone them, they learned of it and fled to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lacaonia and to the surrounding country.

And there they continued to preach the gospel. Now, at Lystra there was a man sitting who could not use his feet.

He was crippled from birth and had never walked. He listened to Paul speaking and Paul looking intently at him and seeing that he had faith to be made well, said in a loud voice, Stand upright on your feet.

And he sprang up and began walking. And when the crowd saw what Paul had done, they lifted up their voices, saying in Lacaonian, The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men.

In Barnabas they called Zeus and Paul Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. And the priest of Zeus, whose temple was at the entrance to the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates and wanted to offer sacrifice with the crowds.

[2 : 57] But when the apostles Barnabas and Saul heard of it, they tore their garments and rushed out into the crowd crying out, Men, why are you doing these things?

We also are men of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them.

In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways, yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.

Even with these words they scarcely restrained the people, even with these words they scarcely restrained the people from offering sacrifice to them.

But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having persuaded the crowds, they stoned Paul, and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead.

[4 : 26] But when the disciples gathered about him, he rose up and entered the city, and on the next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe, when they had preached the gospel to that city, and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, and to Iconium, and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying, that through many tribulations, we must enter the kingdom of God.

And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting, they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

Then they passed through Pisidia, and came to Pamphylia. And when they had spoken the word in Perga, they went down to Atalia, and from there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God.

For the work that they had fulfilled. And when they arrived and gathered the church together, they declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. And they remained no little time with the disciples. May God add a blessing to his word. In of chapter 14, it says, Yet he, that is God, did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons.

[6 : 16] The original rendering of this verse in Greek is really beautiful, and rather compellingly thought-provoking.

The ordering of the words in Greek doesn't conform to our grammatical pattern of subject, verb, and object, but precisely, in order, literally, what it says is this, And yet, not unwitnessed, himself has left doing good.

Now we have that translated for us in the ESV, Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains, and so on. The King James Version says, Nevertheless, he left not himself without witness, in that he did good, and gave us rain from heaven.

The NIV says, Yet he has not left himself without testimony. He has shown you kindness by giving you rain, and so on.

And the Good News Translation says, But, he, God, has always given evidence of his existence, by the good things he does.

[7 : 44] He gives you rain, and so on, and so forth. Now witness is not quite the same as testimony. We would regard a witness, as a person who sees an event take place, and then describes what they have seen.

Though we do use witness as an abstract noun, as well as being what a witness gives. Though that may sound slightly archaic, but then many legal things do, don't they?

Testimony, is what we usually recognize witnesses as having given, either in writing, or spoken, or spoken, a statement that something is true, especially in a court of law.

But also, actually, especially in church, where the testimony we give, as the truth, and nothing but the truth, is just as solemn, and accurate, an account of what we have seen, or experienced, and know to be true, as we would swear on the Bible, as we recount in a court of law.

Our testimony, is recounted before God, as well as before man, whether, they believe us, or not.

[9 : 18] There are several things to notice, in verse 17, in our text. The first is, that it is God himself, the Trinitarian God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, who is witnessing, in this verse, who is giving testimony.

The stark truth, is that, even in the midst of the most profound darkness, of human behavior, and disobedience, God, is never, unwitnessed.

He has not left, himself, without testimony. Indeed, if the God of this world, has not, blinded, human eyes, we may see, the light of that testimony, shining all the more, brightly, in contrast, to that, very surrounding, darkness.

witness. The nature of that witness, we'll come to, a little later. But the second thing to notice, the first is that, the witness is, from God himself.

The second, is that, that witness, that testimony, mattered, to, and matters, to, God.

[10 : 38] Even before, humankind is recognized, as reading, or writing at all, or engaging, in reading, or writing, in any, widespread way, we have in Genesis 21, verse 30, where Abraham, gives Abimelech, seven new lambs, that this may be, a witness, for me, that I have dug, this well.

Therefore, that place, was called, Beersheba, meaning, well of the seven, or well, of the oath. And, a little later on, in Joshua chapter 22, you may recall, there was an altar, erected by the eastern tribes, which caused, such a kerfuffle, and almost provoked, civil war, but which was built, in good faith, as a witness.

And of course, witnesses, and testimony, were also, integral, to the laws, that God, gave, through Moses, to his, loved, chosen, but flawed, and disobedient, people of Israel.

Testimony, and witnesses, mattered, hugely, in Moses, and his test, and his deputies, reaching, judgment, over all sorts, of disputes, especially, where capital punishment, was involved.

A witness, had, to have seen, the event himself. I say himself, because, apparently, women, didn't count. Hearsay, was inadmissible.

[12:14] One witness, wasn't then enough, that had to be two, or three necessary, Deuteronomy 17. Witnesses, were to be the first, to cast, the stone, of judgment, and execution.

Remember, Jesus, invitation, to the crowd, in John 8, that whichever, of them, was without sin, should cast, the first stone, that the woman, caught, in the act, of adultery.

And if, false witness, was discovered, the false witness, was to receive, the self-sing, punishment, that would have been, enacted, on the, falsely accused person, Deuteronomy 19.

Witness, testimony, as laid down, in the Mosaic law, was God's, idea. Of course, the Pharisees, couldn't resist, adding to that, by their own, refinements, about any, individual's, suitability, as a witness.

By the time, our Lord, was born, in the flesh, a witness, had to be, a free man, not deaf, not mentally, or morally, unsuitable.

[13:26] the witness, had to be, older, than the, age of the, Bar Mitzah. Women, were largely, unacceptable. There were no, gamblers, allowed, with dice.

There were no, lenders, who collected, interest. Nobody, who engaged, in racing, doves. These are, the rules, of the Pharisees. And nobody, who ate, in the streets, would you believe?

They were, compared to dogs. And none of them, was admissible, as a witness. Funny then, isn't it? How, our wonderfully, counter-cultural, saviour, and the, wonderfully, counter-cultural, gospel, of the truth, values the testimony, of shepherds, at the Lord's, arrival, in this world, and of women, as the first, to be witness, to his resurrection.

And in the New Testament, we also have it stated, that the disciples, were to be Jesus' witnesses. Luke 24 and 48, says, you are witnesses, of these things.

Let's give a wee bit context, I'll read you the, the few verses, around that. Then, Jesus, opened their minds, to understand the scriptures.

[14:48] And he said to them, the disciples, thus it is written, that the Christ, should suffer, and on the third day, rise from the dead, and that repentance, for the forgiveness of sins, should be proclaimed, in his name, to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

You are witnesses, of these things. And behold, I'm sending the promise, of my Father upon you. But stay in the city, until you're clothed, with power from on high.

And we've got huge emphasis, placed by Paul, in 1 Corinthians 15, on the witness, of Jesus' resurrection.

I delivered to you, as of first importance, he said, for I delivered to you, what I also received, that Christ died, for our sins, in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised, on the third day, in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared, and here are the witnesses, to Cephas, then to the twelve, then he appeared, to more than 500 brothers, at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep, then he appeared, to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

And it was vital, that witness, would be presented in public. True witnesses, not just one or two, but hundreds, and hundreds of witnesses, of reliable, independent witnesses, to the resurrection, of Christ Jesus.

[16:22] Indeed, that was in the job description, for Matthias, who was selected, to replace Judas Iscariot, Acts 1.22, that he must, become with us, a witness, to his resurrection.

And again, when Peter, in his first epistle, chapter 5, describes himself, to the elders, of the scattered believers, to whom he is writing, he describes himself, as a fellow elder, and a witness, of the sufferings, of Christ.

Now all this, witness is external, out there, in the open. People saying, with honesty, what they have seen, to be evaluated, by God and man.

But there is another witness, that is the quietly, whispered, witness, of the Holy Spirit, in our hearts, as he teaches us, instructs us, edifies us, reassures us, shapes us, conforms us.

Romans 8 and 16, tells us, the Spirit, bears witness, with our, spirit, that we are, children of God.

[17:48] And then we find, in 1 John 5, this most amazing, testimony, concerning the Son of God. This is he who came, by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not by the water only, but by the water and the blood, and the Spirit, is the one who testifies, because the Spirit, is the truth.

For there are three, that testify, the Spirit, the water, the blood. And these three agree, if we receive, the testimony of men, the testimony of God, is greater.

For this is the testimony, of God, that he has borne, concerning his Son. Whoever believes, in the Son of God, has the testimony, in himself.

Whoever does not believe, God, has made him a liar, because he has not believed, in the testimony, that God, has borne, concerning his Son.

And this is the testimony, that God, gave us, eternal life. And this life, is in his Son.

[18 : 58] Now it's no surprise then, that when we turn back, to our passage, and text, in verse 17, of Acts 14, we find, the statement, about God's, own witness, is very important, and emphatic.

In Greek, you see, if you want to emphasize, something, you say it twice, in the negative, which makes it, a powerful positive. In English, we do this too, we might say, he is coming, or we might say, he isn't not coming.

And of course, that is a far greater, emphasis there, in the second example, of the truth of the coming. So here it says, God has not, left himself, unwitnessed.

witnessed. So, let's take notice, because this is important, for us to know. But by the way, for our encouragement, the most emphatic, statement, in New Testament, scripture, as far as I can read it, is what it says, in Hebrews chapter 13, where not, two, nor three, nor four, but five negatives, are strung together, assuring us, of our heavenly father's, presence.

In verse 6, Hebrews 13, it is translated, for us, as never will I leave you, never will I forsake you, while the Greek says, I will never, never, never, no, never, leave you, nor forsake you.

[20 : 41] Well, that will be that then. And if we need any assurance, at the end, for some of us, indeed, for all of us, I'm sure, at the end of a tempestuous year, one way and another, God is telling us, that it is not, in his nature, to abandon us.

Instead, we have that rich, and beautiful reassurance, from Romans 2, 8, 28, where we know, that in all things, God works, for the good, of those who love him, who have been called, according to his purpose, for those God foreknew, he also predestined, to be conformed, to the image, of his son.

Let's just, think of that, for a moment, being conformed, conformed, to the likeness, of Jesus. And that, so that he might be, the firstborn, among, many, brothers and sisters.

So, we notice, the importance, of this statement, in Acts 14, 17, the importance, of testimony, to God. And the next thing, to notice, is the wonderful assurance, that God finishes, what he starts. He's not the God, of half-baked ideas, of half-fulfilled, or even unfulfilled, manifest of promises, or half-finished schemes, or half-completed creation, or half-worked out, plans of salvation, or half-adopted children, who are only a wee bit, like Jesus.

[22 : 24] No, no, no. He does all things, well. And Philippians 1, and 6, assures us, that he who began, a good work in you, will carry it on, to completion, until the day, of Christ Jesus.

I don't know about you, but, I've got lots, and lots of, half-finished things, half-read books, one or two, half-finished sermons, half-formulated ideas, about, let's do this, or do that.

I've even been accused, by someone, whom I know, loves me very much, that I even leave, sentences half-finished. Might that resonate, with anyone else, or is it just me?

And I do confess, that within the confines, of the home, occasionally, there may have been, some statements, only half-listened to two.

Only now, and again, might. But our God, God, is not the God, of half-measures.

[23 : 34] Salvation, is to, the uttermost. God's ear, is open, to our cry. God's love, has been poured out, into our hearts.

Romans 5, and 20, where sin, increased, or abounded, grace, increased, all the more, or hyper-abounded, super-abounded.

God, did not, abandon his world, he has never, abandoned his world, whatever sinners, under judgment, may have felt, he has not, ever, left himself, without witness.

And the next thing to notice, is that the Greek word, for witness, or the giver of testimony, is martyros, from which we get our word, martyr.

That is to say, sometimes in speaking to the truth, giving true testimony, may even be at the expense, of losing one's life. And Hebrews 11, gives us a roll call, of many of these folk, and there's example, upon example, in scripture, like the apostle James, or Stephen, who indeed said, in Acts 7, which of the prophets, did your fathers, not persecute?

[24 : 53] And they killed, those who announced, beforehand, the coming of the righteous one, whom you have now, betrayed, and murdered. And our minds, readily jumped, to Christian martyrs,

in our own land, who would not, deny, the truth of the gospel, or the lordship, of Christ Jesus. Even to the extent, of sacrifice, in their own lives. They would not, recant, as it was called, that is, denying the truth, rather than, suffer, unjust punishment, for bearing witness, to the truth. We've got our own, Wigton martyrs, don't we? Margaret McLachlan, Margaret Wilson, who were drowned, as well as, William Johnston, John Milroy, and George Walker, who were hanged. The list goes on, throughout these islands, names we're very familiar, with from down south, Hugh Latimer, Nicholas Ridley, Thomas Cranmer, but there are, hundreds and hundreds, of recorded martyrs, in this country, and beautifully, almost gospel-like, you know, in amongst the lists, and lists of famous names, there are listed, several, unknown men. That's what it says, on the list, unknown. No names recorded, but, like those, in the, World War II, war graves, of Belgium, and France, and Greece, they were known to God. [26 : 20] And when we look, to the persecuted church, in our own day, we find the roll call, of martyrs, in Nigeria, and Pakistan, and Afghanistan, and Yemen, and North Korea, and the list, goes on and on.

Of course, the greatest, actual witness, or testimony, and the best. And the greatest martyr, was Jesus himself. This is what the Apostle Paul, describes, as, the good confession, from one Timothy. He says, to Timothy, fight the good fight, of the faith, take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called, and about which you made, the good confession, in the presence of many witnesses. I charge you, in the presence of God, Timothy, who gives life, to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony, before Pontius Pilate, made the good confession, to keep the commandment, unstained, and free from reproach, until the appearing, of our Lord Jesus Christ, which he will display, at the proper time. He who is the blessed, and only sovereign, the King of kings, and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen, or can see, to him, be honour, and eternal dominion. [27 : 48] Amen. Ah well, that's a witness, isn't it? Ultimate truth, that God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him, shall not perish, but have eternal life. That truth, was more than a concept, an abstract idea. Truth was, is, and ever will be, a person. It is Jesus Christ himself, the way, the truth, and the life. That truth was, and is, the ultimate testimony. And it was his shed blood, speaking more eloquently, than the blood of Abel. It was the life, willingly, surrendered on the cross. It was, the sacrifice, paying the ransom price, for our sins, which spoke, the greatest ever truth. That was the ultimate testimony. [28 : 54] It was Jesus' death, that articulated, the new covenant, in his blood. So, tonight's witness statement, is very important.

It tells us, that God finishes, what he starts. That the witness, or testimony, has connotations, of the absolute truth, even unto death. But the context, of this evening's text, is also important. Context, always is. This speech, where we read, of God's abiding testimony, occurs in the context, of Paul and Barnabas's, first missionary journey. We might nowadays, call it, Paul's first world tour. One which began, at Syrian Antioch. Now, please note, there are two places, called Antioch. Just as there are two, Moscow's. One in Ayrshire, and the other in Russia. So the tour, began in Syrian Antioch, where believers, were first called Christians. And, there is another Antioch, in Pisidia, in Turkey. [29 : 57] So both of these, are mentioned, in this first journey. So it started, at a time, when most of the world, was unchurched. Turkey, Asia Minor, certainly was, unchurched.

It was heathen, it worshipped, Greek gods and goddesses. They hadn't had, teaching or preaching, ministries like Nineveh. Though there, would be everywhere, some of the Jewish, diaspora. Spread throughout the world, by God's plan. Though they largely, kept themselves to themselves, set apart from Gentiles. But this first world tour, was part fulfillment, of Jesus' command, regarding the spreading, of the gospel, beginning in Jerusalem, and Judea, then Samaria, and then to the ends, of the earth.

And interestingly, it was this, diasporate infrastructure, that gave Paul and Barnabas, an inn, as we might say, wherever they went. A starting point, in their mission.

But then, hard-hearted, and afterwards, openly antagonistic, and confrontational Jews, resisted the gospel, at every point, though, some, believed.

[31 : 11] The unbelieving Jews, hounded the missionaries, but their hounding ensured, that the gospel was preached, not just in Cyprus, but in Perga, Iconium, Lystra, Derbe, back to Lystra, Iconium, Pisidian, Antioch, that's the other one, Perga, Italia, and then back to Syrian Antioch.

But in this Lystra, there was a man, who had lost the use of his feet, probably a birth injury, maybe an accident at birth, maybe through polio, in early life, but it says, he was born, without the use of his feet.

But he could sure use, his ears and his brain, and as he listened to Paul, and believed the good news, about Jesus, Paul saw that he had faith, to be made well, and he issued that healing command, stand upright, in your feet.

Now he didn't creak, to an upright position, like some of us in the mornings, it says, that he sprang up, and started walking, and the flabbergasted crowd, they were indoctrinated, by heathen, God, culture, they concluded, that Paul and Barnabas, were gods, who had come down, in the form of men. And so amazing, was this healing, that they wanted, to worship them, put celebratory, garlands around their necks, make sacrifice to them. Now needless to say, this didn't go down, at all well, with Paul and Barnabas.

[32 : 39] In fact, they were so distressed, that they tore their clothes, and rushed into the crowd, they said, stop, stop, stop, what are you doing? Now what follows that stop, was not a detailed account, of the birth, death, and resurrection, of the Lord Jesus.

In fact, Jesus isn't directly mentioned, in the next few verses, but we can be assured, that Paul, had been preaching, Christ crucified, for the lame man, to come to faith.

But in these verses, 15 through 17, Paul preaches, a very short sermon, under great duress, but a sermon, that met, these Greek pagans, where they were.

Oh, there are six points, to this sermon, but they're very quick. One, we're all men, all sinners, we're all the same. Two, we have good news, to give you, the best ever news.

Three, well, there are idols, and then, there's the living God, who's made, absolutely everything.

Point four, because of sin, God has left people, largely to their own devices.

[33 : 51] Point five, but God has not, left himself, unwitnessed. Just, look around you, the rain, the seasons, food to eat, life to enjoy.

Point six, turn to God, the amazing one, and only God. Well, they didn't do, sacrifice in Lystra, but it was touch and go.

And yet, such is the malignity, of the evil one, that Jews, from Antioch and Iconium, were able, very quickly, to subvert, the crowd, in verse 19, such that the Paul, who was going to be worshipped to, was stoned, at the Jews' instigation.

He got dragged, out of the city, presumed dead, and dumped there. But when the disciples, gathered round him, he rose up, miraculously, apparently, none the worse, for the experience.

And the next day, they left, for Derby again. And in all the drama, of this missionary adventure, this wee sermon, might get lost. And this statement, as to God's, constant, witness, might get lost too.

[35 : 07] And at the end, of another year, I challenge us, this evening, to examine our hearts, and see if, we, maybe, have, forgotten.

If we overlook, this as well. Maybe we get, glimpses of that witness, when we see, a butterfly, close up, or when we see, the Dolomites, in the distance, or the bends, closer at hand, or we see the waves, crashing on the shore.

And we are, awed, by God's, greatness, and power. But do we take on board, the constant, witness of God's, goodness to us all.

The breath, we breathe. The carefully, balanced mixture, of gases, that allows us, to do that, to breathe, and survive. The rain, yes, the rain, the sunshine, the, the seasons, the, the heart melting, beauty of azaleas.

that, we have food, we do not starve, we have got heating, we've got clothes, we're free to worship, we don't have bombs, continually falling on, missiles, searing through the sky, around us.

[36 : 19] Would we, would that it, we would be sensitive enough, to know God's presence, and his love, his common grace.

Psalm 145, verse 9, the Lord is good, to all, and his mercy, is over all, that he has made. And we've got that, testimony too, in Romans 1, where the wrath of God, is revealed from heaven, against all ungodliness, and unrighteousness, of men, who by their unrighteousness, suppress the truth, for what can be known about God, is plain to them, because God has shown it to them, his invisible attributes, his eternal power, and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation, of the world, in the things, that have been made, so they are without excuse.

So God's witness is there, for us to see, and there to prompt, our thankfulness, all day, each day, every day.

In, in the sitting room, of our house, is a painting, of waves, crashing on the shore, the shoreline, is actually part, of the west coast, of the Malovkan Tyre, just, south of, where that, wee ferry crossing, to the island of Gia is.

The picture was painted, by a very good man, a Christian man, who has supported, many charitable works, and he's a reader, in the Church of Scotland, his name is, John Lowry Morrison, affectionately known, as Jolomo, and when people, speak of his work, they say, oh, that's Jolomo, I saw a beautiful, Joloma the other day, have you been to, the Jolomo exhibition, his work is very distinctive, you go anywhere, in the world, and show a picture, of his, and people will say, ah, that's a Jolomo, he doesn't need, to be standing there, saying, I am John Lowry Morrison, and I painted this, you could be in Madagascar, take one look, and that's a Jolomo, it's like that, with creation, for what can be known, about God, is plain to them, because God, has shown it to them, his invisible attributes, his eternal power, divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation, of the world, in the things, that have been made, look around you, pause to reflect, and you meet, with God's handiwork, that's God's, that's God's, that's God's, that's God's, everywhere, but we just, don't notice it, we don't, have cognizance, in our brains of it, we are so used, to God's goodness, that we don't, thank him, nearly, nearly, enough, and so,

[39 : 25] God's, own word, explains, that everyone, who does not, see God, is without, excuse, that's what Romans, says, and I grieve, for David Attenborough, who, wonderfully, gifted, and highly, intelligent, as he is, is by the standard, of scriptures, a fool, in fact, a bigger fool, than practically, anyone else, in the face, of the globe, because he, has seen more, of God's, magnificence, than practically, anyone else has, and yet, he's blinded, by the God, of this world, and denies, the creator, his awe, and adoration, and worship, may God, forgive him, and may he, forgive us, too, for our own, unthinking, attitude, of taking, for granted, of entitlement, when we do, exactly, the same, ourselves, even when, his grace, has been shed, abroad, in our hearts, as we enter, a new year, may our attitude, be one of a, radical, gratitude, as Peter, made, and entitled, his great book, and may it, be an attitude, described, by David, in Psalm 103, bless the Lord, oh my soul, and forget, not, all, his benefits, amen, let's pray together, and will be steak,-