

Witness

Daily Devotionals

Believers
FELLOWSHIP

Biblical Witnesses
Part 1



Introduction and Purpose

As a part of our Witness series, we'll be looking at the lives of witnesses to the gospel of Jesus Christ that have gone ahead of us throughout history.

Starting in the New Testament, we'll look at how members of the early church demonstrated what it looks like to be a witness to the gospel, even in the face of persecution. As our series continues we'll trace those who paid the ultimate price for the cause of Christ through the early church and up to the present day.

Our hope is that in paying attention to how they responded to the opposition they faced, we'll discover ways that we can be challenged and encouraged in our own witness. Thank you for taking the time to remember our brothers and sisters who have given their life for the gospel, both in history past and today.

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Stephen

4/9/2018 (Monday)

Stephen was one of the earliest Christians martyred for his faith, and while much of his early life is unknown to us, his willingness to contend for the gospel is apparent. We read in Acts 6 that Stephen was a Hellenist, (a foreign-born Jew who spoke Greek) and that he lived in Jerusalem. As the Christian community there grew, the apostles saw the need for trustworthy partners in ministry.

Stephen was the first of seven deacons chosen for this purpose. Stephen's passion of the gospel was evident in his engagement with members of the Synagogues, and he demonstrated great wonders and signs among the people (Acts 6:8).

While opposition to Stephen's ministry grew, those who argued with him couldn't match the wisdom given to him by the Holy Spirit. Ultimately, Stephen was falsely accused of blasphemy as a means of silencing him. Stephen's response to his accusers in Acts 7 shows a follower of Christ who is entirely unafraid of the consequences of speaking the truth.

Standing before those gathered against him, he boldly recounted Israel's refusal to recognize Jesus. As they moved to stone him, Stephen prayed for them, asking God not to hold the sin of his murder against them.

Stephen contended lovingly for the gospel with his words, and his actions, up to the moment of his death.

4/10/2018 (Tuesday)

“Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” Hebrews 4:16 (ESV)

When we consider the life of a Martyr it can be intimidating to think of how we'd respond in their place. There is a depth of conviction, and an ability to speak fearlessly that might seem impossible to us, especially when we look at someone like Stephen. Further, it's actually much more likely that your time to be bold won't be in front of an angry council waiting to stone you.

More likely, you'll be given the opportunity to speak boldly in front of a loved one who needs to be reminded of the truth. Or in front of a co-worker who assumes you're just going to go along with what they are saying. It may seem counterintuitive, but sometimes being a witness to the gospel is most difficult with people you sincerely enjoy.

We don't want to make things weird. We don't want to be obnoxious. We don't want to be labeled as an outsider. We don't want to say the wrong thing. One of the greatest encouragements we have is that we will receive mercy and we will find grace to help in time of need. In the face of our fears that tell us to be quiet, we can turn with confidence to the throne of grace.

In the face of situations that seem to scary, or too costly for us to speak truth into, we are reminded that the same Jesus who conquered Satan, sin, and death is ruling and reigning at the right hand of God and has invited us to draw near.

Where are you being challenged to speak boldly? Where have you felt unequipped to respond?

4/11/2018 (Wednesday)

“For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.” 1 Corinthians 1:22-25 (ESV)

Contending for the truth of the Jesus in a context that considers it foolishness or fairytale is not a new problem. The Jews who heard the gospel and rejected it demanded proof that met their criteria: miraculous signs. The Greeks who heard the gospel and rejected it demanded proof that met another criteria: their brand of wisdom.

In every time and in every age men and women will demand the Jesus be contorted into their worldview. “Accept what I want and I’ll believe.” “Accept other paths and I’ll believe” “Tolerate my preference and I’ll believe.” The criteria might change, but the stumbling block remains the same. The gospel will not adapt to the supposed wisdom of men.

Despite the objections that are raised against the truth of the gospel, despite the ways that the world around us demands we conform, our task is to fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel. Whatever the consequences we maintain that the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

Scripture tells us that eventually every knee will bow, and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord. The task that is before us is to join with the brothers and sisters that have gone before us and fearlessly proclaim the truth of God.

How have you seen the gospel challenged as foolishness? How do you respond?

4/12/2018 (Thursday)

“To whom shall I speak and give warning, that they may hear? Behold, their ears are uncircumcised, they cannot listen; behold, the word of the Lord is to them an object of scorn; they take no pleasure in it.” Jeremiah 6:10 (ESV)

When the prophet Jeremiah confronted the people of Israel on their sin, he was not warmly received. In Jeremiah 6 we see a witness to the truth of God wholly ignored, his ministry efforts failing. It's hard not to hear an edge of exasperation in Jeremiah's voice as he is ignored, he seems to ask “Who can I talk to that will listen?”

Finding their people unwilling to listen to the word of God, Jeremiah describes them as having uncircumcised ears, as being unwilling to listen. Stephen picks up this same language, and highlights the same theme in Acts 7:51, ““You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you.”

The same refusal that Jeremiah encountered in his ministry was repeated in Stephen's time, and the truth is every generation will be presented with the same truths. Like the Sanhedrin that accused Stephen, we are presented not only with a fresh articulation of the gospel, but by the witness of history. You and I are the recipients of a legacy of both hard-hearted, and repentant people. We have in our DNA the people who shouted, “Crucify him!” and the people who died for the name of Christ. When we are confronted with the truth of the gospel we choose, again and again, whether we will have ears willing to hear, or whether we will hear the word of the Lord and take no pleasure in it.

Where have you heard a truth that was difficult to hear? How did you respond?

4/13/2018 (Friday)

“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 (ESV)

If you’ve ever wondered what God would like you to do with your life, one of the things you can definitely look to is Acts 1:8.

We are called to be a witness, a martyr, to Jerusalem, or the people and places closest and dearest to us. To our immediate circle, to our closest friends, to our family, and the people we see regularly.

We are called to be a witness, a martyr, to Samaria, or the people and places we think of as “others”. To those people who you can’t agree with. To those people who are a different political party than you, a different religion than you, who don’t live like you or value the things that you do.

We are called to be a witness, a martyr to the end of the earth. To the people and places that are so far off you don’t even know yet whether you like them or not! To the people and places that are as far away from where you are now that it will take you a long time to get there. The ends of the earth means you probably won’t finish the task in this life. You will be a witness, a martyr, your whole life.

The calling that Jesus left us with is exceedingly simple, and often incredibly hard to walk out. Be a witness. Be a record to the goodness of Jesus. We aren’t asked to be eloquent speakers, to be logic-choppers, or argue people into a corner. Jesus asks us something that might be even harder, just be a witness.

Where can you fearlessly speak about how you have seen Jesus at work in your life? Where are you a witness?

4/14/2018 (Saturday)

“And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” And when he had said this, he fell asleep.” Acts 7:59-60 (ESV)

The death of Stephen illuminates both the heavy cost of speaking the truth, and the enduring power of love. In a circle of men shouting and brandishing stones, men emboldened by the collective fury of a crowd, men furious with the gospel, Stephen’s character is made plain.

The final punctuation on the story of his life is an exclamation point of love. He breathes out rich theological truth as rocks strike his face, his words an affirmation of God’s sovereign preservation, “Lord Jesus, receive my Spirit.” Into the faces of his executioners he doesn’t promise retribution at Jesus’ second coming, he breathes benediction. “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.”

He presents petition before the Father he is soon to see for the people who really need it. In between the pounding of rocks, Stephen’s greatest sermon bubbles out of him. In the moment of his death, this man who has spent his life as a witness to God is most like Jesus.

The greatest testimony to the truth of the gospel that Stephen could offer, that you could offer, or that I could offer is the love that pours out of us when we are wounded. When we return evil for good, when we demonstrate the love Jesus to those that wound us, and when we see the need of those who persecute us as more pressing than our own needs, then we are truly witnesses to Jesus.

How have you been a witness to those who have hurt you?

Paul the Apostle

4/16/2018 (Monday)

The apostle Paul is one of the most prolific authors in the New Testament, and his emphasis on the inclusion of Gentiles was revolutionary for the time. Paul was trained as a Pharisee early in life, and learned early on to work with his hands, funding his later missionary work as a tent maker.

Before his conversion, Paul was a Pharisaic Jew who fought against the spread of the message of Christianity. He was well-known for the zeal with which he persecuted Christians, and the cause of Christ. Our first introduction to him is during the martyrdom of Stephen in Acts 7 as he oversees the stoning of Stephen on the charge of blasphemy.

It was only through his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus that Paul's life was reoriented to the work of the Gospel. This drastic conversion led to an explosive faith that saw Paul preaching the message of Jesus through the Roman empire and beyond.

While scripture does not speak specifically to the death of Paul, church leader such as Tertullian and Eusebius record that he was martyred for the cause of Christ in Rome.

First a Pharisee, a persecutor, and an enemy of the gospel, Paul became a convert, a witness, and a champion for the cause of Christ.

Alongside his inspiration to endurance in the face of hardships, Paul reminds us that there is no one so far gone that God cannot call them into His service.

4/17/2018 (Tuesday)

“For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge.” Romans 10:2 (ESV)

One of the endearing things about Paul is that he’s a pretty straight shooter. He’s not the type of guy who would lie to you about what you’re good at, or about where you are struggling. While Paul does offer a critique of the Jewish people in Romans 10, he takes the time to recognize their passion.

One of the prevailing difficulties that has plagued the church for generations is the balance of zeal for God and knowledge. A rightly ordered witness requires both. Paul’s own life presents an example of what happens when zeal, or passion for God, runs wild without direction. Paul was what we would probably call a “go-getter.”

He was aggressively ambitious for what he believed to be the truth. He was rampantly, unshakably dedicated to the seeing God made much of, the problem was, he didn’t really know God. He had zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. This isn’t something that’s unique to Paul either, we all have blind spots where we confuse the legalism, traditions, and assumptions of our background with the truth of the Gospel.

We can quickly become so caught up in the minutia of enforcing tradition that we end up working counter to God’s purposes. As we are encouraged and challenged by the intense passion that Paul has for the gospel, it’s important to remember that we need to be rightly oriented towards God in our pursuits.

What are some aspects of your faith that you haven’t examined? Where could God be calling you match your zeal with knowledge?

4/18/2017 (Wednesday)

Paul's mission to the Gentiles was one that he was uniquely equipped to accomplish, his dual standing as both a Jew by nationality, and a Roman citizen by birth meant that he was taken seriously in both settings.

Paul's birth in Tarsus meant that he had access to advanced schools, including a school of Stoic philosophy that was prominent at the time. He would have grown up with the notions of Stoic philosophy, and their related convictions. His understanding, of the argument structures they respected, allowed him to engage with Gentile audiences in a way that few others were prepared to.

Paul's Rabbinic training immersed him in both the Torah, and in the traditions and doctrines of the Pharisees. These marks of accomplishment would become especially valuable to Paul as he described the uselessness of personal righteousness in his later ministry.

We read in Philippians 3:4-6 that he met every criteria that could be asked of him, his pedigree gave him access to the Pharisees that few others had.

Throughout his life, Paul leaned into these unique equipping to advance the gospel of Jesus. When it was beneficial, Paul was quick to remind authorities that he was a citizen of Rome. When it was beneficial for Paul to emphasize his legalistic righteousness, he was quick to point out that he was an exemplar in every category. Most importantly however, Paul did not count this particular inclusions as worthwhile by themselves. He consistently used them as a means to be a witness to the gospel.

Where are you uniquely equipped to witness to a particular people group? What unique equipplings can you bring to bear in your witness?

4/19/2018 (Thursday)

The cost of being a witness to the gospel of Christ is something that we might not think about much, but it played prominently in the life of Paul.

2 Corinthians 11:23-28 can be pointed to as a list of the sufferings that Paul endured, but even this list would only cover the first 21 years of his 32 year ministry. His life was riddled with physical pain, estrangement from loved ones, frustrations in ministry, and the constant threat of death.

Not only was Paul equipped to speak to Romans and Jews, he was equipped to speak to those who had suffered. In our own lives it can be easy to compare our own sufferings to Paul's and conclude that we should just white knuckle our way through it, but that was not the message that Paul would have preached.

While it's true that Paul endured, he never claimed that his endurance came from his own strength. In 2 Corinthians 12:9, Paul explains that it is in acknowledging his weakness that the power of Christ is demonstrated, it is in admitting that he can't endure on his own, that he doesn't have what it takes to keep going, that he is most clearly a witness to the gospel of Jesus.

It can be tempting to aspire to become a "super-Christian", or someone so "holy" that they never complain, never recognize suffering, never admit they can't do it on their own. The example we have in Paul is a man who is hard-as-nails, won't-stop-for-anything, stubborn to a fault, and most importantly honest enough to turn to Jesus as his strength. As we learn from the example of Paul, we are challenged to both endure for the cause of Christ, and to admit the places where we need God's strength to do so.

Where do you need to acknowledge suffering? How can God be made prominent in your weakness?

4/20/2018 (Friday)

“So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these men must become with us a witness to his resurrection.”
Acts 1:22 (ESV)

An early question the church faced was what to do after Judas, as the consequences of that betrayal echoed past the crucifixion. An indirect question that Judas’ betrayal posed to the church was what to do now that one of the apostles was gone?

We don’t like to dwell on these sorts of betrayals, or abandonments, but they have been, and continue to be, a very real part of our lives.

In Acts 1, the church sets about immediately finding a worthy replacement. The charge to continue the work of the gospel is given to Matthias, and the church does not skip a beat.

In 2 Timothy 4, Paul is nearing the end of his life, and the question of “What next?” is raised again. Paul demonstrates what we believe even more explicitly in this passage, as he looks to Timothy, charging him to continue the work of the gospel.

There is no hemming or hawing about, the message is too important to stop. There may come a time in your life where an instrumental figure falters in their faith, where a close friend betrays you, or where a leader you trust goes home to glory. In this moment we look to the example that has been passed down to us, and we continue the work of the gospel.

Whether the departure is of a loved one bound for glory, or a betrayal that leaves brokenness, the message is too important to stop.

4/21/2017 (Saturday)

The death of Paul occurs in part because of the success of his ministry. Paul has masterfully demonstrated again and again through his witness, that Christians worship Jesus Christ, something that much of the Jewish religious leaders contested.

Rome had allowed the Jewish religion to be tolerated because of a belief that the more ancient a religion was, the more respect it was given. When it was made clear that Christianity was something other than Judaism, Christian persecution began in earnest. Paul's ministry had within it the potential to cost him, and those who believed like he believed, everything. Paul understood the legal arrangement that allowed for Judaism within Rome, and the consequences for presenting the gospel as he did.

Consider for a moment the temptation to water down the gospel, just a little bit. Or to paint the gospel as something that was just a little more palatable. Had Paul worded some things a little more softly, arranged his speech with a little more deference, or been a little quieter, Christianity could have avoided Roman persecution. This continues to be the challenge we are faced with.

The consequences of presenting the gospel of Jesus to the world around us can be life-altering. The protection we may have enjoyed because of the misconceptions of others can be a tempting place to stay. When others assume you are not a threat to their way of life, that you are unwilling to call them out, unwilling to speak boldly, they are more likely to tolerate you. But Paul says near the end of his life, in 2 Timothy 4:7 "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." (ESV)

Ask yourself what parts of the gospel you would be willing to downplay in order to be accepted, where are you most tempted to compromise?

James the Great

7/23/2018 (Monday)

James the Great, the son of Zebedee and the brother of John, was the first of the Apostles to be martyred.

We read about his execution in Acts 12:1–2; the text says simply that Herod Agrippa I killed him with a sword as a means of pleasing the Jewish leadership. Herod Agrippa's grandfather, Herod the Great had not been popular with the Jewish leadership, so Agrippa looked for any opportunity to win political allies. With tensions rising between the Jewish leadership and the new Christian movement, Agrippa saw a chance to make some new friends. James was a tragic victim of political posturing. Legend says that James was beheaded.

His accuser, on seeing James' steadfastness facing execution, was convinced of the gospel and proclaimed himself to be a Christian. He begged James for forgiveness for handing him over to authorities, and James responded "Peace be to thee." The two were then martyred together. (Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History 2.9) The powers of this world always war against Jesus. They don't want to submit to his lordship!

We can expect political, business, social, and religious leaders to persecute us for our faith.

How can we have the same courage that James the Great had, to stay faithful to Jesus in the midst of opposition?

4/24/2018 (Tuesday)

James the Great's martyrdom is significant for a couple of reasons. First, he was the first of the Apostles to be martyred. All of the Apostles eventually died for their faith except James' brother John, who was exiled to the island of Patmos. But also, James' martyrdom is placed in Acts alongside of Peter's imprisonment by Agrippa (Acts 12:5–19), and we can contrast the two men's experiences.

God miraculously delivered Peter. He did not miraculously deliver James, but He was in control of both situations. This is a difficult truth for us to consider.

Sometimes, we cry out to God for deliverance, and He breaks our chains and leads us out of prison. Other times, we are not delivered. And yet, the Scriptures never imply that God was empowered in the case of Peter and weak in the case of James. He was in control of both situations. Jesus warned us that the life of faith involves suffering, but that we can take heart because He has overcome the world (John 16:33).

James knew that even though he was headed to his execution, that in Jesus he had already overcome! God was still in control.

How can James' story give you confidence to be bold in the face of hardship?

4/25/2018 (Wednesday)

“And he sent messengers ahead of him, who went and entered a village of the Samaritans, to make preparations for him. But the people did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. And when his disciples James and John saw it, they said, ‘Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?’ But he turned and rebuked them.” (Luke 9:52–55 ESV)

Jesus nicknamed James and John *Boanerges*, which means “Sons of Thunder” (Mark 3:17). From Luke 9:52–55, it is obvious why! When one of the Samaritan villages rejected Jesus, James and John wanted to call down the thunder and lay waste to the whole town!

But contrast this with the legend about James’ death and how he forgave the man responsible for his arrest and execution. James’ martyrdom is a testament to the gospel’s power to change people! James went from Son of Thunder to Son of Forgiveness.

In what way are you like a “Son of Thunder”? Do you have any rough edges that Jesus might be working on?

4/26/2018 (Thursday)

“And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came up to him and said to him, ‘Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.’ And he said to them, ‘What do you want me to do for you?’ And they said to him, ‘Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.’ Jesus said to them, ‘You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?’ And they said to him, ‘We are able.’ And Jesus said to them, ‘The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized, but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.’” (Mark 10:35-40 ESV)

In Mark 10:35–40, James and John ask Jesus if he can grant them the request to sit at his right hand and left (places of honor) in his kingdom. Jesus responds by asking them if they are able to die for the kingdom like he was to die. James and John insisted that they were able, but then Jesus told them that even though they would be martyred, he couldn’t grant their request.

Later in the Gospel, both James and John fall away in scandal when Jesus is arrested. They swore they could die for Jesus, but when the moment came they ran in fear. How this decision must have haunted them! I wonder how many times they must have thought about this conversation with Jesus and then their decision to fall away. James got another opportunity to witness in Acts 12. The second time, he did not fall away.

Think about your story. In what ways have you failed? God is not done with you yet. Just because you failed once or twice or a thousand times, it doesn’t mean that failure has to be the end of the story. God makes all things new!

4/27/2018 (Friday)

“Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.’ Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Brothers, what shall we do?’ And Peter said to them, ‘Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.’” (Acts 2:36–39 ESV)

What a difference the resurrection and the Holy Spirit made in the life of Peter! At the end of the Gospel of Luke (volume one in the Luke-Acts story), Peter denies Jesus three times. Here, at the beginning of Acts, Peter gets another chance to be a “witness.” And does he make the most of the opportunity! He says to them, “This guy Jesus whom you crucified? Yeah, God has made him both Lord and Christ.”

The crowd responds positively to Peter’s boldness. They recognize that something is different about him. He is a changed man. They are cut to the heart and they ask Peter, “What should we do? How do we make up for crucifying Jesus?” Peter doesn’t hold a grudge. He doesn’t condemn them for their actions. He says simply, “Repent and be baptized.

The promises of God are still for you and your children.” What a difference the resurrection and Holy Spirit made in Peter’s life!

4/28/2018 (Saturday)

In Acts 2, the Holy Spirit descends upon the church and the movement is changed forever. Fear became boldness, and failure became power. But also, pride became humility, and unbelief became faith.

The disciples came out of hiding and became a movement. They preached the gospel to the very people who handed Jesus over to Pontius Pilate! “Jesus is risen!” they said, “And He is calling all people to repentance.”

We saw this same change in the life of James the Great. When Jesus found him, he and his brother wanted to call down judgment on everyone who opposed them. They had visions of grandeur—sitting at the right hand and left of Jesus in the kingdom. But Jesus challenged them on this: Would they be able to suffer like Jesus? They were. And the Spirit transformed James so that at the end of his life he was able to embrace the very man who handed him over to be executed.

The gospel can make enemies into brothers.

In what ways do you sense God is changing you? In what ways does James’ transformation give you hope?

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