

Witnesses of God

David Flatt

In the fourteenth chapter of Acts, Paul and Barnabas traveled to the province of Lycaonia. They spent time in the towns of this region preaching the Gospel and performing miracles. Upon their arrival to the Lycaonian town of Lystra, they healed a man who had been unable to walk since birth (Acts 14:8-10).

When the people saw what Paul and Barnabas had done, they said, “...*The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!*” (Acts 14:11). They proceeded to celebrate the arrival of the Roman gods, Jupiter and Mercury. While this may seem strange to us, there is precedent for why the Lycaonians reacted in this fashion.

About fifty or so years earlier, the Roman poet Ovid (43 BC-18 AD) invented a myth about the gods coming to Lycaonia. The story was that an older married couple, Baucis and Philemon, showed hospitality to two strangers. No one else in town was hospitable to the strangers. The strangers revealed their true identities: the Greek gods Zeus and Hermes (the Roman equivalent of these gods was Jupiter and Mercury). The gods pronounced destruction to the town but saved Baucis and Philemon. They were granted “eternal life” by being turned into two trees that stood next to the temple at Phrygia.

This story was part of the mythology believed by the people of Lycaonia. Now, Paul and Barnabas were more than just strangers in town. They performed miracles in plain sight. They Lycaonians naturally thought the gods had returned to their town. Only this time, the story would be different. They would welcome the gods hospitably.

As the Lycaonians commenced with their worship, Paul and Barnabas tried to explain who they were: “*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*” (Acts 14:15-17).

Paul and Barnabas were not gods. They were mere men: humans like the Lycaonians. However, they did have good news to tell the Lycaonians. This news would cause them to turn from idols to the living, creator God. This creator God had not left Himself without witnesses. The natural world testified of His existence and rule.

Well, Paul and Barnabas could hardly stop the Lycaonians from worshipping them. Soon afterward, hostile Jews from the nearby towns of Antioch and Iconium came to Lystra. They persuaded the people to turn against Paul and Barnabas. They stoned Paul and left him for dead.

This account by Luke helps serve the broader purposes of his writing. In both his gospel and in the book of Acts, he writes partly to prove how the Messiah is for the world: Jews and Gentiles (Luke 1:1-4, 3:21-38; Acts 1:1-3). In this compelling account, Luke records Paul saying that God did not leave the world without witnesses. In other words, God has left the world evidence which testifies to His existence and rule. But, what is the evidence?

The Evidence

Exhibit A: Creation. This is the evidence Paul and Barnabas offered the pagans of Lystra. Within the pagan worldview, they understood there was a being who created the gods. In Athens, Paul encountered the shrine of the “*Unknown God*” (Acts 17:15-34). Of course, the pagan view of a creator god was ill-conceived. Paul explains the true nature of the Creator.

Luke does not record Paul and Barnabas expounding further about God’s witness of creation. The scene seems to have been quite chaotic. Never the less, creation bears witness to the Creator. This evidence is sufficient to persuade us of God’s existence and to spur further investigation into who He is (Rom. 1:20).

Exhibit B: Apostles. Jesus chose the apostles to serve as the world’s witnesses of Him: “*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*” (Acts 1:8).

When we read the writings of the apostles, we are reading their testimony concerning Jesus, the Messiah. They tell us what they saw and heard. Their goal is to persuade us that Jesus is our Savior. To this end, John wrote, “*That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ*” (1 John 1:1-3).

Exhibit C: Resurrection. More specifically, the apostles bore witness to the greatest piece of evidence: the resurrected Jesus. God raised Jesus from the dead. The apostles saw and had encounters with the resurrected Jesus. Afterward, they testified of what they had witnessed.

Today, the apostle Paul is considered even by skeptics to be the most credible witness of the resurrection. He cites eyewitness evidence of the resurrection as validation for his message of salvation: “*For I delivered to you as of first importance 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 to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred 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. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God*” (1Cor. 15:3-9).

Conclusion

There is an embarrassment of riches concerning the evidence of God and what He accomplished through Jesus. Other evidence includes but is not limited to the canonization of the Bible, geographical accuracy of the Bible, archeological discoveries, conversions of disciples, miracles, and fulfilled prophecy.

But, what will we do with the evidence? Like a jury, we must deliberate and make a decision. Concerning the evidence John documented of Jesus' resurrection, he wrote, "*Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name*" (John 20:30-31). Will you ignore the evidence? Or, will you believe and obey?