Made Witnesses

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Preacher: Daniel Ralph

[0:00] For those of you who take notes, I'll give you the full set of readings, but I'm only actually going to read from one part of God's Word this morning.

This is, we have been covering a series on a shared life, life with the Holy Spirit, that our life with God is a shared life, and we share it because God the Holy Spirit dwells within our mortal bodies. And this part here is part seven. This will be the final part.
I'll do others perhaps later on, but this will be the final part. We've had seven, and so this morning it is on the Spirit of God giving us the power to witness beyond human effort.
Okay, so it's the Spirit of God giving us the power to witness beyond human effort. And the reading is taken, as you might expect, from Acts chapter 1, verses 6 through to 9.
Acts chapter 1, verses 6 through to 9. And here are the other verses and chapters that I will be addressing in the sermon or throughout the sermon, but I'm not actually going to be reading out because there's quite a lot. The other, of course, is John 16, verse 6 through to 15. This is where Jesus says that it is to our advantage that he goes back to the Father in heaven so that the Spirit of God may come, the Comforter. It is the Spirit of God who comforts Christians in a fallen world. And that's the promise. That promise is kept, of course, but that's in John 16, verses 6 through to 15.
[1:58] Then, of course, Genesis 1 and 2. And you may think, well, what on earth does Genesis chapter 1 and 2 have to do with being God's witnesses? Well, because you were made in the image of God to reflect God on earth. Eden was a small part that occupied, well, I won't address that now, but Eden was not the world.

Eden was just a small place, a very small place, from which Adam and Eve were to go out into the world and make the rest of the world like Eden. That was their command. They were made in the image of God so that they could reflect God to the world that they would then create. In other words, be a witness.
Genesis 1 and 2. Genesis 11, of course, you have the Tower of Babel. You think, well, what does the Tower of Babel have to do with being God's witness? Well, because Pentecost is the reverse of Babel. Pentecost in Acts is the reversal of Babel. And then, of course, Isaiah 49, verse 6, that's just one of many, is drawing attention to the fact that Israel created a nation after Babel.
Remember, everyone spoke the same language and they decided that they would make a name for themselves. God scattered them. And then the next thing that God does after he scatters all these people with all these different languages is he chooses one person from which he will build a nation and that they are then to be a light to the nations. So right from the very beginning, we have this beautiful pattern that God is being reflected through his creation. And so now we read Acts 1, verses 6 through to 9, because that background is important if you're going to understand what the Acts of the Holy Spirit through the apostles really means. So now hear God's word.
So when they had 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 the times of the 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 ends of the earth. And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.
[4:47] And of course, the coming of the Holy Spirit is a unique event, something which they had to wait for, but most definitely something not that we have to wait for. It's already happened.

We can wait on God, but we certainly can't wait in the same way they were commanded to, because it's been and gone. Well, let me pray before we address God's word. Father, we would ask this morning that we would understand from the depth of our very heart that we are the only people

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in this world who can proclaim Jesus is Lord, that we're the only people who can draw attention to Christ Jesus and him crucified. We're the only people because we're the only people who have been made new in Christ and therefore made witnesses. And we would ask, Father God, this morning that you would bless us and keep us and lead us, that we would be faithful servants of you. In Jesus' name. Amen. So several years ago, several years ago now, I handed in an essay to one of my professors. And my professor looked at me, who is, I would consider, probably one of the best theologians in the world. In the world. I mean, he's written several books to prove his gifting. And he looked at me and said, did you do it in a rush? Well, the thing is, I knew, given his skill, his knowledge, his ability, that there's absolutely no way that I was going to be able to say anything that was going to be able to overcome that statement, because he's going to be able to see through everything. He's probably taught thousands of people theology. And I said, I don't think I did it in a rush. And so he says to me, do you think that you ought to do it again? I said, well, it seems that way, doesn't it? He says, you go away and do it again. And I did it. And he says, well, before you do,
I want you to read this book and this book and then come back to me with a new essay. So I did. And I took the essay back and everything was fine. The point, I think, is a fairly simple one.
And that is, by what standard, by what standard do you witness Christ to the world? In other words, is this the best you can do?
By what standard do you witness Christ to the world? In the book of Isaiah, in Isaiah 49, God asks a rhetorical question to his people, Israel. And Israel are to be a light to the nations. They are to reflect God on earth so that they would draw people to themselves, to God, by drawing them to themselves. And the rhetorical question that God asks is this, is it too light a thing that you should be my servant? In other words, do you want to do something far more grand, far more important as you see it in your eyes? Is it too little a thing for you to be my servant?
[8:09] It seems a strange thing that God would ask this of his people, unless, of course, his people are not being the very witnesses and not serving God in the way that they ought to. So by what standard does your witness, is your witness measured? Well, of course, it should be the very standard of God. Now, God gives us his Holy Spirit here in the book of Acts and continually to the church throughout every generation because he wants us to be his witnesses. And he recognizes that he must give us the power to be witnesses beyond human effort. Human effort can only take us so far, but dependence on God can take us so much further. It can give us both the desire and the power to be able to serve God in the way that he wants to be served. And as we have seen, as we have seen, everything comes down to the glory of God. 1 Corinthians 10 verse 31. Whatever you do, do it all to the glory of God. In other words, by what standard are you doing what you do?

And if the standard is not the glory of God, then it needs addressing. And that's really what God is saying here in Isaiah, isn't it? By what standard are you doing what you're doing? Is it for the glory of God or is it for some other reason? So two things have to be considered. Firstly, Christians have been made a witness. And secondly, Christians have to bear witness. And these two are not the same.
Being made a witness is fundamental. And bearing witness means you can either do it or not do it. And so how is this to be addressed? Well, notice in Acts chapter 1 verse 6 through to 9, that the passage is familiar, so familiar in fact, that we know that the disciples were waiting, the apostles that became apostles, were waiting on the Holy Spirit to receive power from on high. And then they were to go out in that power and be witnesses to God throughout the world. That power would then take them beyond their human personalities, their human accomplishments, abilities, gifts, and of course energy, desire, and power. The Holy Spirit would propel these people into the world to be witnesses for God. What is less familiar is the background. And that's the way scripture tends to work with those who read it. What is more familiar to you are those bits that you read more often. So if you read the New Testament more than you read the Old, then it naturally follows that the New Testament is more familiar to you than the Old. If you read a portion of the Psalms more than others, then it naturally follows again that some Psalms will be more familiar to you than the others. That's just the way familiarity works. It comes through exposure, how much you have exposed yourself to a portion of the Bible. Now there is no reason, of course, why we should expose ourselves to one part of the Bible any more than the other part. I can understand your perhaps resistance to not reading through the book of Jeremiah or Lamentations because it's hard work and it's sad and you feel down when you read it, but it is God's inspired word that shapes us just like 1

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Timothy or 2 Timothy or Matthew 4 or Matthew 5 or whatever book and chapter you want to choose. Now the reason I say that is because if you're not familiar with what I preceded the sermon with and what it means to be God's witnesses and that almost everything that God has done is to proclaim himself through us, creating us in his image, restoring us in his image, then it becomes very hard to understand how important Acts chapter 1 is. Unless, of course, you understand why Babel happened, then it becomes again very difficult to understand why God created one nation from Abraham, which were to be a light to all the other nations, and then, of course, leading to the church. So there is a difference, of course, then between being made a witness and bearing witness, and the background to Acts chapter 1, and of course Acts chapter 1 following helps us to understand how that works. So let me try and illustrate. Imagine this morning that as you are arriving at church, you witnessed a car crash. You saw it, you were there when it happened, but no one else in this church saw it or was there. You're the only one. And then a policeman walks into this very building and generally asks, can anybody tell me what happened? Can anybody, there's a car crash, can anybody tell me what happened? There's only one person in this whole building who can speak. And that is the one person who witnessed it. The one person who was there. The one person who saw it happen. He's the only one who can speak. He's the only one who can say anything. Or she's the only one who can say anyone. Doesn't matter if it's the youngest girl or the oldest man. Whoever it was that saw it, they're the only one who can speak. Why is that so important? Because now you're beginning to understand what it means to be made a witness. Witnesses are made. Before they ever speak, a witness has to be made. And a witness is made by an event that you are witness to.

And so as Christians, you are witnesses because Christ has made you a witness by saving you. You have been made a witness because the Lord Jesus Christ died on the cross, rose from the grave, and has now made you a witness. It is because what has happened to you that you have become a witness.

[14:57] So whether you like it or not, being a witness is not something that you first speak. It is actually something that first happens. You can only speak if you have first been made a witness by an event. And so the only one who can speak about the car crash is the only one who witnessed the car crash or who has been made a witness through being there at the time when the car crashed.

This is how witness and witnessing works. Now, if you are, have been made a witness in Christ Jesus, which you have, you therefore can now speak. But you can only speak because you have firstly been made a witness. Hence why we have said a couple of times over these last few weeks that you are the only people on earth who can proclaim Jesus is Lord. That you are the only people on earth who can proclaim the accomplishment of Jesus Christ and him crucified. Because you have been made a witness, you can therefore bear witness. But if you were not a witness, then you could not speak to any of that. So this is how, this is how being made a witness works. And this is why the Spirit of God is then given to these people who have witnessed everything that they have about Christ and are now given the power to go out into the world and speak. Now the gospel is about news, something which has happened, something which is very good that has happened. The event's not happening all over again.

The event has happened. Christ was born. Christ ministered. Christ died. Christ rose. Christ ascended.

That happened once. It's not going to happen again. But as witnesses, we go out and now speak to those events. And we, like Thomas, recognize or should recognize that though we were not there, that we should understand, like John says, that greater are those who believe and yet have never seen, or as Jesus says in John. That the faith that we have is equal to Thomas putting his finger in the side of Jesus. That's the same type of conviction you have when the Holy Spirit is given to you. The Holy Spirit then leads us into all truth. So I have the same type of conviction about Jesus Christ risen from the dead as Thomas did when he put his finger in the hole in Jesus' side.

[17:46] And so do you. Because that's the power and the desire that the Spirit enables in the person who belongs to Christ. That's why you can speak. That's why you can declare. So this is also why Jesus says, do not hide your light under a bushel. Because you have been made a witness, you are therefore then made a light in a dark world, a fallen world. And so Jesus would not have to say, do not hide your light under a bushel unless, of course, you are tempted to do so. And a simple way of illustrating just what this means is how many of your neighbors know that you're

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Christian?

Is your light hidden? Or is it known? How many of your people that you mix with know that you belong to Christ? Are you hiding your light?
Or is it on show? Because you have been made a witness, you should not hide your light under the table. You should not hide your light under a bushel. You should not dilute the very thing that God has made you to be. So it's very easy to tell whether or not we're diluting the light or hiding the light. God created Israel to be a light to the nations.
A light to the nations, just like he has created us to be a light in this fallen world. And so now we understand that if we have been made a witness, we are therefore obligated then to bear witness. God created Adam and Eve. They were then to reflect God in the world. Because they have been made in his image, they were then to reflect that image.
When God made Israel from Abram and then Abraham, when the covenant is given, they were then to be a light to the nations. Because God had made them to be his people, they were then to be lights to the nations around them. Especially after Babel. Because you remember, these were, all these nations came together, spoke the same language, and decided not to follow God. And to follow other gods and follow their own way. And God had to bring the tower down and confuse the languages. And then of course you have the reversal of Babel at Pentecost. But before you even get to Pentecost, you have Israel being a light to the nations. Israel were to be the very people in the world who showed the rest of the world what it meant to live before God and for God. And to serve him. No one else in the world is doing it.
[20:39] And so what happens if Israel then hides their light? Well, no one else in the world knows what it means to live for God. No one else in the world gets to see what it means to live for God. They're not proclaiming Christ Jesus and him crucified. They're simply living in a way that demonstrates God's faithfulness. God's patience. God's love. God's covenant. God's character. And all of those things. And so now the Spirit of God is given to us in Acts to enable us to do what God wants us to do beyond human effort. So that our personalities don't hold us back. So that our gifts don't hold us back. So that we're not holding ourselves back. But God has given us himself to empower us to do the things beyond human effort. Because we are now witnesses. Because we are transformed. So understand that if you are a Christian, you were made a Christian. You were made a Christian by the accomplishment of Christ. And because you've been made a Christian, you have been made a witness. And because you've been made a witness, you are now obligated to bear that witness to the world around you.

You're the only people in this world who can shine his lights. You're the only people in the world who can proclaim Jesus as Lord. You're the only people who can testify to the accomplishment of Christ Jesus and him crucify us. And the reason you do, because everything else in the world is measured by what standard? By what standard?
As we look through the New Testament, even before we get to Acts, and we just go through the Gospels, we see how important Christ is, the kingdom of God is, salvation is, the forgiveness of sins. We see where Christ puts all the focus. And the focus is clearly on the accomplishment of Christ Jesus for the forgiveness of sins. That is clearly where the message focuses. That is the very thing that we are to speak. But that's not the only witness, is it?
And John Stott put it like this. He said that the worst thing that could ever be said about a Christian is that you're no different than anybody else. That's the worst thing that could ever be said about you. Where your neighbor comes up to you and goes, we're really not that different, are we?
It should break your heart. It should really break your heart. Because there's a world of difference between a person in Christ Jesus and a person who is not.
[23:40] And the only reason perhaps someone in the street could say that to you or your neighbor could say that is because your light is hidden from them. And so we're faced with the same thing that Israel are faced with. Is it too light a thing, too small a thing for you to be my servant? Would you rather be doing something else?

Perhaps you are doing something else. But this would be to deny the very people that we have been made to be.
And witness to. So now we understand that being a witness doesn't just mean that we go out and proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord. It means that the light shines where?
Well it's going to shine in what work we do. It's going to shine in what work we don't do. What we're committed to, what we're not committed to.

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It's going to shine in how we live. It's going to shine in how we use money. What we think about money. What our hopes and what our dreams are. It's going to shine in our marriages. [24:50] It's going to shine in our parenting. it's going to shine in our education or how we educate it's going to shine in healthcare in other words all of these things ought to witness Christ by what standard?

the glory of God all of these things are a witness to Christ's accomplishment it's an outworking of the work of God it may not be the center but it most definitely is the fruit of what Christ has accomplished and the reason I say that is because when you look at the world it becomes very obvious even when you look at the church that people come to faith in different ways now notice what I said just in case you're taking notes that you picked me up correctly people come to faith in different ways but they are saved in exactly the same way Christ Jesus saves people through his life, death and resurrection God calls them God brings them God calls them to repentance they repent and believe so it's exactly the same way for everyone but different people arrive at Christ in very different ways some are lepers some are brought on beds some walk straight up to him some are blind shouting out to him the experiences that people have on meeting Christ are different and the questions that they have is also very different but let me give you a little story to illustrate just why this is important

Peter Hitchens who is the brother of the late Christopher Hitchens Christopher Hitchens you will know is the man who wrote God is not great you read a couple of chapters and there's an immediate contradiction in the book but you know when you read the book you understand how he thinks but he is now dead but Peter Hitchens on his journey back to faith actually made his way back to faith by looking at a painting by Roach van der Weyden's The Last Judgment I don't know if you've ever seen the painting I've never seen it in real life but I've seen plenty of pictures of it in beautiful books and online and you can even print one off if you like a copy you can buy a good copy and Weyden's Van der Weyden's picture on The Last Judgment is terrifying absolutely terrifying he's captured almost every possible human fear and Peter Hitchens as he looked at this painting felt just by looking at the painting that he might just be one of those people who are judged in exactly the same way and he said it terrified me it terrified me and that was the very impetus of causing him and causing his heart to be stirred and to make his journey back to the faith a painting of course Christ says but the means by which God stirs the human heart are varied and Christ did it with Peter Hitchens through a painting just as Proverbs recognizes that when Peter began to feel fear it brought about the very wisdom of God okay the beginning of wisdom is what?

fearing the Lord and so the very fear that he felt brought about the very wisdom so that he could then begin to see clearly and then begin to come back to Christ but why is this so important?

well if God can do that with Peter Hitchens through a painting then God can do that with your next door neighbor through your marriage if God can do that with Peter Hitchens through a painting then God can do that to your next door neighbor through how you educate your children how you spend your money how you think about health care how you think about parenting you see everything's a witness everything is a witness because everything is to the glory of God or it ought to be to the glory of God so therefore do not think that the only time that you are witnessing or being a witness is when you are speaking the gospel because your whole life for all of your life is designed by God to witness God and therefore the temptation is to hide that light because of the contradictions you feel of you not living up to Christ is it too small a thing for you to be Christ's servant?

[29:52] that's what's being asked of you in Isaiah isn't it? so while proclaiming the gospel is central to being a witness to Christ to being a witness to your neighbor Peter understands in his letter that on the day of God's coming unbelievers will see your good deeds will see your good works and then praise God he doesn't say anything about you proclaiming the gospel he says they will see your good deeds how you parent how you use money how you work why you work how you're committed why you're committed all of those good things they will see those things and give God the glory on the day of his visitation everything's a witness well here's the exhortation as we close so without question you have been made a witness by God because God has saved you the question you must now wrestle with is am I hiding my light under a bushel or am I being the very witness that God has made me to be is everything that I'm doing for the glory of God or do I have a lesser standard which revolves around me and so God the Holy Spirit is given to empower us to do those things beyond human effort beyond human personality beyond human desires to be able to enable us to do what God wants us to do to serve him in this world we have been made

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weaknesses and so there's one very searching question isn't there that comes from this and it's this when was the last time an unbeliever family or not neighbor or not loved or not heard the gospel from your mouth when was the last time family member or not neighbor or not loved one or not work colleague or not heard the gospel from your mouth because when God made witnesses he didn't make videos he didn't make posters he made you to be his witnesses in this fallen world and because you're his witnesses remember you are the only people in the world the only people in the world who can proclaim that Jesus is Lord risen from the dead to the glory of God the Father for the forgiveness of sins amen well let's stand as we sing our final hymn this morning man said well let's guess if you know

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