

Faithful & Afire

LCMS Circuit Bible Studies — 2012-2013

Called To Be Christ's Witnesses

Called to perceive by faith and to proclaim the unseen works of God amidst the things that are seen.

Participant's Guide November 2012

Topic: Being God's Witnesses to the Unseen Works of God the Son

1. Focus of This Study

There are events in life that defy human explanation and occurrences which often cause us to wonder how God is working. These events may either be tragic or simply mysterious. The theme of this study is to reflect and consider “the unseen works of God the Son amidst the things that are seen.”

The Scriptures are full of examples where God, particularly the Son of God, is working in ways hidden behind what we see. For example in John 9:1 – 3, a man was born blind so that the works of God might be displayed in him.

“As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. And his disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus answered, “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him.” (John 9:1 – 3 ESV, see also the remainder of John 9).

Out of darkness the Lord brings light. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face.” (1 Corinthians 13:12 ESV). There are many things that we do not see clearly now. God testifies through His Word to these unseen works of God and reveals them to faith, even though we do not see these things with our eyes. A promise that Christ has given us is found in Colossians 3:3–4: “For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.”

For example, the death of our bodies appears one way to the world, but the Lord works unseen in the midst of what the world sees and allows us to see by faith the physical death of the body as a sleep, while we wait for the Day of Resurrection.

“He rather speaks more sternly of Christ's death than ours and says: Since we believe that Christ died. But of us he says that we do not die, but only fall asleep. He calls our death not a death, but a sleep, and Christ's death he calls a real death. Thus he attributes to the death of Christ such exceeding power that by comparison we should consider our death a sleep. For this is the right way to give comfort, to take the death which we suffer as far as possible from our eyes, at least according to the spirit, and look straight at the death of Christ.” (Martin Luther, “Sermon at the Funeral of the Elector, Duke John of Saxony,” 1532; AE 51, 233 – 234.)

This study will focus on how Jesus “appeared” and “revealed himself” to his disciples so that they might see what would remain unseen by our natural senses.

How do we bear witness or testify about Jesus' work in the presence of people who are suffering or dying?

How do we testify to Christ's resurrection in a world that sees no such resurrection?

2. Searching the Scripture

Our natural condition prevents us from seeing the works of Jesus. After Jesus fed four thousand people, Jesus said to his disciples, “Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear? And do you not remember?” (Matthew 8:18) If the disciples had trouble seeing the works of Jesus, after just witnessing the feeding of four thousand people, how much more so might we have difficulty seeing how Jesus is at work in our lives?

Read the following passages and note revelatory work of God that is beheld through faith:

Mark 16:14. “Afterward he appeared to the eleven themselves as they were reclining at table, and he rebuked them for their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen.”

John 21:14. “This was now the third time that Jesus was revealed to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.”

Why did Jesus reveal himself to the disciples more than once after he rose from the dead?

How does Jesus reveal himself to us over and over again?

Romans 3:21 “But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—²² the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.”

How is Jesus revealed today to his people?

1 John 3:5 “You know that he appeared in order to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. “ --

How does the Lord employ all of our senses to reveal to us that He has forgiven us our sins?

How is evangelism connected to the “revealing” of Jesus?

1 Timothy 3:16 “Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory.”

Examine this extended reference from Luther’s commentary on 1 Timothy 3:16:

“Now it is declared how it was manifested: *In the flesh*. I call Christ the very reality of Christ—Christ in the spirit. To have Christ in the person is to have nothing. Rather, we must make use of Him. The Enthusiasts say: ‘Christ is on the cross. Therefore He is not visible in the Sacrament, in Baptism, in the Word.’ That is an ignorance of Christ; it is to not know how to use Christ. To have merely the fact of Christ is to speak metaphysically of Christ, as I say about Him that He has flesh and hair. Rather, the function for which He died is remission of sins. The use for which He baptized is in the sacrament—for the forgiveness of your sins. The thief would not have had the remission of sins had he not come—to the Word ‘today’ (Luke 23:43). Just to look at Christ accomplishes nothing. The Word is added in the Sacrament, and through it His Passion becomes spiritual and is poured into our hearts, etc. But Christ once believed must still be believed, that is, with the reality of His use in spirit. I don’t want the Christ the Enthusiasts have. They have the sort of Christ that makes them hold the Gospel and the sacraments in contempt as symbols. They keep this for themselves that Christ suffered on the cross, but this they must believe happened in spirit. Where do they get this foolish notion from? Through the Word? They want to oppose others. Christ is among them not in His work and energy. This mystery has been revealed through the Word. Yet He is not palpable. We do not see him. None of our senses catch Him; and yet we must believe. Therefore this is a mystery. There is nothing more hidden; there is nothing more apparent. If I must apprehend this, it is indeed obscure, and yet Christ is more apparent than the sun. Here we have some clear contradictions. It is ‘great’ through its publication, through the Word, through signs and miracles. Nothing has been more hidden through its comprehension. After all, human wisdom does not grasp it, the flesh flees from it, and reason abhors it. Let them wrestle with it; that will give them something to study so that they may forget the other uselessnesses.” (AE 28, 305 – 306)

How is Christ both hidden and yet “more apparent than the sun”?

How is the mystery of God revealed or made manifest in the flesh of Christ?

Ephesians 5:13 – 14 “But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, for anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says, ‘Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.’”

How does the appearing of Christ bring life?

What struggles does the pastor face in proclaiming the resurrection of Christ?

How does this bring lasting comfort to people broken by death?

3. More From Our Lutheran Perspective:

How does the appearing of Christ throughout a person’s life bring life? Abram shows himself in the following passage from Genesis 15 to be our true father in the faith; He *believed* the Lord:

“After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: “Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.”² But Abram said, “O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?”³ And Abram said, “Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir.”⁴ And behold, the word of the Lord came to him: “This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir.”⁵ And he brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.”⁶ And he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness.” (Genesis 15:1 – 6)

Luther elaborates on what it means for Abraham to hear the promise but not see it yet. The Lord promised Abraham many descendants and that the Messiah would be one of his descendants. After Abraham and Sarah were beyond any ability of their own to have children because of infertility and age, the Lord fulfilled his promise so that there could be no doubt that He was delivering on his promise. The promises of the Lord must be seen with “spiritual eyes,” as Luther notes below.

“Therefore learn and believe that there are other spiritual eyes with which those who believe in Christ see when the eyes of the body have been closed by death or have rather been entirely destroyed.” (AE 3, 11)

“Therefore even though Abraham had been assured by the Word of God about the future blessing, he nevertheless begins to have doubts when he considers both his own childless marriage and the hope and plans of his servant. This, you see, is the way things go in the church and in the kingdoms of the world: they are at loggerheads with regard to the promises.” (AE 3, 14)

“Even though Abraham had a clear promise about his natural seed, as chapters twelve and thirteen prove, there were nevertheless those who scoffed at those promises, as heretics are in the habit of doing, and caused Abraham to waver. The promises, of course, were sure. But along came this demonic reasoning with its distinction between a natural and an adopted seed. This reasoning so disturbs and distresses the heart of the saintly patriarch that he humbles himself and submits to the will of God, but not without profound grief and sorrow; for he thinks that God is forsaking him and has changed His will.” (AE 3, 14)

“Just as Abraham is strengthened by the divine Word, that he might be certain about the promise which his domestics were distorting, so it is God’s regular custom to stand by and strengthen the church when it is in trouble.” (AE 3, 16)

“The chief and most important part of the doctrine is the promise; to it faith attaches itself, or to speak more clearly, faith lays hold of it. Moreover, the confident laying hold of the promise is called faith, and it justifies, not as our own work but as the work of God. For the promise is a gift; a thought of God by which He offers us something. It is not some work of ours, when we do

something for God or give Him something. No, we receive something from Him, and that solely through His mercy.” (AE 3, 23)

“Therefore the only difference between Abraham’s faith and ours is this, Abraham believed in the Christ who was to be manifested, but we believe in the Christ who has already been manifested; and by that faith we are all saved.” (AE 3, 26)

How are we like Abraham in doubting the promises of God, or thinking that He has forsaken us?

How does the Lord strengthen Abraham? How does He strengthen us?

How is our faith the same as Abraham’s?

4. Points to Ponder

- Sometimes when people doubt or appear to doubt a promise of God, it is not that they doubt God is faithful to a promise, but they doubt that the promise is for them, perhaps because they feel guilt or sin upon them, or because they are harassed by Satan. How would strive to help them believe the promise for is for them?
- Faith clings to what is not seen. If the promise were seen, it would not be faith. How would you best make this point to someone struggling to live or move through an event that seems to leave them in the dark as to what is going on and the way forward?
- This theme of revealing the hidden works of the Lord appears throughout the Scriptures. Which Biblical texts do you turn to most when trying to reveal these to one struggling with what is seen?
- Christ is the true “friend of sinners.” The pastor is called stand in the stead of Christ before the people; as such he is to be a true “friend of sinners.” How do you go about doing that when people are overwhelmed with what they see and experience? How do you give them Christ as both friend and Savior?
- As we speak the Word of God, people hear Jesus through us. As people hear Jesus, they also see what He does. What role do the works of Jesus play in helping people see the unseen Savior?
- At funerals, we see a dead body and we speak the promise of resurrection in Jesus. How do you help the family see the unseen tie of the actual resurrection of Jesus from the dead to their loved one lying dead before them?
- Could someone who refuses to believe in the resurrection of Jesus actually thereby be refusing to repent? (See Acts 17:30-31).

5. For Conversation

Consider examples, perhaps from events in your circuit where by external appearances the working of God could not be seen. Then talk about how after the fact or after further reflection it became apparent that the Lord was indeed at work.

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