

GOD, HIS OWN WITNESS

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"Nevertheless he left not himself without witness, in that he did good, and gave us rain from heaven, and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness." Acts 14:17.

We live today in a society which thinks little about God. People tend to live their lives as if there were no God, generally speaking. If they think at all, they tend to assume that everything merely came about by chance. It just evolved! Evolution is the great omnibus word of the age which excuses people the trouble of thinking. But this philosophy is not much deeper than poor Topsy's. You remember when Topsy was asked, who made her? She answered, "Nobody, I 'spect I just growed." If you ask people today, who made them and the world, they look equally puzzled and answer, "Well it all just evolved."

But the truth is, God has not left himself without a witness. He is the Creator of all things and that is written on the face of his creation. The earth, the sky, the sun, the moon all point to him, who made all things.

*"The spacious firmament on high,
"With all the blue ethereal sky,
"The spangled heavens, a shining frame
"Their great Original proclaim."
(Joseph Addison)*

The harvest itself is a witness to a Creator God. It comes round year by year. It meets our needs in no accidental way, but by a wonderful conspiracy of the powers of nature. The rain, the sunshine, the soil, the insects, the labours of man, all contribute, all work together to produce the harvest, which supports and nourishes human life.

The Psalmist refers to this in Psalm 104:13ff.

"He watereth the hills from his chambers: the earth is satisfied with the fruit of thy works. He causeth the grass to grow for the cattle, and herb for the service of man: that he may bring forth food out of the earth; And wine that maketh glad the heart of man, and oil to make his face to shine, and bread which strengtheneth man's heart."

This is the teaching of Holy Scripture. It is the truth which God has revealed in his Word. How different from the gross ignorance and speculation of today. How different also from the beliefs of the people of Lycaonia amongst whom Paul and Barnabas had gone, and whose idolatrous behaviour had led Paul to utter the words of our text. They were not atheists or agnostics, as many people are today. They were polytheists, that is, they believed not in one God, as did the Jews, but in many gods. A god of the sky, another god of the wind, another god of the sea, and so on. And that, of course, was just as wrong and misguided as is the atheism or agnosticism of the present day.

The truth is, that the mind of man left to itself swings to extremes, and goes wildly wrong in these important matters. That is the consequence of sin and the fall. "The understanding is darkened," says Paul, "being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of the heart." Ephesians 4:18. So people in this condition have no spiritual bearings, nothing by which to arrive at a proper spiritual understanding and judgement regarding the world about them and themselves.

But the faith of the apostle Paul and his companion Barnabas was settled upon the true centre; upon the Creator, upon the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Why? Because God, the true and living God, has not left himself without witness. If only men and women could look with unprejudiced eyes at the world around them. If only they could view the

phenomena of nature without their minds and judgements being darkened by sin. If only they could see what is written in the earth and the sky, and so evidently set forth in them, they also would be compelled to confess, that God has not "left himself without witness."

First, God has not left himself without witness to his existence.

The first step of faith is to believe in God, that he is. "He that cometh to God must believe that he is," Hebrews 11:6. That is where modern man falls down; he falls at the first hurdle. But why should he? "God has not left himself without witness." The evidence is all about us. When Robinson Crusoe saw the footprint in the sand, he was convinced. He knew for a certainty that there was another human being on the island. He did not see him with his eyes, but he knew for sure that he was not alone.

We cannot see God with our physical eyes. "No man hath seen God at any time;" John 1:18. But the evidence of his existence is all around us. We have much more evidence than Robinson Crusoe had; we have the whole system and economy of nature. Many years ago, Archdeacon Paley wrote something like this: "If I am walking on a heath, and strike my foot against a stone, and ask, How did it come there? I might answer, For all I know it might have been there for ever. But if I found a watch, that answer would not do. Why? Because it is a contrivance; it has been put together by an intelligent being." Wherever we look, there are signs of design in the world - the flowers, the birds, animals, man himself supremely. All these bear in and about them such marks of a creative Intelligence as to tell us that God exists.

But why do people not see this, and acknowledge it? Paul has made this very clear and gives us the answer in Romans 1:20, "For the invisible things of God from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse." The minds of people, in their natural state, are darkened and blinded by sin. As a result they cannot see God even in his own creation. But God has not left himself without witness to his existence. It is there, even if men cannot and will not see and acknowledge it; so that they are "without excuse".

Secondly, God has not left himself without witness to his wisdom.

"O Lord, how manifold are thy works! in wisdom hast thou made them all" Psalm 104:24. The harvest which comes round year by year is a proof of the wisdom of God, and of the wonderful provision he has made for the needs of mankind. The productive power of the earth is very great and very wonderful. It is referred to by our Lord in the parable of the sower. The seed that fell on good ground brought forth "some thirty, some sixty and some an hundredfold."

At the beginning of the nineteenth century a man called Malthus argued that there would be world-wide famine in that century, as the production of food could not keep pace with the growing population, and all the hopes for the future would end in disaster. But he was proved wrong. Why? Well, the earth is astonishingly more productive than he thought. His calculations, brilliant mathematician that he was, were wrong. New methods of farming outstripped his forecasts. The earth is capable of producing enough food for the whole world population, and more. But it is not always properly managed, and many of the famines that afflict mankind are man-made disasters.

God has ordered all things well. We see it in the design and planning of the world, the whole vast scheme - what order and symmetry and precision! God has not left himself without a witness to his wisdom. Let me give you one detail, yet a lot hangs upon it. Water, upon which all life on earth depends, has the most remarkable properties. When it gets cold, it contracts as do other substances. But it is unique in that at a certain point, just before it freezes, it expands. If it did not do this, but continued to contract, ice would be heavier than water, with the result that it would sink to the bottom of the lakes and seas; and in course of time all the lakes and seas in the world would become mere

masses of ice from the bottom up, and life on earth would be impossible! But because of the unique properties of water, the ice floats upon the surface of the lakes and seas, and melts when the air becomes warmer, and so life is sustained in the waters, and on the earth. "O Lord, how manifold are thy works! in wisdom hast thou made them all: the earth is full of thy riches" Psalm 104:24. "The Lord by wisdom hath founded the earth; by understanding he hath established the heavens" Proverbs 3:19.

God has not left himself without witness to his wisdom.

Thirdly, God has not left himself without witness to his goodness.

The harvest annually testifies to the goodness of God. Paul and Barnabas appealed to the heathen at Lycaonia to turn from their idols to the living and true God. They pitied and deplored the ignorance of these poor, benighted people who brought sacrifices to offer to them, thinking that they were the gods Jupiter and Mercury, because by the power of the Lord Jesus they had healed a lame man. They cried out, "Why do you do these things? We are men just as you are, and preach to you that you should turn from idol worship to the true and living God, who made heaven and earth, and the sea, and all things in them. Who in the past allowed men to follow their own ways, but at the same time did not leave himself without witness, in that 'he did good, and gave us rain from heaven, and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness'."

Just think of the infinite variety of the fruits of the earth. There is no sameness or dullness. I suppose God might have created a world without colour - in black and white, but instead he has given us the blue of the sky and sea; the white clouds; the green grass and trees; the dazzling array of the colours of flowers; the rich, brown earth; the splendour of the rainbow; the golden sunlight.

I suppose God could have given us food without taste. Instead, he has given to us the sweetness of the grape, of the cherry, and of apples and peaches; and all the subtle flavours of salads and vegetables.

*Yes, God is good, in earth and sky,
From woodland tress and swelling flood;
Ten thousand voices ever cry,
God made us all, and God is good.*

Or as the apostle James put it, "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning." James 1:17.

But all this is like "looking through a glass darkly." The world and the universe witness to God, but in a general sort of way: what we have in nature are only pointers to Him. How can we know this Creator God better? How can we enter into a relationship with him? We need something more to go on. We need to know God personally, not merely by inference from his works in creation.

But there is also another dimension to this quest. The gifts of harvest, the fruits of the earth, put us under an obligation. We have a moral duty to enquire after the author of them. Imagine a poor family. Every day some unknown benefactor leaves them gifts of food at their door. They do not know who it is, but regularly the gifts appear. Are they not under an obligation to try to find out who it is who supplies them with these good things, and to thank that person? Are they not worthy of blame if they are simply content to remain ignorant? Do they not condemn themselves if they have no sense of gratitude, and show no desire to find out who supplies them with these gifts, and are just content to take everything?

This, indeed, is the apostle Paul's great argument in Acts 17, when he preached to the people of Athens. This was where he started. God, he said, has made the world and all things in it. He has made mankind, and determined the times and the seasons. And he has so ordered things, that men might seek after him. These are his actual words, Acts 17:27: "...that they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not far from every one of us."

Men ought to seek after God, they have a duty and obligation to do so. They must feel after him in the darkness of this world, (we are speaking of the spiritual darkness that is due to sin); as men grope and feel for an object in the absence of light. And if they did so search for God, they would not be disappointed, "for he is not far from every one of us." In the darkness we do not know where objects are; they may seem very far away when in fact they are near at hand, within reach. Jesus said, "Seek and ye shall find." If you do not find God, it is because you are not seeking him; for he is "not far from every one of us."

And Paul was bold to speak like this because he had found God in the person of Jesus Christ, his Son. This was the message he had to bring to the Lycaonians and the Athenians, and to all alike. The God who has created all things, he who stands behind all the phenomena of the universe, is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Would you see and know the Creator and Sustainer of the world? Look at Jesus. "No man hath seen God at any time: the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him." John 1:18.

"God has not left himself without witness." The evidence of his existence is all about us, so that we are without excuse. We have a duty to seek after God, and if we seek after him we shall find him. Let us not despise the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; for the goodness of God is meant to lead us to repentance.

And if we seek him in the manner that Paul instructs and exhorts us, we shall find more than earthly bread; we shall find him who is the living bread that came down from heaven to give life to the world. We shall find Jesus Christ who gives eternal life to all who believe in him. We shall find more than water; we shall find that living water that springs up eternally, and satisfies forever.