

Witness to All

Acts 21:27–22:21

April 28, 2002

“The God of our fathers appointed you to know his will, to see the Just One and to hear a voice from his mouth; for you will be a witness for him to all men of what you have seen and heard. And now why do you wait?” Before the beginning of time, before the creation of the world, before the origin of human life, before the call of Abraham, and before the birth of Jesus Christ, God had appointed Paul to know his will, to see the resurrected and living Jesus Christ, and to hear a voice from his mouth, for Paul was to be a witness for Christ to all the world of what he had seen and heard. God had appointed all of that for Paul. Then it all came to be. What has God appointed for you and me? What has God determined for the course of your life and mine? What are the gifts God has given us? What is the witness which Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church shall bear?

“The God of our fathers appointed you to know his will, to see the Just One and to hear a voice from his mouth; for you will be a witness for him to all men of what you have seen and heard. And now why do you wait?” To all human perception, Paul was in a terrible situation. The Holy Spirit had warned him of hard times ahead in Jerusalem. The crowd there had turned against him. The Roman government had arrested him and put him in chains. And yet, when it came time to defend himself before the mob, it was given to Paul to remember before them his conversion to faith in Jesus Christ and his calling into the ministry of Jesus Christ. For him, the two were the same. He was converted and called at the same time. He was turned to believe in Christ and sent forth to proclaim Christ both at the same time. When his life was in jeopardy, when his faith and his ministry were on trial, when all that he believed and all that he stood for were at stake, Paul was driven back to his roots to say who he was and what he was about, in order to show that his life was in obedience to the will of God and not in defiance of it. What are the roots of your life? What is the basis of your conversion? What is your calling? What is your witness and service? What are you and I about here and now in Richmond, Virginia? Are we living in defiance of the will of God or in obedience to it?

Beyond the hard reality of Paul’s chains, in a court higher than that of the Roman tribune, with a truth more sublime than the crowd could imagine, the good news about and for Paul’s life was that his life was hidden in the will of God, that his life was connected to, and tied up with, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, that God had taken away his sin and guilt and had promised him eternal life, and that God had deigned to use even him in working out God’s great purposes in the history of the world. Even the opposition which Paul experienced was in fulfillment of prophecy and was part of God’s plan. Neither the crowd nor the tribune knew it, but they carried out the will of God.

This tells us that life is not simply chance or chaos. It may be hard. From our vantage point, the way may not be clear. But life is not capricious. It is not meaningless. It is not empty or without hope. Behind the scenes, the one whom we have come to know as the God and Father of Jesus Christ is in control, calling us into his service, gathering us in his love, fulfilling his good and gracious will in and through us. This is our faith. This is our hope. This is the reason we are able to go on living and to face life with courage and good cheer. God is good to us in ways beyond our imagining.

Before the beginning of time, before the creation of the world, before the origin of human life, before the call of Abraham, and before the birth of Jesus Christ, God has appointed us to hear his word, to believe in his Son, to be united in his church, and to bear witness to him. Now, it has come to be. Despite all the other voices we hear, we have heard the word of God. Despite all the alien faiths vying for our attention, our commitment, our time, energy, and gifts, we have come to believe in Jesus Christ. Despite all the forces which would tear us apart and scatter us across the face of the earth, God has gathered us here, given us to each other, and made us part of each other's life. Despite the enticements to keep our silence, we are still called upon to make our witness at home, in the city, in this nation, and in the world. This is who we are and what we are about. Thanks be to God!

Paul had completed three missionary journeys. He had started churches in a number of major cities around the northern edge of the Mediterranean Sea. He had carried the infant Christian faith beyond the bounds of Judaism into the Greek speaking world of the Roman Empire, paving the way for Christianity to move beyond being a small sect within Judaism and to move toward becoming a faith for all the world. And when he came home to Israel, his countrymen despised him. They misunderstood his promotion of Christ to be a denigration of Judaism. Even though he understood Christ to be the fulfillment of everything good in Israel's faith and history, he could not convince them that he had not done something terribly wrong by carrying that good news beyond the boundaries of Israel, beyond the restrictions of race, language, and nation. And yet, even in addition to the direct word of God to Paul instructing him to go to the Gentiles, we have also the ancient words of the prophet Isaiah, to whom also it had been revealed that God intended his salvation to reach out into all the world:

And now the LORD says,
 who formed me from the womb to be his servant,
to bring Jacob back to him,
 and that Israel might be gathered to him,
for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD,
 and my God has become my strength—
he says:
“It is too light a thing that you should be my servant
 to raise up the tribes of Jacob
 and to restore the preserved of Israel;
I will give you as a light to the nations,
 that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth” (Isaiah 49:5–6).

That is to say, it had never been enough for Israel alone to be saved. God loves the whole world, and he continues to intend for all people to know that.

By the end of the book of Acts, Paul will have been carried to Rome, still under arrest, but still preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. Having been rejected by his countrymen, he will have turned his attention to the Gentiles once again. However, he came to understand even the Jews' rejection of the gospel as part of God's plan. That is, he understood it as a temporary phenomenon, giving time to allow the rest of the world to come to faith, but then coming to an end with the salvation of Israel, also. “For the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable” (Romans 11:29).

All of this puts us in an interesting and important position. As Gentile Christians, we are recipients of the grace of God in Jesus Christ through the distant ministry of the Apostle Paul. And precisely as such, it is incumbent upon us as our responsibility and high privilege to continue to carry out and to extend his mission of carrying the gospel of Jesus Christ to all the world. It is not enough for us to realize from today's reading that the Jews made a terrible mistake in trying to prevent Paul from carrying the gospel to the rest of the world. The message for us in today's reading is also that it would be a terrible mistake for us to fail to carry the gospel to the rest of the world. Jesus Christ is not for the church alone anymore than salvation was for Israel alone. Jesus Christ is for the world. It is here that we have learned of him, met him, and come to know him and believe him. And it is from here that we are sent out to carry his good news to all the world. We cannot keep it for ourselves. We cannot hide him. We cannot be greedy or selfish. That would be to betray him. That would deny his gospel. Instead, we can do no other than to shout his gospel from the rooftops.

What do those rooftops look like today? How do we spread the good news? We are certainly grateful for the high privilege of our radio ministry, carrying the gospel to thousands of listeners, being strengthened in our own worship as we are joined by those in their homes, in hospital rooms, in their cars, and so forth. We are grateful to be able to print and mail out sermons to hundreds of members, visitors, and friends of the church on our mailing lists. And we are grateful for the new technologies of computers and the Internet, making our message available around the world, and you will be interested to know that one of our new members who joined today learned a great deal about us through our web site before he ever made his first visit. But what about more personal involvements?

As a part of today's two worship services, five people are reaffirming their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. At one level, they are meeting the entrance requirements for the Presbyterian Church. But at another level, they are proclaiming their faith aloud and publicly, for all the world to hear. We are the beneficiaries of that. Those of us who already believe have our faith strengthened by this gift. And those who do not yet believe may, by this simple testimony, be led to do so. Here is one formal, but important, example of sharing the faith.

Beyond these walls, there are thousands of people in and around this city who are dying for lack of a savior. There are thousands of people who are lost, confused, hurt, wounded, wandering, alienated, alone, lonely, and misguided. Even the strong and healthy may need more help than they realize, a direction to their lives, a focus for their energies, a guide for their efforts, a place to serve. God has a word for each of these people in Jesus Christ. God has a word of hope and love for each of us. Paul was to be a witness to all of what he had seen and heard. So are we to be a witness to all of what we have seen and heard. We are to carry the good news we have received here out into the world. There, we are to invite others back here so that they, too, may hear it. Paul did that in chains and under threat of imprisonment. Surely we can do that in the freedom of America.

Beyond here, we have also the responsibility and privilege of world mission. Perhaps few of us will be able to journey to the mission fields of the church, though perhaps more than we realize now will be able to do just that. But many of us can support world mission financially, and all of us can support world mission with our prayers. As we have received the gospel through the mission efforts of the church throughout the centuries, so now it is our turn to share it with others.

In times of trial, in times of questioning, in times of searching, in times of faith and faithfulness, and in times of obedience and mission, let us go with Paul back to our conversion and back to our calling and there find again and reaffirm God's will for our lives. "The God of our fathers appointed you to know his will, to see the Just One and to hear a voice from his mouth; for you will be a witness for him to all men of what you have seen and heard. And now why do you wait?"

*To God Almighty, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
be all praise, honor, and glory
now and forever! Amen.*

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