

God's Witnesses

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[0 : 00] Well, if I can direct your minds now as we wait on the Lord to Isaiah 43, Isaiah 43 and reading at verse 8. Bring out the people who are blind yet have eyes, who are deaf yet have ears.

All the nations gather together and the peoples assemble. Who among them can declare this and show us the former things? Let them bring their witnesses to prove them right, and let them hear and say it is true.

You are my witnesses, declares the Lord, and my servant whom I have chosen, that you may know and believe me, and understand that I am he. Before me no God was formed, nor shall there be any after me.

I am the Lord, and besides me there is no Saviour. I declared and saved and proclaimed when there was no strange God among you, and you are my witnesses, declares the Lord, and I am God. And as you have noticed there, the reference to witness and witnesses is repeated down through these verses, and it's something that occurs in the following chapter and some of the previous chapters as well.

[1 : 12] As God, through Isaiah, brought this message to the people in order to try and bring them back to himself, having turned their back on him and taken up so much of the idolatry around them in the nations.

Witnessing, it's frequently mentioned in the Bible, witnessing on the part of God's people. Also, false witnesses are referred to many times. You think of the psalmist many times crying out to God that many false witnesses had risen against him.

David knew of that in his own personal experience. He was misrepresented, lies told about him, and people believed that. You find it too in terms of Christ's own ministry, and when he came, as we find in the Gospels, towards the end of his time in the world, false witnesses were brought together to try and concoct a story by which he might actually be accused and sentenced.

Of course, they found no fault in himself, and so the false witnesses were a means that were used, a means used to try and bring an accusation against him that would stick.

And you find the same in the book of Acts as well, Acts chapter 1, verse 8, where you find God saying to the apostles at the time, as they had seen the Lord's ascension and were now gathering together in order to try and work out or move forward as to what the next stage for the church might be.

[2 : 43] And in chapter 1, verse 8, you find these words, but where he said, when they'd come together, they asked him, Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel? He said to them, it is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority, but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.

And then he was taken up, as we say afterwards, immediately to heaven. But that's what he left behind for them to not only consider, but to actually be encouraged by, that he was going to use them as his witnesses to the ends of the earth.

But what does it mean to be God's witnesses? Why did God, through Isaiah, say this to the people? Well, in fact, in the days of Isaiah, God was reminding them that he had established them in bringing them to be a people for himself by his deliverance of them from Egypt, by the way that he brought them through the wilderness years and on into the promised land and gave them that as an inheritance.

He was establishing them as witnesses in that context so that to the nations round about, they ought to have been faithful witnesses to God, to the true, the only true God.

And this is what God is reminding them of here in this chapter, that he is indeed, he alone is God. And that was the mandate that he had given to them to communicate and to show by the life they lived that the God they worshipped was indeed the true God, the only God.

[4 : 20] And of course, in that, they had failed. But we bring that forward and ask the question, well, what is it for ourselves to be witnesses for God? God, is it something inevitable from the moment you become a Christian, from the moment you come to know the Lord as your Savior?

Is it inevitable that you then witness to Christ, to God, to his salvation? Is it something you have to work at? Is there something that we need to do in terms of furthering that witnesses, feeding that witnessing or improving that witnessing?

Of course, you know the answer to these questions is yes, it's something that needs to be worked at, it's something we need to apply ourselves to. It's fed by our understanding increasingly of the Bible, of God's truth.

And as that's fed into our souls, and as we grow in the knowledge and in the grace of Christ, we come to have that witness enhanced. That's how it ought to be. Though sometimes we have to confess that we wane in our witness as we do in many other aspects of our spiritual life.

But from this passage, I want tonight just to ask, first of all, who are God's witnesses? Who is spoken about here by God as he says, you are my witnesses, declares the Lord, and my servant whom I have chosen?

[5 : 39] Well, you can see the context here is actually a context of picturing the situation as a courtroom scene. You'll find this very often in Isaiah and other prophets as well as other parts of the New Testament.

It's a very frequent, fairly frequent imagery that's used, especially when God comes to accuse his covenant people of things that they ought not to be guilty of.

It's something that he brings out in various prophecies. And here, it's the courtroom language that Isaiah is using that provides the background for the reference to witnessing.

Here he is saying in verse 8, bring out the people who are blind, yet have eyes, who are deaf, yet have ears. By that, he's talking about the people who are now really blind, as it were, to the message that God is sending them, who have forgotten the purpose for which God redeemed them from Egypt and set them out as his people.

Bring them out, says the Lord. All the nations, gather them together as well. Who among them can declare this and show us the former things? Let them bring their witnesses to prove them right, and let them hear and say it is true.

[6 : 59] And then he says, you are my witnesses. You covenant people of Israel, Judah, are my witnesses. So the context is really one of idolatry, an idolatrous situation in which God's covenant people find themselves, and from which they have imported so many practices that God is now condemning.

Now, that's a familiar picture, isn't it? I'm not talking about all you folks here tonight, but you know that that's an imagery that's very applicable and very relevant to our present day, to the church and the world of today, to the mainstream churches especially.

When you find so much abandonment of God's truth and of the doctrine of Scripture as God's word and the consequences of that, the ruinous consequences of that in terms of our understanding of human behavior and ethics and so on.

Well, this is exactly what Isaiah was facing. He was facing a people who had imported all the practices or many of the practices from the Canaanite religion around them, from the paganism around them.

And they were being called back by God through Isaiah to the position that God had stipulated and set for them as his witnesses. And he was reminding them that they had been set by God in a context of bearing witness to his truth and to the truth about him and about his salvation and about his uniqueness, his greatness, his power, his majesty, his holiness.

[8 : 35] That was what he had called them to. So what God is basically doing through Isaiah is really saying to the people, call the witnesses of idolatry before God.

Call them all into the courtroom. Let the case for idolatry be set forth. Let them call forth their witnesses. Let them call in their advocates.

Let them present the argument in favor of their idolatrous ways. Let these gods of the pagans that you have actually come to embrace, let them speak for themselves.

This is the language of imagery, of course. But it's powerful language. And it's language that we can use in a right way today as well, because that's really what we're seeking to set before this terribly confused world of our day that has so much abandoned the ways of God and the church of our day that has brought in so many practices that are contrary to a biblical Christianity.

While we have to say in presenting the gospel, this is what God is saying, bring the witnesses to all of that departure, to those practices, to that unbiblical alternative Christianity.

[9 : 50] Bring them in. Bring them in before God. Let them speak for themselves. What do they have to say? You see, God is saying, who among them can declare this and show us the former things?

Let the secularism of our day, let the atheism of our day, let the humanists of our day answer the question, how could Isaiah 53 come to be so minutely fulfilled in the sufferings and the death of Jesus?

If God is other than what the Bible says he is. How could the former things that took place come to lead bit by bit, step by step, stage by stage, to the development of the world as predicted in the Bible?

How can so much of what you find in Scripture, New Testament as well as old, fit into the context of the way things have developed in the world since the day of Christ, the day he came into the world? How is it that so much of the teaching of the apostles proves again and again to be accurate and true and relevant to every generation of the church and of human beings?

[11 : 08] Well, God is saying, where is the definitive answer in paganism, secularism, to all of that, these former things?

Let them bring their witnesses to prove them right and let them hear and say, it is true. You see, for all the bluster and the confidence and the arrogance of a world that says, there is no God and the God of the Bible cannot possibly be a God that's worth trusting in, where have you ever come across a proof that God does not exist?

Where have you ever come across a definitive declaration that convinces you that faith in Christ is futile? It's not there.

It can't be. Because it's contrary to truth. And what Isaiah is doing is reminding the people, this is the truth that you have in God and from God. And you have the honor and you have the privilege, he's saying to them and reminding them, of being witnesses to this God.

Where do you find any God like this God? Look at what he's saying, verse 11, I am the Lord and besides me there is no God. Before me no God was formed, nor shall there be any after me.

[12 : 35] And you see the sarcasm that he has there in verse 8 as well in that description as we mentioned. People who have ears but don't hear, they don't lack physically, but they do spiritually.

And that's where he says, you are my witnesses, people that I have chosen for myself. Well, here's our great privilege, challenge, mandate, as Christians in the world today, as Christians in Stornoway today, as Christians wherever we live today, in the society that we form part of, you are my witnesses, declares the Lord, that I am he.

We are set in the world to communicate by our lifestyle and by our words as far as possible, whether it's spoken or written, the way we live and what we do, that he is God, that he is a glorious God, that he is a tremendous God, that there is in this God that which you find nowhere else. all of what the Bible says about him and he has chosen us and set us free and led us and taught us, just as he says here to Israel, this is what he has done in bringing us to know himself.

So you are my witnesses. In other words, he means today the equivalent of that is for you and I together as a Christian people, as a Christian congregation, as professing Christians in Christ to actually be set by God in this world of so much alternatives to God, so many alternatives, so much of a different mindset and behavior and practice to the lifestyle that God calls us to.

[14 : 39] You are my witnesses to be an alternative to that. To set forth the truth of God, the truth that God is. Now that, of course, means wherever we set, whether it's in mansions, in schools, whether we work here in our community or whether we work at home, whatever it is, in our relationships, married or single, whatever, this still is really at the bottom of our very existence as Christians.

And every day we need to remind ourselves that God is speaking to us and saying, you are my witnesses, says the Lord. So secondly, what is the evidence that God's witnesses produce?

There's the courtroom scene. There is God saying, to paganism, bring in your representatives. Let them argue their case. where can they actually explain my doings, my dealings with my people, my acts of redemption?

Where can they find anything to do with the description of creation and how the world came to be and all of that? But you are my witnesses. You sit beside them or stand beside them.

When their arguments fail, then you present your case because I have chosen you to be my witnesses, says the Lord.

[16:04] And the evidence that's presented by God's people, we can think of it in this way. First of all, evidence that God exists. Evidence that God exists.

Now you don't need to think about saying a lot. Sometimes silence itself, in fact, is a powerful witness. We don't need to be worried about whether we're good with words or whether we're good at writing, whether we can engage in online discussion or anything like that.

What this is really saying is your very presence and your way of life and your worship, worship as much as anything else, actually speaks out the reality of God.

People may say about what they like, but they cannot deny that what you are presenting is the true and living God through your lifestyle, through your worship, through your witness and all of these things.

This is your witness. This is the case you're presenting. You know, there are people tonight that are looking through these windows or going past this building and they know that we're here and they know why we're here and they may decry the fact that we're here.

[17:09] They may laugh at the fact that we're here. They may pass by and say this is just complete nonsense and I wouldn't want to be there for all the world, but they cannot deny why you're here and what you're saying by being here and what your presence here means to that world that's looking on.

I'm not saying that's all there is to our witness is far from it. To our witnessing, that's far from it. But it's a very important part of it. The constant reference to God that comes across from a faithful lifestyle of God's people.

And of course, it's not just the bare fact that he is God that they were to witness to. What Isaiah was reminding the people of was that they have been called to be God's witnesses to the fact that he is the one of God.

Here's the dilemma that we have in this world. There are so many gods. Humanly speaking, so many alternatives to the true and living God.

Not just in terms of other religions, though that of course is a fact that other gods are presented as alternatives or even rivals or even companions to this God that you can set beside this God that we're told or some other way in which the gods of this age, the idols of humanity, love, corrupted love, sex, money, big business, so many things that are set up to be idolized by people, celebrity, entertainment, so many things.

[18:55] We were reminded in prayer when Morda prayed and Alistair prayed as well that we're surrounded by this, that we're bombarded with this, that the temptation is that you spend more time on your phone or on Facebook than you do in your Bible.

That's what the devil wants you to do. That's what we are tempted to do. That's what Israel had imported into their life, into their mindset, into their lifestyle.

It wasn't that they were not religious, it wasn't that they were irreligious, they were an intense to religious people. The first chapter of this prophecy of Isaiah really gives a list of their religious practices and then God summarizes it and says, but I hate it.

because their heart wasn't in it. It was just a ritual, just ticking the boxes. I'm not suggesting I said that's what it is with ourselves, but the Bible is setting this out for us so that we can see the tendencies of our human hearts and explains why things as they are to some extent at least in the world of our day.

And so we are to show not only that God exists but we are to show that he is the only God, the true and living God and that we call people through the gospel to be redeemed from idolatry.

[20:22] As Peter said in his first epistle, you remember, this is what he said when he was reminding those that he was writing to there as to what God had redeemed them from.

when he said that they were not redeemed, they had not been redeemed by silver or gold, by money or things like that from the things that God had redeemed them from, but instead that they

were redeemed by the precious blood of Christ as of a lamb without blemish and without spot. But you remember one of the things he mentioned there was that they had actually been redeemed from the ways of their fathers, the futile traditions of your fathers.

Verse 18, knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, your pagan forefathers, your futile traditions, he says, and that's really where we are today, isn't it? What has God redeemed us from? Well, he's redeemed us from sin. Of course, that's putting it generally and in a summary way, but he's redeemed us from the futile traditions of self-made religion, of legalism, of paganism, of secularism, of self-interest, of all the things that characterize alternatives to God and to his gospel and to life in Christ.

[21 : 56] What a great privilege that he's given us to witness that he is God. As 1 Peter put it again, he has called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Why? So that you should declare, that you should show force, that you should exhibit and be witnesses to us, what really is meant, of the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

And the word excellencies there literally means the attributes of. Those who know Gaelic will know it's fjarshen.

It's the attributes. It's the things that characterize God as God. How does the world come to know these attributes of God?

Well, we saw in the Lord's Day or recently that to an extent that is actually something that is read from nature around you. But you have far more than that.

[22 : 56] And God has given us the scriptures and God has given us the knowledge by his Holy Spirit of himself in our hearts. And in doing so, he has placed us as his witnesses that he is God to show forth his attributes.

The world out there doesn't read the Bible. It doesn't read theological books. It doesn't read theological magazines. It doesn't largely look at anything to do with theology or religion on TV. And sadly, if it does, it's likely to come across much that's going to lead them astray anyway. But they read your life and my life. They read what we set out as our priorities.

They watch to see what our interests are, how we spend our time, how we relate to each other. whether we genuinely love each other or not.

All of that's known to the world. And as they read that, so they make conclusions about God. I am not saying that the world is not going to reach its own conclusions anyway.

[24 : 07] After all, they reached a very wrong conclusion about Jesus and he was perfect. you are never going to avoid the world reaching certain conclusions that are wrong, even if you have done your utmost to live a holy life.

But what we need to be reminded of and this is what he is reminding us of tonight is that we need to actually work at being his witnesses so that we don't give cause as far as possible for the world to misread God in what we are about or misunderstand who he is and what he is like.

And that God exists but also as the only God but also that the God who exists is a redeeming God. That is coming across strongly from the passage. I have spent a bit more time than I ought to have on the previous part.

So let me just go through this more quickly. The evidence that God's witnesses that you as God's witnesses produce yes that he exists and that he exists as the only God but also that he is a redeeming God.

That he redeems from sin. Look at the language of verse 3 there for example. I am the Lord your God the Holy One of Israel your Saviour.

[25 : 24] I gave Egypt as your ransom Cush and Seba in exchange for you. And verse 4 because you are precious in my eyes and honoured and I love you I give men in return for you peoples in exchange for your life.

The length to which God went to redeem his people was at the expense of many of the choice soldiers and people of Egypt. It wasn't that God was being cruel in the way that he dealt with the Egyptians.

I'll come to that point in conclusion. It was that he set out to redeem his people and everything that stood in the way of his people being redeemed God dealt with.

Even if it meant that his enemies needed to be defeated in the way that God thought best. What is it that's behind that? It's the fact that God loves his people and has loved them everlastingly.

This is what he's saying because I love you because you are precious in my eyes. What is it that's made us witnesses of God? What is it that's brought us to be said by God himself to be his witnesses?

[26 : 35] It is divine love. Nothing less than that. He chose in his love to set us forward as his witnesses.

What greater privilege is there than that? What greater encouragement is there than that? Of course left to our own strength we would indeed fail but this is the basis on which he's calling the Israel people of Israel back to repentance indeed where he's saying there in verses 22 to 24 having said you're my witnesses this is what I've done for you this is how you've come to be where you are this is why I'm placing you where I am yet he says in verse 22 you did not call upon me O Jacob you have been weary of me O Israel what a devastating critique that is of so much of the church of our day where in the strictest biblical sense God's church God's church in the scripture is presented as his chosen people his called out people to be his witnessing people and yet just like Israel and Judah you have been weary of me O Israel tired of his truth tired of looking at the Bible at face value and saying this is the word of God tired of the God of reformed theology tired of the God that has been worshipped in that way down through the ages tired of the emphasis of the reformers themselves on all the basic essential doctrines of the faith become weary of that it's too old fashioned it's too cumbersome can't expect people nowadays to learn about atonement and about all the various aspects of it or about election or about the mechanics of forgiveness and the person of Christ and the Trinity that's just all too complicated give us a simple Christianity give us something that's practical never mind the doctrinal stuff you can't have it that way God is actually saying unless you actually start with me and who I am and seek to grow in the grace and the knowledge of Christ well the practical things will serve little purpose but here he's saying you are the witnesses of God that he redeems from sin that he redeems people from their lostness that's the burden that he places upon our hearts as indeed that people would come to know him as the saviour not as the God that's caricatured in so many publications of atheists or of prominent secularists whatever else it may be as an alternative I've said it all before this God this saving

God this merciful God this God of forgiveness who redeems from sin the redeeming God and not only that he redeems us from sin but that he looks after his redeemed people look at the first two verses where do you find verses in the Bible more precious than that not very not in many places if at all fear not for I have redeemed you I have called you by name you are mine and then when you come to verse two how many generations of Christians individuals and churches and communities have actually come to be thankful for these words when you pass through the waters I will be with you and through the rivers they shall not overwhelm you when you walk through fire you shall not be burned and the flame shall not consume you why for I am the Lord your God the Holy One of Israel your Saviour I gave Egypt as your ransom in other words he is saying to them would this [31 : 01] God that I am who I am would I have gone to the lengths of giving Egypt as a ransom for you if I didn't intend to look after you and to you and to me as his witnesses isn't he saying tonight would I have given my son to die the death of the cross if I had any other intention but looking after you for the whole course of your life as my witnesses he is encouraging us of course it is a great challenge and we put it to ourselves in terms of how often we fall short and we fail but don't be consumed by that don't slacken your pace because of that indeed it is the opposite he is assuring us that you have nothing to fear as witnesses for God however corrupt the society around you may be I will look after you I have not redeemed you so that I'll forget about you I've not redeemed you so that

I'll just leave you behind to fend for yourself I'm not going to leave you to your own strength to the power of your own mind I'm not going to redeem you and place you then in a corrupt society and say to you make your way out of here and then I'll approve of you no I've already approved of you saying I've loved you I've redeemed you you are mine so don't be afraid when the going gets tough when you go through the waters when you go through the flame you'll feel its heat you'll have fears you'll sometimes tremble but the flame shall not consume you God will be in it with you I am the Lord your God and not only that but he redeems from sin he looks after his redeemed people but he also destroys their enemies there are some very solemn points accompanying the emphasis on a glorious salvation because wherever you have a glorious salvation in the

Bible the salvation of God's people you have alongside of it the destruction of his enemies the ark of Noah those that were redeemed from the flood were inside it those that were not drowned in the flood there is always destruction alongside of redemption and it will be so not only to the end of the world it will be so especially at the end of the world otherwise the words of Christ about hell are meaningless he redeems his people and they remain redeemed but the unredeemed perish God will destroy his enemies enemies and you know very well you know very well the many times you come across the view nowadays that if you believe in this God of the Old Testament especially then really there's something wrong with you isn't he a tyrant doesn't he destroy people doesn't the Bible tell us that he like in the flood of Noah's day destroyed multitudes of people is that not a cruel God is that not a tyrant somebody unworthy to be feared to be honored to be trusted in well put it this way is there anything wrong with God giving us all what we deserve is there anything wrong if God were to give us all what we deserve which is everlasting death forever from his presence would God be wrong in doing that of course not if it's what we deserve it wouldn't be wrong if it happened to us the wonder is not that there are some people who will not be redeemed who will not come to Christ who will be destroyed that there are enemies of the cross and of God who will end up in a lost eternity that's not the amazing thing the amazing thing is that there are others different to that that there are a redeemed and there is a redeemed people the amazing thing for us tonight is not destruction it's what we all deserve the amazing thing is redemption deliverance forgiveness righteousness peace with God the prospect of a glorious eternity that's what's amazing that's what we convey as God's witnesses may bless his word to us let's conclude our worship now tonight singing from Psalm 26 Psalm 26 and from verse 7 that's in the Sing

[36 : 29] Psalms version that's on page 31 from verse 7 to 12 I'll tell of all your awesome deeds proclaiming loud your praise your glory fills your dwelling place I love your house always sweep not away my soul O Lord with those who hate your way nor take away my life with those who love to wound and slay for their right hands are full of bribes they plot iniquity but I will lead a blameless life in mercy set me free my feet will stand with confidence upon a level place and in the people's gathering I'll praise the Lord of grace these verses I'll tell of all your awesome deeds I'll tell of all your awesome deeds proclaiming love your praise your glory fills your glory place

I love your arms always sweep not away my soul O Lord with hope to take your way nor take away my life where all could have to wound and slave for their right hands are rule of right they brought in equity but

I will be a daily life in mercy set me free my feet will stand with all their hands upon our level ways and in the people have been the people have been the Lord of grace if you let me get to the main door please after the benediction and now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ the love of God the Father and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you now and always

Amen ■ a nh ■ nghi